



# Constitutional Referendum during the Covid-19 Pandemic: the case of Chile

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Pamela Figueroa

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International IDEA  
Strömsborg  
SE-103 34 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Telephone: +46 8 698 37 00  
Email: [info@idea.int](mailto:info@idea.int)  
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

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# Contents

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|   |    |
|---|----|
| Constitutional Referendum during the Covid pandemic: the case of Chile .....        | 5  |
| 1. Introduction .....   | 5  |
| 2. Political and institutional context .....  | 6  |
| 3. The pandemic: evolution of cases and government responses .....                  | 7  |
| 4. The decision to postpone the constitutional plebiscite and other elections ..... | 8  |
| 5. The constitutional reform to make possible a new constitution .....              | 9  |
| 6. Preparing an election in the context of Covid-19 .....                           | 10 |
| 7. The election day .....   | 13 |
| 8. Conclusions .....  | 15 |
| References .....  | 15 |
| About the author .....  | 20 |
| About International IDEA .....  | 20 |

# Constitutional Referendum during the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Case of Chile

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Pamela Figueroa

## 1. Introduction

Chile held a National Plebiscite to decide upon having a new constitution and the body that should write the new text on 25 October 2020. The plebiscite was scheduled for 26 April 2020 but because of the Covid-19 pandemic government and political parties decided to postpone it, as well as the elections of governors, mayors and councillors, planned for October 2020, to 11 April 2021 (Republic of Chile 2020b). A couple of days before 11 April, elections were postponed again because of an increase in confirmed cases of Covid-19, to take place on 15 and 16 May 2021 (Republic of Chile 2021). This was a difficult decision because, since October 2019, there had been significant social mobilization and protest demanding profound social, economic, and political changes. After decades of being considered one of the three most stable democracies in Latin America, massive social protest erupted in Chile, stemming from a political and institutional crisis that could be traced at least from 2010 (International IDEA 2019; PNUD 2020; Latinobarómetro 2020). The National Plebiscite was an attempt to drive the crisis in a democratic way.

In this context of a crisis of legitimacy and lack of confidence in the political system and social elites, the pandemic posed a challenge to the changes occurring in the country. The authorities faced the tradeoff of prioritizing, on the one hand, sanitary measures that implied strict quarantines and restriction of citizen mobility, and, on the other, guaranteeing democratic and safe elections. The decision to have an extended state of emergency and criminalize curfew violations was an aspect of concern from a democracy and human rights perspective, which affected both the plebiscite campaigns and people's confidence in government (International IDEA n.d.a).

This case study analyses holding a National Plebiscite for constitutional change in the context of Covid-19 in Chile. It will first present the country's political and institutional context, then the situation of the pandemic analysing the evolution of cases and government responses in a context of social crisis; the decision to postpone the constitutional plebiscite and other elections; the constitutional reform to make possible a new constitution; the process of preparing an election in the context of Covid-19; and finally, the election day, results and effects on confidence in the democratic process. The Chilean case demonstrates

the importance of assuring democratic processes in times of uncertainty, pandemics, and social and political crisis. Political agreements to hold institutional, participative and democratic processes are key to canalize social discontent and rebuild confidence and legitimacy. Timely decisions, and the inclusion of civil society, the scientific community, political parties and institutions, are also key steps to making democracy works.

## 2. Political and institutional context

Chile has had a history of political stability based on codified constitutions from independence in 1810. Since then, Chile has had a long legalist tradition and three democratic Constitutions in 1828, 1833 and 1925. The 1925 Constitution was suspended after the 1973 coup d'état. In 1978, Augusto Pinochet, president of the military junta, announced that a constitution would be adopted in 1980. The current Chilean Constitution was written by an authoritarian government and ratified by means of a plebiscite that did not have the minimum democratic guarantees, so the Constitution was contested by political and social opposition (Fuentes 2013). During the process of transition and consolidation of democracy, the Constitution has been amended 52 times (BCN 2020a), the most important being the amendment in 1989 that allowed the first national elections under democratic rules. In 2005, President Ricardo Lagos amended the Constitution to eliminate nondemocratic institutions inherited from the authoritarian regime. In 2019 the Congress amended the Constitution to make the plebiscite to have a new constitution possible.

