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Chile Con Conservative

Chile's Sebastián Piñera could deliver a conservative victory this Sunday.

By Deroy Murdock

Scott Brown's bid for the U.S. Senate is not the only election that should intrigue conservatives and free marketers in the days ahead. Center-right businessman Sebastián Piñera is on the ballot in Sunday's run-off vote for Chile's presidency. A Piñera victory could be a serious boost for the beleaguered forces of limited government in the Americas — South and North.

Latin America has been beset in recent years by the far-left tilt of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, and even Daniel Ortega — the former Sandinista thug who got voted back into power in Nicaragua. All of these committed socialists, with frightful totalitarian impulses, see Cuba's Fidel Castro as their guiding light. They look to Havana and think, "Try this at home."

Piñera, 60, is a billionaire industrialist who helped introduce credit cards to Chile. He has major investments in TV, a soccer team, and LAN Chile, the country's major airline. He happens to fly his own helicopter and was educated at Harvard. He is pro-American and is running to restore Chile to the path of capitalist-oriented growth, from which it has drifted somewhat.

Piñera and his center-right Alliance for Chile hope to dislodge the center-left coalition, *Concertación* ("harmony," more or less), which has been in power for 20 years. Its standard bearer is Eduardo Frei, 67 — a stable sort, but widely considered a bit monochrome beside the more colorful Piñera. The latter has been compared often to Italy's flamboyant Silvio Berlusconi (though without the sex obsession). Frei faces an uphill battle to convince Chileans that he stands for hope and change, even though he is a former president, and son of a former president, trying to keep his party in power for yet another consecutive term.

The Chilean Left predictably has played the Pinochet card, by trying to tie a conservative to the former military dictator. Piñera rejects the charge.

"I was against Pinochet," he told London's *Sunday Telegraph*. "Pinochet stopped being president more than 20 years ago, and it's part of the past. And I'm not trying to be a guardian of the past, but a constructor of the future."

Piñera's platform aims to restore Chile's vibrant economic expansion — specifically, a goal of 6 percent GDP growth. As Piñera's "Government Program" states, "We will eliminate bureaucratic barriers that

impede business start-ups and will promote competence, incentives for innovation, creativity, and efficiency.”

Conservatives did raise eyebrows when a Piñera TV ad featured a gay couple. He has promised to extend inheritance and visitation rights to unmarried couples, regardless of their sexuality. He also wants to see the morning-after pill more widely available. Piñera reportedly sees these positions as a way to attract moderate votes and further de-link him from Pinochet.

Piñera’s momentum and his 44 percent showing to Frei’s 29 percent in the preliminary vote have his supporters confident of a win on Sunday. U.S. observers of the Latin American scene believe a Piñera presidency would be a step in the right direction for the nations to America’s south.

“The Chilean vote is significant because it is yet another achievement in the maturing of Chilean democracy and society that began with the far-reaching economic reforms of the 1970s, which served as the basis for a peaceful transition to democracy under left-of-center governments that in general have chosen to stick to the free-market model,” says Ian Vasquez, director of the Cato Institute’s Project on Global Economic Liberty. “The expected election of a right-of-center candidate shows that . . . Chileans’ preference for more market-oriented, growth-based policies, rather than the policies of redistribution that were increasingly leading to diminishing and even negative returns.” Vasquez adds: “Significantly, the expected presidential victor is a businessman, usually a distrusted and vilified figure in Latin American politics.”

“Piñera has said he will confront the Chávez/Castro/Morales block head-on,” notes Alvaro Vargas Llosa, a senior fellow at the Independent Institute and the editor of *Lessons from the Poor*. “The Concertacion has been too accommodating on that front, thereby weakening the non-socialist forces across the rest of the continent.”

Vargas Llosa further predicts that a Piñera win could presage center-right gains in upcoming elections in Colombia and Brazil this year and in Peru and Argentina in 2011. “That whole process will influence U.S. policy and, oddly enough, protect Obama from having to suck up to Chávez and company too much,” Vargas Llosa adds.

As far as the U.S. Right is concerned, seeing a generally conservative capitalist stem Latin America’s leftist tide could embolden a movement that has gone from utter dejection a year ago, to excitement with the capture of New Jersey’s and Virginia’s governors’ mansions, and now virtual rapture at the prospect of replacing the late Ted Kennedy with the surging Scott Brown.

The sound you hear may be that of center-right dominos falling up and down the hemisphere.

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