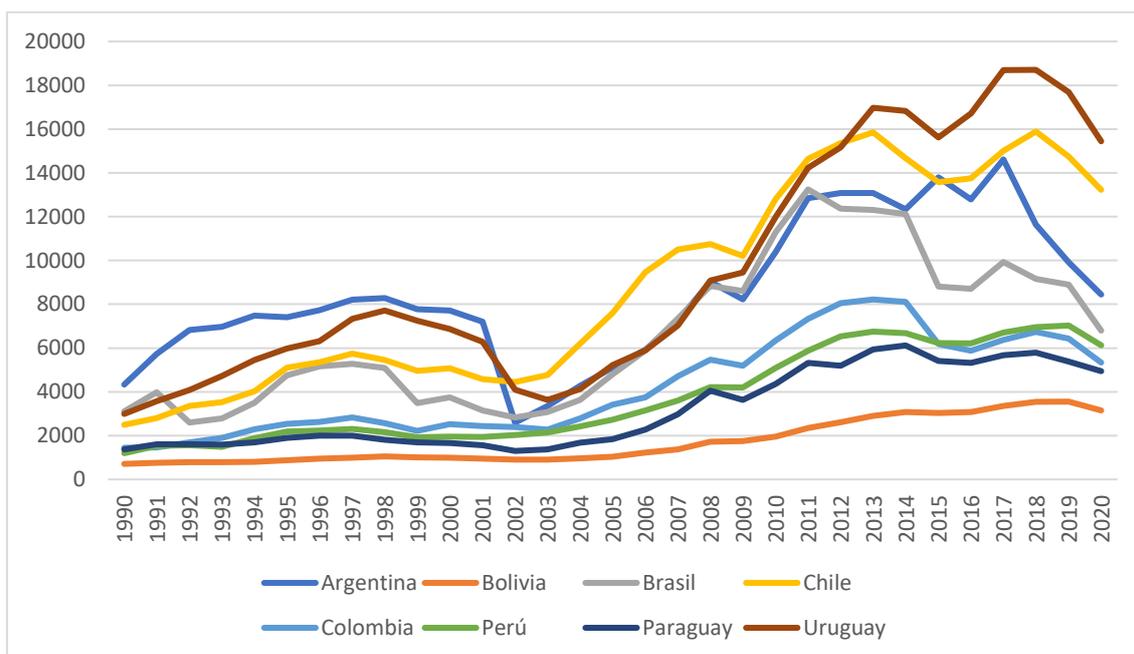


THE ELECTORAL YEAR IN CHILE: REPERCUSSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Diego Telias
Universidad Católica de Chile

Chile has been described as an example in Latin America in economic matters, reaching remarkable levels of development in the last decades compared to the rest of the countries in the region. In addition, the country has a great international economic reputation, being ranked as one of the most stable countries in Latin America (Deutsche Welle 2019). Poverty reduction numbers and GDP per capita growth have been used as an indicator of progress to show Chile's progress in recent decades. As shown in Figure 1, Chile has experienced a great growth in its GDP per capita since the beginning of the 20th century, being today one of the countries with one of the highest indicators in the region and showing a sustained increase until the last few years, when a slight decrease has been observed.

Figure 1. GDP per capita (current US\$)



Source: World Bank

Beyond these advances, several aspects of the "Chilean model" have been questioned. One of them has been the growing inequality and the fact that very few have benefited from the economic growth, generating economic segregation. Chile seems to be still trapped in a model that served it to grow at an accelerated pace but has run out of steam. No country has achieved development through this path of extractivism, economic concentration and extreme inequality (Matamala 2021).

Another aspect that has been raised in political terms is that despite the fact that Chile is one of the leading democracies in the region, for years Chile has been experiencing a crisis of representation associated with effective channels of vertical accountability (Luna 2016). An example of this is the level of participation of Chileans in elections. According to data from SERVEL (Chile's electoral service), in the last presidential elections (2017), only 46% of the population voted. This implies that although Chile was observed from the outside as an example in economic terms, those who studied Chilean politics had been warning about possible future problems.