The Chilean Constitution established a presidential system that is characterized by strong presidential powers and a bicameral Congress—155 deputies and 50 senators—elected by a proportional electoral system. The legislature is limited in its scope of action. After the 2005 constitutional amendments, and the political reforms in the period 2014–2016, institutions that limited democratic power were reformed (Figueroa and Jordán 2017). Institutions removed from the Constitution in the 2005 amendment were designated senators (9 of 39 senators were appointed by the military or other forces sympathetic to the right for much of the transitional period); effective veto power for the armed forces; the establishment of a strong and military-dominated National Security Council; and a military insulated from civilian control with respect to hiring, firing and promotions.

There are two main characteristics that remain from the original 1980 Constitution: (a) a Constitutional Tribunal with the ability to derail legislation at any point in the legislative process; and (b) high quorums for specific legislation and two-thirds quorum for reform (Siavelis 2016).

Presidential elections in Chile are held every four years, as are elections for deputies. The president of the republic has a fixed term of four years, without immediate re-election, but they can be re-elected indefinitely in alternating terms. The deputies have fixed terms of four years and unlimited re-election. The Senate is partially elected every four years. With a senator's term being eight years, half of the Senate constituencies are renewed every four years. The presidential and parliamentary contests are concurrent elections, in a multiparty system context.

In Chile there is universal suffrage and the vote is secret and voluntary (Republic of Chile 2017, 2012). Voting is strongly regulated in Law 18.700 on popular voting and scrutiny. The vote is cast in person and the election day is a public holiday. The tradition is to have the results at the end of the day, which is important for legitimacy. The electoral registry is prepared by the Electoral Service (SERVEL) according to information from the civil registry office, since registration in the electoral registry is automatic for everyone over 18 years of age, and the electoral address is assigned based on information from the civil registry office.

Elections are organized by SERVEL. The Electoral Service is the highest organ of the electoral administration in Chile. It is an autonomous body of constitutional rank, with legal personality and its own patrimony, whose objective is to fulfill the functions indicated by the law.<sup>1</sup> Article 60 of Law 18.556 entrusts the Electoral Service with: (a) managing and supervising the electoral registration process, the preparation and updating of the electoral rolls and the electoral act; (b) supervising compliance with the norms on electoral campaigns and their financing; (c) supervising the fulfilment of the norms that regulate the activities and spheres of action of the political parties, with full respect for their autonomy and their financing; and (d) other matters that this or other laws establish.

### The National Plebiscite for a new constitution

In political terms, on 25 October 2020 Chileans decided at the polls to write a new constitution, through a Constitutional Convention democratically elected, with gender parity, reserved seats for indigenous people and the participation of independents and political parties' candidates to be elected on 15 and 16 May 2021 (Republic of Chile 2021, 2020a, 2020c). This was the first time in Chilean history that people could participate in electing a Constitutional Convention in a very innovative democratic institutional design, as a response to a large period of social protest and mobilization, an unfulfilled constitutional process that started in 2016 in the government of Michelle Bachelet, and the context of a political system that is weak because of a lack of confidence and legitimacy from citizens (Figueroa and Jordán 2017).

On 25 November 2019, after a month of protests, mobilizations and acts of violence, 11 of the 17 political parties with representation in Congress signed an agreement for constitutional change, the main demand of citizen mobilization. The Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution (Acuerdo por la Paz y la Nueva Constitución) is a document that consists of 12 points that approved in the Congress an electoral schedule to allow the people to decide whether they want to have a new constitution, and the type of body to write the text (BCN 2020b). That plebiscite was scheduled for April 2020. The calendar also included that, in the scenario that people decide for a new constitution, they would elect the members of the Constitutional Convention. Finally, people could approve the new text in a ratifying plebiscite. That political compromise was critical, because to change the Constitution, a two-thirds quorum of the Congress was needed.

