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Right-Wing Businessman Wins Chile's Presidency

By [ALEXEI BARRIONUEVO](#)

SANTIAGO, Chile — Sebastián Piñera, a billionaire businessman and former senator, broke the 20-year hold on power of a leftist coalition on Sunday, becoming the first right-wing president to be elected in [Chile](#) since the dictatorship ended in 1990.

It was the first time the right had won the presidency democratically in more than 50 years, and Mr. Piñera is one of a handful of conservatives elected to head a Latin American country since the region began a strong swing to the left in recent decades.

But most analysts did not see the vote as a reflection of a major conservative shift among voters as much as a sign of disenchantment with what they saw as stale ideas and a desire for renewal.

"It's clear to me there needs to be change in Chile," said Eduardo Navarrete, a retiree who voted for Mr. Piñera. "Twenty years of abuse and fake progress based solely on the price of copper is too much. The rest is just for show."

With 99 percent of the vote counted, Mr. Piñera, 60, had 52 percent, to 48 percent for [Eduardo Frei](#), 67, [a former president](#). After the first official results were released, Mr. Frei conceded, calling the defeat "just a bump in the road."

Nonetheless, the result was a crushing setback for the leftist coalition that had steered Chile out of the 17-year dictatorship of Gen. [Augusto Pinochet](#) and helped build democracy while maintaining economic stability.

Voters not only overcame their fears of the right's ties to the dictatorship, but they also rejected the candidate supported by an extraordinarily popular leftist president, [Michelle Bachelet](#). Despite having approval ratings hovering around 75 percent, she was unable to transfer her popularity to Mr. Frei, whom many voters saw as a re-tread and whose campaign was unable to keep up with Mr. Piñera's slick, well-financed effort.

Mr. Piñera has positioned himself as an experienced business leader but is not expected to make any striking changes in the country's economic policies.

In his victory speech, Mr. Piñera paid tribute to the previous government and vowed not to "start from zero, but to start a new era in the development of our country." And in a televised telephone call, he called Ms. Bachelet late Sunday to thank her for her service and to invite her to breakfast Monday morning to seek her "advice."

Chile's third-richest citizen, Mr. Piñera has a financial empire that includes a controlling interest in the country's largest airline, Lan; a major television channel; and a stake in Chile's most popular soccer team. He has said he would divest his holdings in Lan if elected.

During the campaign, Mr. Piñera boasted that he would create one million new jobs and crack down on delinquency and drug trafficking. He also said he would seek to privatize a part of Codelco, Chile's state-owned copper company and the world's largest copper producer.

Like Mr. Frei, he vowed to carry on some of the social programs that Ms. Bachelet put in place, including an expansion of child care and social assistance for nonworking mothers.

Although some members of Mr. Piñera's coalition served in the Pinochet cabinet, the president-elect has said he will not allow former members of the Pinochet government to serve in his cabinet. Mr. Piñera's brother, [José Piñera](#), helped install the nation's neo-liberal economic program as the general's labor minister and today is a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), a libertarian research group in Washington.

After toppling the Socialist government of [Salvador Allende](#) in 1973 in a bloody coup, General Pinochet violently thrust the country to the right. More than 3,000 leftists were killed or disappeared, leaving a bitter memory that had kept conservatives out of power ever since.

That fear still worked in Mr. Frei's favor on Sunday.

"This was one of the most difficult decisions the country has had in a long time," said Erica Tapia, 44. "Unfortunately, I voted for Frei out of fear of the right."

Ms. Bachelet could not seek re-election because the Constitution allows only one four-year term and no direct re-election. Analysts believe she could [win again](#) in 2014 if she runs.

But dissatisfaction with her coalition was evident in the [first round of voting](#) in December, when Mr. Piñera won 44 percent of the vote and an independent candidate, Marco Enríquez-Ominami, won 20 percent. Mr. Enríquez-Ominami, a former Socialist, tapped into the desire for a break with the old with a campaign against politics as usual.

Pascale Bonnefoy contributed reporting.

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