

Chile

Chile populists challenge elite as voters seek new direction

Maverick candidates gain support ahead of polls as leaders fail to address grievances



Chile's opposition deputy Pamela Jiles celebrates after voting on a bill that allows for early withdrawal of private pension funds in Santiago © AFP via Getty Images

Benedict Mander in Buenos Aires YESTERDAY

When Pamela Jiles [pranced around](#) Chile's lower house of Congress sporting a pink cape and waving matching feathers after the approval of a law allowing pensioners to withdraw their funds early, she was not the only one celebrating.

The [legislation](#) pushed by the former television personality, who has since become one of Chile's most popular politicians, was backed enthusiastically by a public suffering from the economic impact of the coronavirus crisis. But it was still seen by many as a populist stunt that would do little to resolve the country's underlying problems.

With Chile's traditional ruling class failing to provide solutions to the demands of protesters after a wave of mass demonstrations that started in 2019 and continued last year, [a new brand of politician](#) has emerged. Rather than coming from the country's deeply unpopular traditional elite, their roots lie mainly in municipal politics, grassroots movements and the media.

However, the same questions hang over the heads of this new generation: can they prevent the explosion of more social unrest caused by Chile's high levels of inequality, rising prices, meagre pensions and poor public services.

The leading candidates in opinion polls ahead of Chile's November presidential elections are mayors who have set themselves apart from the established political class. On the right is Joaquín Lavín, the social media savvy mayor of a well-heeled district in Santiago. On the left is Daniel Jadue, the communist mayor of a downtrodden area of the Chilean capital who won support by setting up a "popular pharmacy" selling medicines cheaply.

"Both are very much neo-populists. Neither has a programme or a team. They are all by themselves," said Marta Lagos, a Chilean pollster and sociologist. They were only offering short-term fixes, she argued: "They have only touched the surface with immediate populist solutions, but there are no proposals for the future."

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Robert Funk, political analyst

Mr Lavín is an old hand at headline-grabbing stunts. First elected as mayor in 1992, he once hired a plane to spray chemicals to generate rain — unsuccessfully — during a drought. He has also brought a truckload of snow down from the Andes to Santiago's main square for children to play in and created a makeshift beach with imported sand by the capital's river.

A regular on television chat shows, Mr Lavín has become adept at harnessing social media. "If you have a problem with the overhanging branches of a tree, you can tweet him and within an hour he will have told someone to

deal with it. I don't know if he has a team of little elves helping him out, but it's quite amazing," said Robert Funk, a political analyst in Santiago.

Mr Jadue is seen as a problem solver and has focused on complaints over expensive medicines and inadequate public services. Through his state-run pharmacy, he managed to break a private sector monopoly and provide cheaper drugs, an initiative since copied by other mayors around the country.

Most mainstream political analysts believe Mr Lavín has the edge over his rivals, although some see him as no more than a traditional politician.

Mr Lavín was first elected as mayor of the Santiago district Las Condes in 1992, a position he returned to in 2016 after serving as a minister in the first government of current president Sebastián Piñera and standing twice as a presidential candidate.

While Mr Lavín may be able to rally the Chilean right behind him, Mr Jadue will struggle to win the backing of centre-left voters, say analysts. The leftist Concertacion coalition that governed Chile for most of the past 30 years — with the exception of Mr Piñera's two terms — has all but collapsed, having failed to address high levels of inequality.

“How can the country's most successful coalition in the last 100 years self-destruct to a degree where not only can they not win an election, but they do not even have a candidate? If they had a decent one, Jadue would not be anywhere near where he is today,” said Mr Funk, who argued that the communist mayor would not be able to win wide support.

There is still time for a true outsider to emerge ahead of the November polls. For many of the [protesters](#) who stormed downtown Santiago last year, even Mr Jadue does not qualify. He was not welcome when last year he tried to join a demonstration in Plaza Italia, the emblematic epicentre of the protests, as some saw him as seeking to exploit the situation for personal political gain.

However, the populist tide seems likely to prevail. Asked who they thought would win the next elections in the latest Cadem poll, 17 per cent of Chileans surveyed said Mr Lavín, 9 per cent thought Mr Jadue, and 5 per cent favoured Ms Jiles. In fourth place with 3 per cent was another rightwing mayor and former presidential candidate, Evelyn Matthei, who wants to run against Mr Lavín because she considers him to be a populist.

It remains to be seen what the implications would be for the country's much-vaunted market-friendly economic model. The country has enjoyed three decades of continuous growth since the return of democracy in 1990.

“Chileans want to be Sweden or Finland, not the USSR. They want a welfare state,” said Patricio Navia, a political scientist at New York University. But with voters wanting better pensions and public services but struggling to decide how to fund them, he said, “Chileans are in for a rude awakening.”

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