## 3. The pandemic: evolution of cases and government responses

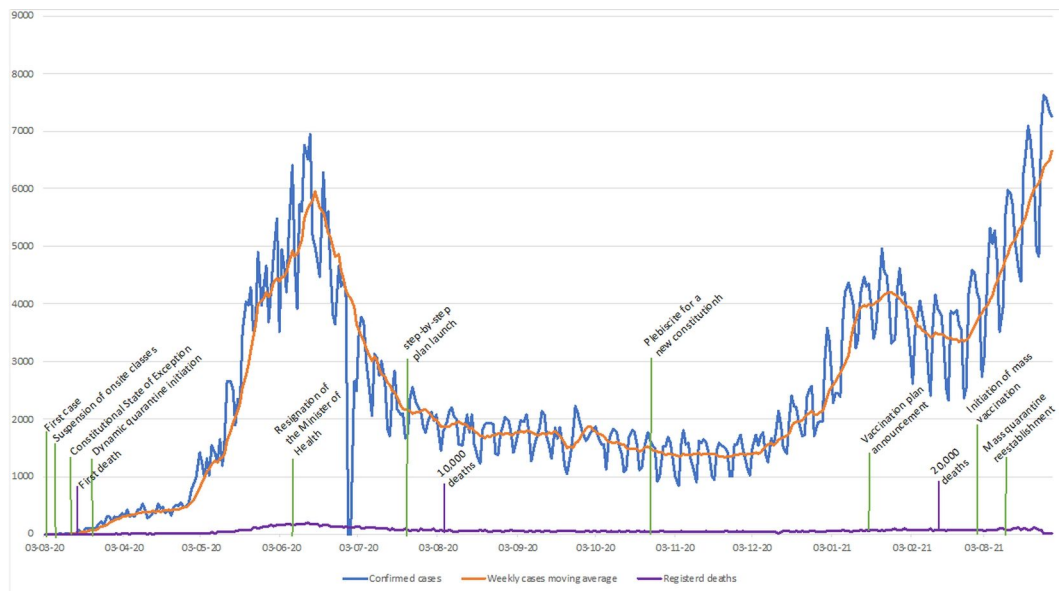
In this context, Chile confirmed its' first case of Covid-19 on 3 March 2020, which involved a 33-year-old male doctor who had travelled to Asia. On 18 March 2020, the President of the Republic of Chile, Sebastián Piñera, issued a state of constitutional exception, the 'State of Catastrophe'. The state of exception affected the entire national territory and began at 00.00 hours on Thursday 19 March 2020. To begin with, it would be in force and effect for 90 days but had been kept in place until the time of writing. On 24 March 2020, article 4 of the Health Code was modified, in order to declare a Health Alert, and give the Ministry of Health powers to take the appropriate measures. On 21 March 2020, the country had the first death because of Covid-19.

The government designed a dynamic policy to tackle the pandemic called the 'Step by Step' plan, which was a mixed policy, where, depending on the health situation derived from Covid-19, some regions were in quarantine and others without quarantine. Partial closures were in place starting from 26 March 2020, and a total closure implemented between 15 May and 16 August 2020. After 143 days, the government announced an end to the

lockdown in the entire region of Santiago, the longest in the country at that time, and partial closures in other regions.

On 30 March the Ministry of Health released the First Epidemiologic Report of Sickness for Covid-19. By 29 March there were 2,449 confirmed cases, out of a population of around 19 million people (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Covid-19 cases confirmed by day



Source: Author, compiled using data from Gobierno de Chile, Cifras Oficiales, Situación Nacional de COVID-19 en Chile, [n.d.], <<https://www.gob.cl/coronavirus/cifrasoficiales/>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

The political context is important to understand the measures taken in Chile relating to the pandemic and elections. As a result of the social discontent and because of an institutional design based on strong presidentialism, the low support that the president Sebastian Piñera had by February 2020<sup>2</sup> undermined the necessary confidence from citizens in the government. Critics disagreed not about the necessity of the lockdown, but about the opportunity and effectiveness of the government policies. The main opposition to the government policies came from the scientific community. Dr Izkia Siches, the president of Chile's Colegio Médico, a highly influential medical union, criticized the lack of information from the government, and the timeliness of the measures. The government policy of partial closures, called dynamic quarantines, had the aim of managing the pandemic without crippling the economy. Because of that decision, the government faced accusations that it was letting people die to save the economy, reinforcing its troubled reputation among the population (Luna 2021).