October 2019 was the moment where these mentioned above problems had a great international repercussion. For several months there was a wave of massive protests that began after a campaign by high school students against the subway ticket increase in Santiago and subsequently spread throughout the country. These protests showed levels of violence that had not been seen in recent decades and generating some of the largest demonstrations in the country's history (Palacios-Valladares 2020). An example that the protest went beyond the incumbent government was that one of the most mentioned phrases in the demonstration was: 'It's not for 30 pesos (increase of the bus fare), it's for 30 years'. Showing that the deep protest was aimed at the economic model and the political elite.

These events that occurred at the end of 2019 generated President Sebastián Piñera to suspend the COP25 Summit on Climate Change that was scheduled for December, as well as the APEC Summit that was to be held in November 2019. Chile, as host of these international forums, sought to show itself to the world as the Latin American icon of development. However, during that time Chile's image was damaged due to accusations of the government committing widespread attacks, using unnecessary and excessive force with the aim of harming and punishing the protesting population (Amnesty International 2019). The return of the military to the streets as it happened in the first days of the protests and the deaths and wounded demonstrators marked a moment that will be remembered in contemporary Chilean history.

NEW CONSTITUTION AND CHANGES IN POLITICS

After weeks of strong protests and negotiations between parliamentarians, these protests that shocked Chile ended with an agreement in November between the government and the opposition to initiate a constitutional process to replace the constitution created under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). At a conference in Congress in the early hours of the morning, Senate President Jaime Quintana was in charge of announcing the agreement called "Agreement for Peace and the New Constitution", which was endorsed by the main political parties except for the Communist Party. The agreement implied that the new text would be a blank sheet of paper without considering the current constitution.

The plebiscite in which the population was asked if they opted for a new constitution was scheduled for April 2020 but by COVID-19 it was postponed until October 2020. This plebiscite also asked to the population that in case they wanted a new constitution what mechanism would be used: whether an assembly with directly elected delegates

(constitutional convention) or a mixed convention that also included members of Congress. This popular consultation resulted in the victory of the option to draft a new constitution (78%) and the formation of a constitutional convention, with surprisingly wide approval.

Melendez et al (2021) argue on the basis of a survey that the rejection vote for the new constitution is explained by variables associated with support for radical right-wing populist forces, while the approval vote is characterized by high heterogeneity in ideological and sociological terms. In any case, the result of the plebiscite implied the need to hold elections (in May 2021) to choose those who would draft the new constitution. This meant that 2021 will be an election-heavy year, as it also included elections for councilors, mayors, regional governors, the latter being elected for the first time by popular vote, replacing the mayors who were appointed by the president in office.

The results of the election of constituents to choose a new constitution implied a tough result for the traditional political parties because as almost one third (48) of the 155 seats went to independents who are candidates from social movements associated with the 2019 protests. It is worth mentioning that most predictions failed to anticipate these results and the decline of the vote for the major parties. In addition to the independents, the two largest opposition lists obtained 28 (*Apruebo Dignidad* that include the Communist Party and new left parties) and 25 constituents (*Lista del Apruebo* which brings together the parties of the historic center-left *Concertación* that governed the country after the transition to democracy). While the list backed by Piñera (*Vamos por Chile*) achieved 37 constituents, falling far short of the third to be able to veto articles (BBC News 2021).

According to Palanza (2021), these results show that Chile is undergoing a very significant process of deepening democracy, a process characterized by the increased inclusion of new forces and increased political competition. She also argues that the three institutional innovations that were made to the electoral system and allowed to understand the results were: the incorporation of parity, reserved seats and lists of independents. This result generated that the convention is a space differentiated from the Congress as a result of the weight of the independents due to the distrust in the parties and an anti-elite vote, but that possesses challenges due to the great fragmentation, generating opportunities but also spaces of uncertainty (Negretto 2021).

