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Chile's constitutional referendum points to a difficult path ahead

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*Chileans will vote on a new constitution after submitting a new text to replace the current one, which stems from the Augusto Pinochet era. The uncertainty over its approval comes from the disenchant towards a real social, economic and political reform, meaning that Chile's democracy is in a challenging moment, **Miguel Zlosilo** (Artool, Chile) and **Roland Benedikter** (Willy Brandt Centre of the University of Wroclaw) explain.*

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Chile has been considered a model for both developmental progress and reform attempts in the Global South and the Pacific region. Thus its current attempt to profoundly reform its constitution – originally stemming, in substantial parts, from the Augusto Pinochet era (1973-1990) – is crucial not

only for the nation's future but also observed quite closely by other countries. This includes authoritarian **China, with which an improved free trade agreement came into force in March 2019**, destined to increase bilateral ties and influence. According to the EU and NATO, China's interest in the globe is to establish a second global order in a "systemic rivalry" with democracies and open societies, and thus the rising superpower is sceptical about a more liberal constitutional turn in Pacific nations such as Chile.

Great hopes of a large majority of the population for a pro-liberal turn of Chile's constitution were put on the new, reformed text. Yet after years of debate and initial enthusiasm, the aftermath of **the victory of the left under Gabriel Boric in the November 2021 regional, parliamentary and presidential elections** seems to have changed the situation of the constitutional reform process, and especially its public approval ecosystem. In the surrounding of the 4 September referendum, the prevailing mood about the renewal of the constitution is scepticism. Is Chile's 2022 national plebiscite about the new constitution already decided against the draft of renewal? There is some evidence, as the latest polls show.

Indeed, most recent surveys indicate that the results of the plebiscite to approve or reject the proposal for the new constitution drawn by **Chile's Constitutional Convention**, which worked on the text from July 2021 to July this year, seem to be doomed. This is different from the highly volatile scenario that was observed until the end of June 2022, where there was a high percentage of undecided and trends that showed stark variations, with permanent rises and falls between the percentages of approval and rejection. This volatility is no longer observed. On the contrary, data shows that the choice seems to be defined for most citizens – with a substantial margin favouring the camp that will vote against embracing the new constitution.

The future after the referendum

The dissemination of the exact text of the reformed constitution seems to have impacted the negative trend noticeably. Since the final document was released, approval has steadily decreased. The government's campaign to

promote the text failed to re-enthrone some supporters of approval, who are not convinced that fulfils the purpose of renewal as it was promised, especially social, economic and political reform and a general passage from a neoliberal experiment to a modern welfare state. Since the beginning of the final phase of the Boric government advertising the new text, which was also questioned by the **Comptroller General of the Republic**, approval has remained stable at a bandwidth of 2%. This indicates that both the rather leftist and conservative camps are unsatisfied with a compromise that goes neither far enough into a socialist re-distribution utopia nor sufficiently into a European-style “social market economy” realism.

Second, there is a substantial difference in what to choose when the vote is about a text and not about a politician or a political party. Unlike a choice of faces, a plebiscite is about a choice of content. In the first scenario – voting for a politician or a party –, the result has a higher level of uncertainty. A candidate can make a serious mistake or be dragged out of the sun until the very last minute. In contrast, a text that is widely known and has no personalized, clearly identifiable face to be associated with seems anonymous and not to be modifiable to many voters.

Voting is compulsory for this referendum. As it comes with automatic registration, unless a catastrophe (such as the preceding Covid-19 crisis, which hit Chile hard) occurs, participation in the vote will increase sharply compared to the last election. This includes those who have already been bound by strong camp affiliations, i.e. among others, the remnants of the Post-Pinochet right who reject democracy, but now they are committed and mobilized with the rejection to combat what they consider “the communist threat”.

Lastly, it is essential to remember that there has been – and will continue to be in post-referendum times – a strong mobilisation of lobbyism against the approval. Scholars and analysts on the ground will need to scrutinise at least two facts. On the one hand, if there have been “unholy alliances” of neoliberal forces with the new authoritarian superpowers like China, who buy Chile’s raw resources and have the interest to cement a rather top-down order. On the other, to which extent local forces have collaborated and profited from it (like

it has always been in Latin American and Chilean history). Nevertheless, this mood swing in the voters' should be explored at home, not abroad.

A transition full of challenges

If the constitution is rejected, this may increase the general uncertainty in the country because the way forward to replace a constitution that would have been socially abolished is not clear and because the government of President Boric will be severely hit by rejection. Also, if the voter turnout is lower than expected, the country will face a deep political and institutional legitimacy crisis.

The only chance that the approval camp has at this point is that all the undecided voters end up leaning towards the "accept" position, added to some sudden serious problems within the rejectionist electoral fringe. The doubts about a leadership capable of getting the process back on track after a potential rejection suggest that a long road lies ahead where we will see a strong political struggle to determine the next step. Knowing what the new, post-plebiscite **constitutional process** will be like, which body will manage it, who will lead it and how it will be ratified are among the aspects to be defined.

Overall, Chile is undergoing a transition which is not without hurdles, challenges and problems. The voters seem not to have come out of their state of democratic adolescence after **electing Michelle Bachelet for a second term** supporting her ambitious program of reforms, later on choosing **Sebastián Piñera's return to the presidential palace La Moneda** with exaggerated hopes for immediate change. Now, after a new shift to the left since the election of the Constituent Convention and an initially overwhelming triumph of approval, the country may be once again in doubt about its desired future development model.

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- The views expressed here are of the author rather than the Centre or the LSE
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• Banner image: View of the vote cast by Apruebo in the 2020 plebiscite in Chile / [Klopping](#) (Shutterstock)

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