#### 4. The decision to postpone the constitutional plebiscite and other elections

On 19 March 2020, the government and political parties agreed to postpone the constitutional referendum until 25 October 2020, with recommendations from SERVEL

and the Colegio Médico. The National Referendum was regulated by the Bill 21.200 of 24 December 2019. The Bill 21.200 was a constitutional reform, so to postpone the plebiscite, a two-thirds quorums of the Congress was necessary to pass it (La Tercera 2020a). On 19 March, the President of the Senate, Senator Adriana Muñoz, and the President of the Chamber of Deputies, Deputy Iván Flores, both from the opposition and supported by 15 out of 17 parties in the Congress, announced the postponement of the constitutional plebiscite until 25 October 2020, and the elections of governors, mayors and councillors scheduled for 2020, until 11 April 2021.

## 5. The constitutional reform to make possible a new constitution

The Law 21.200 amended Chapter XV of the Constitution, on Reform of the Constitution, established in Decree No. 100 of 2005,<sup>3</sup> of the Ministry General Secretariat of the Presidency, with the aim of establishing a procedure for developing a new Political Constitution of the Republic. Its origin was in seven bills recast in November 2019, to consolidate its legislative process in the Constitution Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, which subsequently took for the final text of the bill the proposals for constitutional reform generated in the work of the Technical Bureau<sup>4</sup> nominated by political parties to elaborate the draft of the reform.

As a result of the lockdown, dynamic quarantines and restrictions on movement, including a nighttime curfew, protest declined. But as has been the case in other countries, despite or perhaps because of the issues raised by lockdowns, popular engagement with politics increased, and the interest in the elections grew. People self-organized in Cabildos (citizen councils) in their neighbourhoods to deliberate and talk about the new constitution in 2019 and in ‘common pots’ to have a meal under the pandemic (Albert and Köhler 2020; France 24 2020; The Economist 2020).

On 25 March 2020, Law No. 21.216 was published, which established a new electoral itinerary for the constituent process (Republic of Chile 2020a). The bill was an initiative of senators from parties across the political scale. Article 130 related to the National Plebiscite was amended just to update the date, from 26 April to 25 October 2020. It also amended the transitory disposition 28, related to the date of elections of governors of the Constitution, to update the election day of governors. In addition, a new transitory disposition was included (the 34th) to extend the mandate of the mayors and councillors in office until 24 May 2021 because of the new electoral calendar. The transitory disposition is intended to establish the entry into force of permanent constitutional provisions. The law does not provide a definition of transitory provisions. It is the concept itself which seems to indicate that it would be a rule meant to be applied temporarily and would facilitate the transition to new regulations (Núñez, 2021). The new electoral calendar is displayed in Table 1.



Table 1. Elections postponed

| Type of election                 | Initial date     | New/Postponed date        |
|----------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Constitutional Plebiscite        | 26 April 2020    | 25 October 2020           |
| Municipal and regional primaries | 7 June 2020      | 29 November 2020          |
| Constitutional Convention        | 25 October 2020  | 4 April 2021 <sup>5</sup> |
| Local Governments                | 25 October 2020  | 4 April 2021              |
| Governors                        | 25 October 2020  | 4 April 2021              |
| Governors' ballottage            | 22 November 2020 | 9 May 2021                |

Source: Author's elaboration based on data from SERVEL, Acuerdo político posterga la realización del Plebiscito Nacional, 23 March 2020a, <<https://servel.cl/acuerdo-politico-posterga-la-realizacion-del-plebiscito-nacional/>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