Another key election in 2021 was the primary elections for president held in July with surprising results that confirm the trend of a change in Chilean politics, as younger candidates prevailed over traditional politicians and favorites according to the polls. In the left-wing coalition (*Apruebo Dignidad*), former student leader and 35 years old Gabriel Boric from *Frente Amplio* won against Sergio Jadue of the Communist Party. Congressman Boric was singled out for having signed the Agreement for a new constitution in a personal capacity, which generated criticism in his own sector.

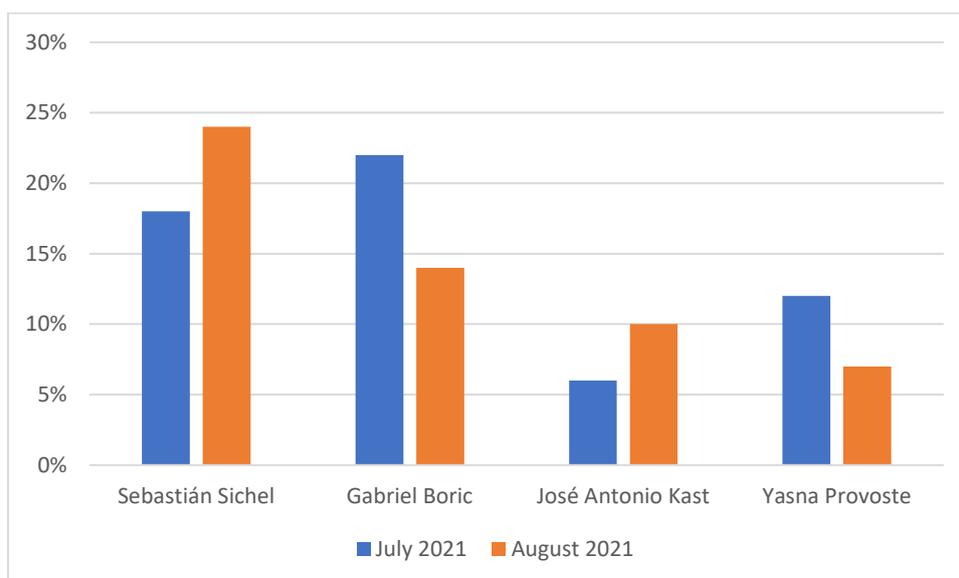
In the center-right bloc election, Sebastián Sichel (49%) defeated better known figures of the right and former members of the government such as Joaquín Lavín (32%), Mario

Desbordes (10%) and Briones (9%). Sichel is 45 years old and was Minister of Social Development and President of Banco Estado during the Piñera administration. This independent lawyer and an unknown figure politically will be the candidate of the ruling party (*Chile Vamos*) in the presidential elections.

FUTURE ELECTIONS AND POSSIBLE CHANGES

The legislative and presidential elections to replace Sebastián Piñera will be held on November 21 with an eventual second round in December. Boric and Sichel will be joined by Yasna Provoste, winner of a primary election of the center-left *Unidad Constituyente* a coalition that includes the Socialist Party and Christian Democracy and that basically represents the *Concertación* that governed Chile from 1990 to 2010 and from 2014 to 2018. José Antonio Kast, a candidate of a more radical right wing (*Partido Republicano*), will also be a candidate. Beyond the polls (figure 2) uncertainty will be what determines this election, as it has been the case in the last few elections (Suárez Cao 2021).

Figure 2. Preferences for presidential candidates



Source: *Activa – Pulso Ciudadano*¹

Additionally to the presidential elections, the next few political months will be marked by the Constituent Convention which is already working on the drafting of a new constitution. Elisa Loncón, an activist belonging to the Mapuche people is the president of a convention that has gender parity, unique in the world. This assembly will have 9 months (that can be extended for 3 months) to present a new constitutional text and which will imply a new plebiscite in middle 2022 where the new constitution will be approved or rejected. The rules of procedure and the composition of the thematic commissions are currently being discussed before entering into the substantive debate,

¹ More details on other perceptions available at: [https://chile.activasite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Pulso Ciudadano Informe Agosto Q1.pdf](https://chile.activasite.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Pulso_Ciudadano_Informe_Agosto_Q1.pdf)

including a possible new government system that can take away greater powers from the president.

