

Chile's 2017 presidential election: who will win and why?



Disillusionment with the second centre-left government of Michelle Bachelet will likely see the return of the conservative right, write [Roland Benedikter](#) (EURAC Research, COHA, University of Wroclaw) and [Miguel Zlosilo](#) (Artool, Chile) in the second of a two-part series on Chile's 2017 presidential election.

• Read part one: [Evaluating the second Bachelet government](#)

Opinion polls carried out before the elections revealed [unambiguous discontent](#) with Bachelet's politics and aspects of the wider political system. Paradoxically, amongst those disappointed are those who benefited most from Bachelet's second term, such as women's movements and environmentalists.

Indeed, this is a key feature of the 2017 elections: even those whose basic demands have been met by Bachelet's second government disagree so strongly with other aspects of her tenure – or are so upset with scandals and the informal “second sphere” operating behind Chile's institutionalised politics – that they still favour a change of direction.



Discontent with Bachelet's second term has led to a proliferation of candidates, but who will prevail? ([myeviajes](#), CC0)

The basic pattern reaffirms what analysts have long called Chile's “adolescent democracy”, which is characterised by mood swings between great expectations and rapid disappointment, producing a persistent zigzagging between left and right parties.

One partial exception is the novel presence of a segment of the population that seeks outsiders, newcomers, or critics of the current political system outside of the left-right scheme, including candidates with a strong populist flavour – just as has occurred in recent European and US elections. The worry in Chile's post-authoritarian democracy is that anti-democratic forces could emerge into the political sphere on the back of this global populist momentum.

The candidates

Disillusion with the Bachelet years is reflected in a variety of factors, not least the proliferation of candidates. For the first time since the transition to democracy, the number of candidates has nearly doubled; this has often occurred elsewhere in South America, but not in Chile.

The 2017 presidential candidates can be divided into three groups based on the likelihood of their reaching the decisive second round:

1. *Strong contenders*

Billionaire former president (2010-14) **Sebastián Piñera**, supported by the *Chile Vamos* alliance, stands a good chance of being the first conservative-right candidate to be re-elected since Jorge Alessandri (1958-64). His political comeback has also taken considerably less time and effort than that of his predecessor.

Despite being linked to two conservative parties, Piñera tries to maintain an independent profile, citing Christian-Democrat Patricio Aylwin (1990-94) – Chile's first democratically elected president after Salvador Allende – as his main reference point.

Aylwin aimed to forge agreements between social classes to achieve as much as was possible given conflicting interests. Piñera is promising to follow in his footsteps and focus on equity and participation, which is in stark contrast to the neoliberal past of his party alliance.

Piñera knows that growing inequality is Chile's most pressing problem, especially for the middle classes. By targeting it he hopes to gain command the centre ground which will decide the election.

67-year-old Piñera also claims to be the "Anti-Jaime Quintana", referring to the president of the leftist party Party for Democracy, 17 years his junior and meant here as a symbol of continuity for the governing New Majority coalition.

Beyond the favourite, one of the strongest candidates to reach the second round is **Alejandro Guillier**.

The 64-year old senator is one of Chile's most prominent journalists, known for his role on leading political programmes such as *Tolerancia 0* and *Factor Guillier*. Guillier is a sociologist turned politician who was by his own admission dragged towards candidacy by public opinion.

He was nominated as an independent candidate without primaries, representing the leftist party spectrum of Radicals, Socialists, Communists, the Party for Democracy, MAS Región and Citizen Left in the senate.

Like every outsider he suspected that the subtle dilution of support by the party coalition after his candidacy was intentional, aiming to remove him from coalition and party in-fighting at a time when public perceptions of Bachelet's second term make continuation in power seem unlikely.

Guillier failed to produce a governmental programme before the elections and presented only a vague summary. Yet, popular reaction suggests that this may turn out to be a strength, as many Chilean voters are fed up with elaborate platforms that are ignored once their proponents achieve power.

2. *Outsiders*

Amongst those with a poorer chance of reaching the second round is **Beatriz Sánchez** (46), also a prominent broadcast journalist. She is the candidate of the Broad Front, an association of leftist, liberal, and civil-society initiatives that claims to offer an alternative to the usual dualism of left (New Majority) and conservative right (Chile Vamos).

The weakness of Sánchez's candidacy stems from chronic tensions within her coalition which have contributed to a sharp drop in her appeal. Her apparent lack of preparation also reinforced the perception that she had been chosen as something of a guinea pig for an election that the Broad Front knows it cannot win. Some consider that the long-term goal of the Broad Front is to promote their leading faces, such as Gabriel Boric and Giorgio Jackson.

Such internal conflicts have not been adequately resolved. Most notably, much tension was generated by leading sociologist and political analyst Alberto Mayol's choice to stand as a candidate in the same district of Santiago as Giorgio Jackson, the former president of an important student union and spokesman for the Chilean Federation of Students (CONFECH).

Another outside bet is **Carolina Goic Borojevic** (45), a social worker and activist for the Christian-Democratic Party (PDC). She emerged from a party in crisis and lacks broad support from its base or clear backing from its figureheads. This has created the perception that she is the least dangerous contender, an image reinforced by her somewhat desperate decision to request support from Guillier despite having previously attacked him.

Then there is **José Antonio Kast Rist** (51), often dubbed the Chilean Trump. He is supported by parts of the extreme right and some sections of the military. He has at times presented a homophobic, nationalist discourse, including justifications of past violations of human rights. Kast opposes serious reform and rejects the notion that the neoliberal model has only served to incubate tensions in Chile since the transition to democracy. Nevertheless, like Trump in the US he could become the surprise package of this election, with growing inequality and fears of national decline fuelling a modest rise of the populist right.

Finally, there is **Marco Enríquez-Ominami** (known as MEO, 44). A filmmaker and former Socialist congressman, he is the phoenix of this election. After being linked to national and international corruption cases, he has risen from the ashes as an option of the left. In the final week of the campaign he was even invited to inaugurate a hospital together with the leading leftist candidate Guillier, which was interpreted as a strategic call for left unity. MEO could be the left's surprise package, though he has almost no chance of reaching the second round.

3. *No-hopers*

Last but not least, there are candidates with no chance whatsoever of reaching the second round. The most prominent amongst them is **Eduardo Artés** (66), a secretary general of the Communist party and president of the Patriotic Union (UPA).

Who is going to win?

Polls commissioned by supporters and opponents alike suggest that the winner will be Sebastián Piñera. The big question is whether he will be able to win in the first round.

If not, history suggests there is a high probability of the leftist coalition taking its candidate to the second round, at which point the wider left will have the option of establishing a broad (and essentially instrumental) anti-right pact, as has happened in the past.

Here the main driver could be the Broad Front, as long as it is able to use these elections to distinguish itself publicly as a new political force for the future. Its hopes of scaling the heights of Chilean politics alone have faded after problems in its primaries.

The bigger questions

Even if we see the polls as reliable – no longer self-evident, as elections the world over have shown of late – the question of who will win is not the most important. There are three fundamental questions with greater significance for the future:

1. How will participation evolve in terms of socio-demographic profile and what variables will mobilise whose participation?
2. Will a new configuration emerge with the aim of reforming the Chilean political system or will the status quo be strengthened?
3. Will the differences between the traditional left and right coalitions be strong enough to break the hold of “shadow government” by closed-door “family politics”?

The 2017 elections will begin to provide us with insights into how Chilean society will shape its answers to these vital questions in the coming years.

Notes:

- The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE
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