## 6. Preparing an election in the context of Covid-19

Covid-19 spread in Chile between April and June 2020, when it reached a peak of contagion and deaths (Figure 1). Civil society, political parties, and the Electoral Service, recognizing that it was important to hold the National Plebiscite, but that it was also important to take care of the population's health, worked together to have a 'Safer Plebiscite', an expression that means that to hold the referendum, health measures must be in place to control the risk of contagion of Covid-19. With a lack of confidence in the political elite and a government with low popularity ratings, the role of civil society organizations was key. In April 2020 the Minister of the Interior, in an interview for a major newspaper in Chile, proposed the possibility of re-evaluating the electoral calendar that had been modified because of the pandemic (La Tercera 2020b). Following that interview civil society organizations argued that Chile should not 'stop democracy' because of the pandemic but should instead hold a Safer Plebiscite. The Red de Politólogas (Valencia 2020), an organization of women political scientists, as well as other academics, made specific proposals to find the best way for people to safely vote and to guarantee participation. They highlighted two in particular: promoting political participation and safeguarding the exercise of the right to vote. They argued that it was possible to hold elections with strong health measures. For example, the authorities and electoral personnel should have Covid-19 tests, and be provided with personal protection such as masks. Hygienic services with water, soap and disposable towels were needed to ensure frequent hand washing. Finally, physical distancing at each polling place was suggested. Polling booths were requested to be in ventilated locations and regularly sanitized during the voting process. The number of voters per voting station was also requested to be reduced by opening more polling stations to avoid crowds. Another measure to consider included taking the temperature of people at the polling station.

In order to have alternative ways to vote under pandemic conditions, the Red de Politólogas also argued that it seemed reasonable to extend the one-day election, to a two-day election process. Also, they proposed the delivery of ballot boxes to households of persons with reduced mobility, who are part of the at-risk population, or who were in health isolation. Finally, a campaign to inform citizens about new rules was suggested (Camara de Diputados Chile 2020). The Electoral Service also made recommendations to government (SERVEL 2020a). Its proposal was to have a Health Protocol, limit campaign spending and regulate campaigns through social media.

In order to receive inputs from civil society, a group of experts was convened, drawn from the Electoral Service and the Senate. This group also had experts on public health enabling a multidisciplinary approach. The Electoral Service also coordinated actions with the Ministry of Health, and received technical opinion from organizations such as the Pan American Health Organization/PAHO; United Nations Development Programme; Chilean Society of Infectiology; Chilean Society of Epidemiology; Chilean Red Cross and National Emergency Office. The result of that effort was a National Plebiscite Health Protocol, with a first draft in July 2020 and approved by SERVEL and the Ministry of Health on 9 September 2020 (SERVEL 2020b).

The National Plebiscite Health Protocol addressed and regulated a number of matters necessary to implement the National Plebiscite by safeguarding the health and safety of citizens. Training is one of the aspects established as mandatory according to the regulations issued by SERVEL for the Plebiscite of 25 October 2020. The training of electoral personnel is one of the tasks that SERVEL carries out regularly. The provisions of article 130 of the Political Constitution of the Republic; and laws relating to the regulation of elections (Law No. 18.556; Law No. 18.700); Law No. 21.257, Constitutional Reform that empowers the Electoral Service to dictate the norms and instructions necessary for the development of the National Plebiscite provided in article 130 of the Constitution and other electoral processes in the terms indicated; the Agreement of the Board of Directors, published in the Official Gazette on 4 September 2020, which establishes rules and instructions for the National Plebiscite of 25 October 2020; Ordinary B3 / N 3828, of 9 September 2020, of the Minister of Health, which communicates the approval of the Health Protocol for the National Plebiscite 2020 by that Ministry. These measures are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Measures for elections in the time of Covid-19