Beyond what happens in the next legislative and presidential elections, the last two years have seen an important political change in Chile, with the emergence of new figures that are not associated with the traditional parties, which may be due to the activation of a younger electorate that is beginning to participate and is causing a renewal at the elite level (Luna 2021). This may imply certain changes in the future conformation of the legislative power and a general renewal of Chilean politics. It will take a few months to understand if it will have or not profound consequences in what has been called the Chilean model. But for sure will undoubtedly imply a greater discussion on some key aspects such as high inequality.

In terms of foreign policy, a first aspect to highlight is that it is an issue that has not been among the priorities of the presidential candidates in the electoral campaign. Overwhelmed by local issues, the international aspect seems to be left out. The few references have been regarding the democratic crisis in Venezuela and some aspects of trade policy. In this sense, for example, the new legislative conformation will be key for the approval of the CPTPP that still generates controversies in Chile (Sahd 2021). The results of the election and the new constitution should be awaited, but the results observed so far and this context of change in Chilean politics may lead to at least some questioning of the openness trade tradition of foreign policy.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. 2019. *Chile: Política Deliberada Para Dañar a Manifestantes Apunta a Responsabilidad de Mando*. <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2019/11/chile-responsable-politica-deliberada-para-danar-manifestantes/>.
- BBC News. 2021. "Elecciones En Chile: Candidatos Independientes y de La Oposición Dominan La Asamblea Que Redactará La Nueva Constitución." *BBC.com*. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-57139669>.
- Deutsche Welle. 2019. "Las Dos Caras de La Moneda En Chile: Crecimiento Económico vs. Desigualdad." *Dw.com*. <https://www.dw.com/es/las-dos-caras-de-la-moneda-en-chile-crecimiento-económico-vs-desigualdad/a-51076140> (August 9, 2021).
- Luna, Juan Pablo. 2016. "Chile's Crisis of Representation." *Journal of Democracy* 27: 129–38.
- . 2021. "Quedó Demostrado El Colapso de La Capacidad de Movilización de Los Partidos Tradicionales." *Cnn Chile*. https://www.cnnchile.com/programas-completos/entrevista-juan-pablo-luna-elecciones-primarias-partidos-tradicionales_20210720/ (August 9, 2021).
- Matamala, Daniel. 2021. "Mar de Fondo." *La Tercera*. <https://www.latercera.com/latercera-domingo/noticia/columna-de-daniel-matamala-mar-de-fondo/75ZGGNFF7JCGDK4O6XLXMWCXM4/>.
- Meléndez, Carlos, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Javier Sajuria. 2021. "Chile 2020: Pandemia y Plebiscito Constitucional ." *Revista de ciencia política (Santiago)* .
- Negretto, Gabriel. 2021. "Chile: Continuidades y Discontinuidades En La Elección

- Constituyente." *El Estadista*,. <https://elestadista.com.ar/?p=16489>.
- Palacios-Valladares, Indira. 2020. "Chile's 2019 October Protests and the Student Movement: Eventful Mobilization? ." *Revista de ciencia política (Santiago)* 40: 215–34.
- Palanza, Valeria. 2021. "Resultados Constituyentes: ¿Qué Dicen Los Números?" *Centro de Estudios Públicos*,. <https://www.cepchile.cl/cep/noticias/notas-de-prensa/seminario-resultados-constituyentes-que-dicen-los-numeros>.
- Sahd, Jorge. 2021. "Sichel, Boric y La Política Comercial." *Diario Financiero*,. <https://www.df.cl/noticias/opinion/columnistas/sichel-boric-y-la-politica-comercial/2021-07-19/181506.html>.
- Suárez Cao, Julieta. 2021. "La Campaña de La Incertidumbre." *La Tercera*. <https://www.latercera.com/opinion/noticia/la-campana-de-la-incertidumbre/4TFWCPSGGJBMXJSGVXYJDM2DOA/>.