

The six sources of Piñera's success in Chile's 2017 elections will also shape his second term

Piñera's campaign won out thanks to fears of "Chilezuela", the non-committal stance of Frente Amplio supporters, the divided Christian Democrats, Obama-style campaigning, a "low-energy" opponent, and a little help from friends in the media, all of which will influence the new president's second term in office, write [Roland Benedikter](#) (EURAC Research, COHA, University of Wrocław), [Miguel Zlosilo](#) (Artool, Chile), and [Corinna Saeger](#) (EURAC Research).

1. Fear of "Chilezuela"

The electoral campaign covered most of 2017, resembling the US model of extended political competition with its own dynamics and logics.

Chilean experts employed much of their capacity to explain the impact generated by the vague fear of middle-class, centrist voters and conservative segments that a triumph of Guillier would lead Chile down Venezuela's path towards unprecedented political and economic chaos.



Fears of Venezuela-style political and economic chaos helped Piñera's campaign ([Andrés E. Azpúrua, CC BY-ND 2.0](#))

In retrospect, it was a politically astute move for Piñera's team to brand any leftist constellation as "Chilezuela". On social networks there was a viral spread of content that compared Guillier with Venezuela's president Nicolás Maduro and claimed that a Guillier government would ultimately generate similar results – though this was of course highly unlikely. Numerous media contributions also suggested links between a Piñera defeat, the risk of communism, the end of social order, and general democratic degeneration.

The upshot is that Piñera's second term will face a public sphere characterised by heated political rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and outlandish historical analogies. One of the president's main challenges in the first half of his mandate will be mitigating, pacifying, and rationalising Chile's political debate. This will require Piñera to adopt postures beyond party politics in an attempt to become a kind of meta-partisan president for all Chileans, but this could damage his links to his own political alliance and constituency.

2. The ambiguous behaviour of Frente Amplio supporters

Halfhearted support from Frente Amplio voters contributed to Guillier's poor tally in the second round. Between 10 and 20 per cent of those who voted for Frente Amplio candidate Beatriz Sánchez [in the first ballot](#) paradoxically supported Piñera in the second.

This can be interpreted as a protest vote amongst elements of a new, young left, including anarchist factions, against the traditional leftist New Majority. This group saw the Bachelet government as having broken its promise to build a fairer country in favour of tweaking the pre-existing neoliberal model. Though somewhat unfair to Bachelet, these accusations influenced public opinion.

The influence of Frente Amplio supporters over left-wing opposition will be considerable throughout Piñera's tenure. Part of the New Majority is ready to take a more radical left-wing approach, and Frente Amplio's rhetoric more generally will play a role in redefining the left during its time out of government.

Piñera may attempt to moderate parts of the Chilean left through concessions and cooperation in order to pre-empt radicalisation.

3. The divided Christian Democrats

Prior to the second round, it became apparent that some of Christian Democrat Carolina Goic's votes would go to Piñera despite Goic's public support for Guillier. Indeed, a significant group of party members – the self-proclaimed "progressives" – rebelled against this decision.

This group eventually left the Christian Democrats, with many appearing to see themselves as potential candidates for a new Piñera cabinet. Essentially, the party's conservative wing felt greater affinity with Piñera's platform [than with that of Guillier](#).

This rupture consolidates Piñera's position both on the political spectrum and in parliament. Since major figures within the party retain a moderate-centrist orientation, the Christian Democrats both as a party and as a constituency will continue to enable Piñera's mandate where concessions and incentives are provided on particular issues.



Piñera's campaign team attempted to style a softer persona for their candidate (detail of [Simon Paredes](#), CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

4. Piñera's Obama-style combination of traditional and digital campaigning

The Piñera team's capacity and effectiveness on the ground, going door-to-door and street-to-street, also helped to provide a human face for their candidate.

This was particularly important as the billionaire had been depicted as detached, snobbish, and socially merciless by his opponents. The team benefited from the experience of its coordinator, Piñera's former Sub-Secretary of the Interior (2010-14) Rodrigo Ubilla Mackenney.

Piñera's digital team also developed successful social-media campaigns using both highly trained humans and bots, just as were employed in [recent elections in the US, the UK, and Germany](#).

Successful deployment of efficient but democratically dubious tactics such as bot-promoted content will represent a permanent temptation for Piñera's second administration whenever a crisis breaks or an important decision falls due.

Piñera would be wise not to go overboard on digital opinion-shaping and should refrain from adopting the Trump model of social-media government outside of the usual institutional framework, otherwise he will open himself up to damaging criticism and fritter away his significant post-election political capital. His core support is conservative and wants a president that acts like a traditional representative rather than a millennial.

5. Guillier's "low-energy" message and inexperienced team

From the outset there was friendly fire against Guillier and his team. He faced criticism from within his own coalition and doubts were frequently raised about his physical and mental suitability for the rigours of presidential office.

His statements about preferring to take a nap before attending the first-round ballot – "[sleep soundly and prepare the roast](#)", as he put it – contributed to perceptions of indolence amongst the general public.



Guillier was accused by critics left and right of being rather too relaxed ([Fotos TVN, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

There was also criticism that his team lacked experience in electoral campaigns of such magnitude and complexity. There were doubts especially about its level of "technical" competence, as pointed out by the former minister and representative of Chile's previous Concertación alliance, [Sergio Bitar](#).

Since the left not only lost the digital battle but also failed to give its candidate an appealing human profile, Piñera now has a chance play up his own character in this way.

He will attempt to style himself as a politician who is strong yet humane. He will also ramp up his appearances in poor areas and displays of immediate personal involvement in crises and catastrophes, just as he did during the [dramatic mine rescue of 2010](#).

6. The influence of the media (and their links to Piñera)

Last but not least, careful attention must be paid to the impact of media comments.

In the first round, the media message claimed a low probability of Piñera winning in the first round, meaning that many supporters chose to go the beach instead of fulfilling their civic duty. In the second round, however, the perceived risk of a Guillier government leveraged by the nascent Frente Amplio led the same voters to express a commitment to the political project of the centre-right. In other words, they backed Piñera to avoid new risks to their beach houses (amongst other assets and privileges).

Mass media partly owned by [Piñera's entourage](#) also did their part by diffusing the idea of low pro-Piñera turnout again in the second round, thereby mobilising backers who feared a left-wing victory.

With trust in the media declining as awareness of manipulation rises, Piñera would be well advised to tone down such strategies. Chilean voters increasingly value transparency and objectivity in government and could be irked by media gamesmanship.

Reactions to the rhetoric of crisis

Both sides of the political spectrum depicted a country in deep upheaval, but the results of the election suggest that Chilean voters felt otherwise and instead valued continuation of a US-inspired societal model of malls and credit cards over a resurgent state that would strengthen public welfare.

As renowned Chilean analyst Carlos Peña González [has noted](#), the left mistook displeasure at some effects of rapid modernisation for popular rejection of the model of modernisation itself. Rather this election was won by a middle-class majority whose ethos was “forged at the mall, [through] expanding consumption, mobility, and self-confidence”, and its preference for reform over revolution.

Notes:

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