| Issue of election                                 | Main measures   |
|---|---|
| I. Production of election material                | The operations of acquisition of materials, conditioning of the spaces, transport and distribution of these materials, documents and electoral equipment will be the object of special consideration in terms of sanitary risk and hygiene. Physical distance and specific spaces for food consumption should be promoted.  |
| II. Sanitary kit                                  | A call to the electorate so that on the day of the 2020 National Plebiscite they come with their own sanitary protection implements (70% alcohol gel and a mask (ideally three-fold disposable surgical)). The voter must bring a blue pen to mark her or his preference on the corresponding ballot papers, as well as to sign the table register. On 25 October sanitary kits were to be provided by SERVEL to collaborate in an appropriate safeguard of the measures recommended. |
| III. Campaign acts                                | Prohibition of mass acts. Political parties, civil society organizations, or campaign teams of the options submitted to a plebiscite have the responsibility to allocate resources for health supplies and make them available to those who work in the campaign. To hold face-to-face meetings, a physical distance must be guaranteed and the allowed capacity must not exceed the number defined in accordance with the instructions issued by the authority.                      |
| IV. Training                                      | The Electoral Service has mandatory training in face-to-face and virtual modality for personnel with an electoral role.   |
| V. Personnel with electoral role                  | The Electoral Service is concerned with the organization of contingency plans for civil servants. Protocol with the procedures and sanitary provisions that international visitors must follow.   |
| VI. Communication to the electorate               | A special campaign to inform citizens about the election and special health protocol.   |
| VII. Voting locations                             | The number of tables per polling station will be reduced and consequently increase the number of precincts in which to install tables. The permanent use of masks (ideally, three-fold disposable surgical masks) will be mandatory in polling places.  |
| VIII. Suffrage receiving table                    | The curtains of the secret chamber must be removed, and they will have to be placed in a position that guarantees the secrecy of the vote.  |
| IX. Food and rest times                           | Respecting physical distance and health measures.   |
| X. Accessible voting, risk groups or older adults | Special hours and access to places where they have to vote.   |
| XI. Scrutiny and data transmission                | There will be a maximum capacity informed in advance to the media. Those who cannot access the Press Centre for this measure will have online broadcasts and live contacts that allow them to properly cover the event.   |
| XII. Disclosure of results                        | Respecting physical distance and health measures.   |
| XIII. Transport of voters                         | Respecting physical distance and health measures.   |
| XIV. Voting abroad                                | Same protocol as in national territory.   |
| XV. On the proxies for the plebiscited options    | To reduce the chances of contagion from Covid-19, only a maximum of four proxies of all the plebiscited options, one per option, will be able to attend the actions of each place where votes are received.   |

Source: Author's elaboration from data of SERVEL and BCN, *Aprueba Protocolo Sanitario Plebiscito Nacional 2020*, 9 September 2020, <<https://www.bcn.cl/leychile/navegar?idNorma=1149318>>, accessed 1 April 2021.

Other initiatives proposed by experts, such as the electronic vote, early voting and a two-days election, were not included in the legal reform. There were many opinions about the

viability and effectiveness of those kinds of measures that could not be implemented, because of time and political willingness. Another issue was the right to vote of people who tested positive for Covid-19. In the referendum people diagnosed with Covid-19 were not allowed to vote due to restrictions on their freedom of movement as part of the government's regulations to reduce the spread of infection. Ensuring the right to vote of those who cannot attend the polling place for health reasons was an issue pointed out by civil society organizations. But because the vote cast in Chile is in-person, there were no facilities for those people to vote (Asplund et al. 2020; La Tercera 2020c).

## 7. The election day

The plebiscite was held on 25 October 2020<sup>6</sup>. Opinion polls carried out days before the plebiscite indicated that 76 per cent of people planned to vote (DataInfluye 2020). Another study (MORI 2020) indicated that 71 per cent of those surveyed affirmed that going to vote in the plebiscite on 25 October 'can make a difference'. Meanwhile, 67 per cent thought that going to vote was worth the effort, while 59 per cent said they had already made the decision and that they will vote 'anyway'. Regarding the health situation and its relationship with the October plebiscite, 52 per cent believed it was possible to vote without risks, and 36 per cent thought that it was risky to vote (MORI 2020), and around half the population feared that by doing so they could catch the virus.

The campaign period was between 26 August and 22 October 2020, regulated by article 130 of the Constitution and the transitory disposition 42 (which regulated the plebiscite campaigns); Law No. 18.700; and the restrictions of the National Plebiscite Health Protocol. In accordance with current legislation, electoral propaganda could only be carried out through the written press and radio stations, in digital media, through posters in authorized public spaces and, in private spaces, through posters or signs (SERVEL 2020b). Likewise, campaign materials could only be distributed by activists or brigade members on the public highway if carried out in strict compliance with health regulations and the recommendations of the health authority for a Safer Plebiscite. Finally, free-to-air television channels must allocate 30 minutes a day of their broadcasts free of charge to electoral propaganda on this plebiscite, having to give expression to the two options contemplated in each card, in accordance with the instructions of the national television council (CNTV).

