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WORLD | LATIN AMERICA

Chilean Opposition Candidates Win Key Races Amid Political Shift

The results are seen as a victory for conservative former President Sebastián Piñera



Chilean former President Sebastián Piñera, left, and Chilean right-wing lawyer and Santiago's mayoral candidate Felipe Alessandri greet supporters during municipal elections in Santiago on Oct. 23. *PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

By **RYAN DUBE**

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Chilean voters punished President Michelle Bachelet's left-wing coalition in municipal elections on Sunday, as opposition candidates won a number of key races in what is seen as a harbinger for next year's presidential election.

The results offer a boost to conservative former President Sebastián Piñera, who is expected to run for office next year with polls showing him as an early favorite to succeed Ms. Bachelet. But the historically low voter turnout and success of some independent candidates also highlights a backlash against Chile's political establishment.

Candidates in Mr. Piñera's Chile Vamos coalition won 38.5% of votes, compared with 37% for Ms. Bachelet's Nueva Mayoría coalition, the election agency said. More important, Mr. Piñera's allies won several important municipalities, including the capital Santiago.

"It was a big win for Piñera," said Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist at New York University. "After losing badly in the 2013 presidential and legislative election, the right is now back."

Since 2004, the coalition that wins the most votes in the municipal elections has gone on to victory in the presidential vote, Mr. Navia said.

One of the most closely watched races was in Santiago, where Felipe Alessandri of Chile Vamos upset Mayor Carolina Tohá, a member of Ms. Bachelet's coalition, by a 10-point margin.

"Chile wants and needs a change and today we've taken a big step toward that," Mr. Piñera said while celebrating the results.

The election is the latest setback for Latin America's left following the end of high commodity prices that drove economic growth for a decade. In August, former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff was ousted in an impeachment trial. Bolivian President Evo Morales' proposal to change the constitution to run for another term was rejected in a referendum. Late last year, Argentine voters elected business-friendly President Mauricio Macri to overhaul his predecessor's populist policies.

In Chile, Ms. Bachelet's approval rating has fallen below 20% in recent months as her government struggles to kick-start a lackluster economy while facing growing opposition to overhauls and large street protests, most recently over low pensions.

"There was a punishment against the Nueva Mayoría...and everything that it includes," said Helia Molina, a former health minister in Ms. Bachelet's government who lost a race for the mayor of a Santiago commune.

In a speech late Sunday, Ms. Bachelet recognized that the election reflected dissatisfaction with her coalition, saying there was a need "to do things better." She also raised concerns about low voter turnout.

Only 35% of eligible voters—about 4.8 million people—cast a ballot on Sunday, the lowest rate since Chile’s return to democracy in 1990. A mix-up resulted in about 500,000 Chileans being registered at the wrong address.

But the low turnout also highlights Chileans’ growing distaste with the political establishment following campaign-financing scandals involving politicians in both coalitions that undermined the country’s image as one of Latin America’s most transparent, law-abiding nations.

“In Chile, we’ve been shaken by the knowledge of bad practices by political, social and business leaders,” Ms. Bachelet said. “This has created a distance between the people and democratic institutions.”

Weariness of Chile’s main coalitions created an opportunity for independents like Jorge Sharp, a 31-year-old lawyer who surprised rivals by winning more than 50% support in the mayor’s race in Valparaiso, home to Congress.

“The bad practices are over,” said Mr. Sharp, who helped organize large student protests in recent years. “It’s possible to build an alternative for the country and for governing our city.”

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