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Considerations about the rising Latin American Right

LSE Ideas

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That Sebastian Piñeira's election as president in Chile has implications in and of itself should not overlook the [wider regional context](#) and a possible resurgence by the Right in Latin America following a decade during which the Left was dominant.

The past 20 years has seen a generational change across the region as the military regimes and 'thin' and unrepresentative democracies of the past become an increasingly distant memory for older voters and a chapter in the history books of the young. Significant in this respect has been the resurgence of social movements and action inspired by the Left, from anti-globalisation protesters to demands for a more equitable distribution of national resources.

That Piñeira should have won might therefore seem surprising. But his may be the first of several more successes for the Right in the region in other elections both this year and next which could include Alvaro Uribe in Colombia in May, José Serra at the head of an increasingly right-wing coalition in Brazil in October and possible defeats for the Left in Peru and Argentina in 2011.

Over the past year there has been increasing interest and concern about the Right in Latin America, especially following the coup in Honduras in June 2009. Indeed, the manner of President Zelaya's departure and the moves against him following his declaration to hold a non-binding public consultation to change the constitution had echoes in Salvador Allende's own call for a referendum before the 1973 coup.

The rise of the Right in both Chile and Honduras highlight diverging trends in Latin America. On the one hand the Honduran example was similar to events in those states practicing '21st century socialism', through a failed coup in Venezuela in 2002 and a potential one in Bolivia in 2008. On the other hand Chile seems to conform to the 'loyal' Right which exists in social democratic states including Brazil and Uruguay, where confrontation is limited to the electoral arena.

The reason for the differences in the Right's development in Latin America owes much to the so-called 'pink tide' that swept the region during the last decade. This was a reaction to the unrepresentativeness of representative democracy and the rising economic uncertainty and vulnerability resulting from structural adjustment and liberalisation. Whereas social democratic governments in Brazil, Uruguay and Chile sought to mitigate those changes through the introduction of targeted social programmes, 21st century socialism in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela coincided amid high levels of social polarisation and pressure by the Left to 'refund' the state through constitutional reform on the other.

But even if the Right differs in its political strategy across the region, what are its constituent parts? Regardless of where it is based, it does seem accurate to talk of a Latin American Right. On one hand it shares a commitment to its previous 1980s-90s incarnation through continuing support for liberal economic and socially conservative positions (e.g. being against abortion and freely available contraception). On the other hand it differs from that version by being inclined to maintain many of the social programmes of the Left, particularly the cash conditional transfers paid to families to send their children to school or to feed them. The reasons for doing so not only include the support that governments gain as a result, but that such programmes are cheap, at around 1% of GDP. In addition, their foreign policy, especially in relation to the US, is likely to be similar to that of social democratic governments by being both nationalist and independent. In part this is due to changes in Washington as well, following the more confrontational Bush by the relatively enigmatic Obama.

This then, would seem to the parameters for a government by the Right in Chile: it would not mean a return to the unrestrained capitalism of the 1980s, but rather a development or reimagining of the Concertación model of the 1990s and 2000s. In other words, just as the Concertación inherited the structure of the military regime and adapted it, so will Chile's first right-wing president since 1989 face a similar situation.

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