

Historic plebiscite for a new Constitution - Popular triumph in Chile referendum

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The popular will has been forcefully expressed in a historic plebiscite. Rather than a finishing point, this huge triumph should represent the signal for starting the construction of a new Chile.

Last Sunday, 25 October, a historic plebiscite took place in Chile. The people went to the polls, giving a resounding victory to the “I approve” option in response to the question “Do you want a New Constitution?” Thus validating a democratic demand sustained for the past forty years which has become unavoidable since the beginning of the social revolt a year ago: ending the Pinochet Constitution.

In a few months, the working class has done what the parties that administered the democratic transition had not done in thirty years. Let us recall that this plebiscite, originally scheduled for April 2020 and postponed to October as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, was the result of the “Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution” signed by most of the parties represented in parliament on 15 November, 2019, less than 48 hours before the general strike that checkmated the government and forced the political establishment to give an institutional channel to a revolt expressly aimed at its overthrow.

Although a detailed analysis of the results is needed, we know immediately that the “Approve” option obtained 78.27% of preferences and the “Rejection” option 21.73%. The latter only obtained a majority in five municipalities in the country, three of them those in which the richest people in Chile are concentrated. On the social networks, the message “there are not thirty pesos, there are three communes” is already circulating, reworking the iconic phrase from the first days of the social revolt - caused by a rise of thirty pesos in the price of transport - into a balance sheet of the last three decades of neoliberal democracy.

This was a markedly class-based vote, not only because in the urban popular sectors electoral participation visibly increased, but also because in these areas “Approve” obtained in all cases about 90% of the vote. Especially noteworthy are the results in the “environmental sacrifice zones”, places devastated by extractive mining and energy activity, which are going through serious water and socio-environmental crises and where the inhabitants have for years confronted big companies embodying the devastation. Such is the case in Freirina, Petorca and at least six more municipalities, where the “Approve” vote exceeded 90%.

Surveys prior to the holding of the plebiscite showed that more than 70% of the population identified the “Reject” option with the military, big business and the government. This has been a vote against them as well, but not only them. While the resounding triumph for “Approve” was expected, the surprise came in the results of the second ballot in which voters were asked “What body should write the New Constitution?” 78.99% voted for a Constitutional Convention, which will be equal in terms of gender and whose members will be one hundred percent elected by popular vote - over the

21.01% obtained for a Mixed Convention, which would not have been equal in gender terms and whose members would be half elected by popular vote and half composed of parliamentarians currently in office.

Finally, it should be mentioned that initially it is possible to detect an increase in participation in this electoral process. In absolute terms, there were more than 500,000 votes than in the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, an increase supported by greater participation in popular municipalities. This in itself reverses a three-decade trend of systematic decline in voter turnout. In relative terms, it should be considered that this plebiscite took place in a pandemic context, with municipalities that are still in quarantine. For this reason, we will need to review the details of the data to correctly interpret what this increase means (who voted that had done so before? Who did not vote, and why?)

What is the political significance of these results? First, it is one of the highest points of the movement of rupture opened by the revolt of October 2019. That popular impulse placed the 1980 constitution as its main target. Second, the vast majority of votes for a constitutional drafting body with 100% of its participants elected can be seen as a vote against those who have ruled the last three decades, both the centre-left and the right.

Finally, it has been a forceful political blow to the most reactionary sectors of the political spectrum (inside and outside the state) that had been organizing in the Reject campaigns. Here a political pole with a nationalist, evangelical and Pinochetist base which was threatening to constitute itself has been hit hard by the vote of almost 80% for approval.

What are the challenges ahead? Yesterday's plebiscite was perhaps the culminating moment of the phase of rupture, in the sense of a critique challenging the political and economic regime that has governed Chile since the 1970s. What is opening now is the properly constituent phase, in the sense of the confrontation of the projects of society that will enter the constitutional debate before, during and without a doubt after the Constitutional Convention.

A clear indicator of this is that the employers' organisations have been emphatic for months on the importance of working on a draft Constitution that represents their interests as landowners, industrialists, and financial capital, ensuring freedom of business, private property, and maximum political stability of the regime, that is, closure to all popular pressure.

The main challenge, given the willingness of those at the top to give content to the New Constitution, is that the working class should take the lead in the constituent debate. Given the current situation of the mobilized sectors and the existing correlation of forces, how will it be possible to face this challenge?

First, the construction of strength from the greatest possible unity of the sectors that support the overthrow of intends capitalism acquires particular relevance and this constituent process offers an opportunity for advancement. This broad political and social unity must be based on loyalty to the aspirations of the social revolt by the broad precarious masses that have filled the squares and streets since October last year, and that includes new popular subjectivities, with a marked feminist protagonism that also involves broad layers of workers.

Second, the constituent debate requires that the people develop, discuss and socialize the programmatic perspectives that support a forceful mobilization while the Constitutional Convention is being developed, so that both inside and outside it there is full awareness of what is at stake in this process, in the face of attempts to push back the will to transform sustaining the street mobilizations that put pressure on the convention participants. It will be extremely relevant to

recuperate the programmatic advances made by the Coordinadora de Trabajadores/as NO + AFP on a new social security system and the Plurinational Meetings of Those Who Struggle organized in 2018 and 2020 by the Coordinadora Feminista 8M, which now represents one of the most advanced programmatic exercises from the point of view of the intersectionality of the transformations proposed by social movements.

Finally, it is vital that this role of the masses in the constituent debate has as its counterpart their ability to build their own alternatives representing their interests in the Constitutional Convention, without subordination to the parties of the neoliberal transition. Those who have administered for decades what the people are challenging today are preparing to reap with someone else's hand from the struggle that others have sustained. Identifying themselves in a dishonest way with an electoral victory that has also been aimed against them, they seek to remake a broken social pact that connects them with the social base. Defending class independence is a political task of the first order to navigate the challenges to come.

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P.S.

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