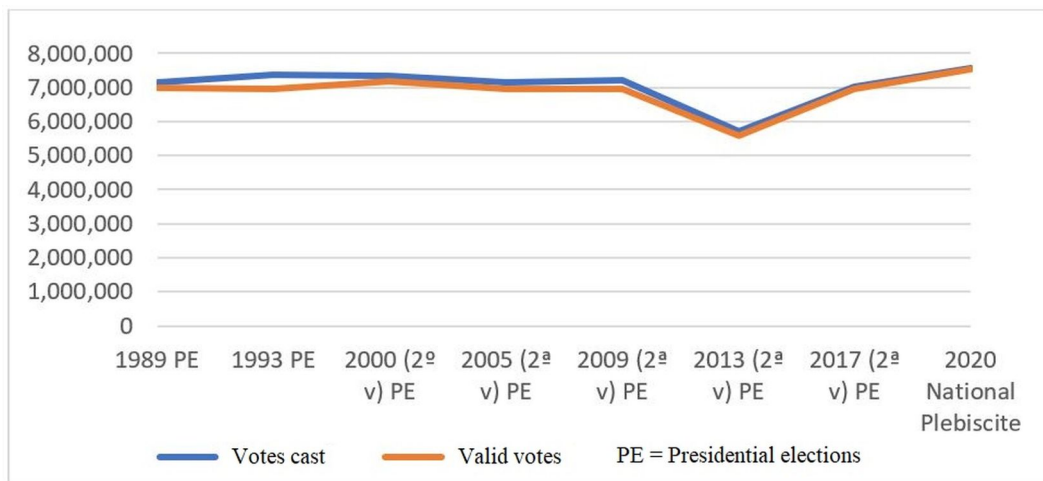
Given the new context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Electoral Service recommended not carrying out large scale campaign events, whether public or private, as they are incompatible with a strategy of physical distancing and intensive health care. The foregoing must also be compatible in accordance with the instructions issued by the health authority in the 'Step by Step' plan since different places may be in steps with restrictions. Massive face-to-face events should be avoided, and virtual channels promoted. To carry out face-to-face meetings, a physical distance of at least one metre must be guaranteed and the allowed capacity should not be exceeded in accordance with the instructions issued by the health authority in its 'Step by Step' plan and prioritizing the use of open spaces. In the event of meetings in closed spaces, the venue must be sanitized, 70 per cent alcohol gel available for the attendees and the use of masks mandatory. Door-to-door campaigns can be carried out as long as a limited number of people travel and that the physical distance of two metres is respected, masks are used and hands are periodically sanitized. The instructions issued by the health authority in the 'Step by Step' plan must be always respected.

The election day was calm, the system and protocols functioned, as expected there were no special problems or complaints, and the news were an important participation compared with last national elections (International IDEA n.d.b; The New York Times 2020). Fifty-

one per cent of the population voted, that is 7,562,173 total votes (see Figure 2). A study about the characteristics of the plebiscite participation pointed out that the levels of participation in the plebiscite increased sharply in the communities with a higher proportion of young people (Bargsted and Delgado 2021). Voters from municipalities where there were movement restrictions, voted, on average, about 2 percentage points more frequently than those located in quarantined municipalities, although the difference reaches conventional statistical significance (95 per cent) only for those in transition (movement restrictions). The socio-economic variables, income and average community schooling, are also very relevant to explain participation during the plebiscite. As the socio-economic resources of the inhabitants of a municipality increase, the average level of participation also tends to increase. The magnitude of the association is large, particularly in the case of schooling (Bargsted and Delgado 2021).

The President of the Electoral Service declared, ‘It is undoubtedly the largest participation in the history of the Republic’ (SERVEL n.d.). In a context of voluntary voting (compulsory voting was abolished in 2012 in Chile), this election seemed to break out of the tendency towards declining electoral participation. The low levels of citizen participation have been described as the main indicator of a weak political system (PNUD 2020).

Figure 2. Electoral participation in presidential elections and the National Plebiscite



Source: Author using data by SERVEL, INE, and Fuentes, 2020.

The results were 78 per cent for the option ‘I approve’ a new constitution, and 78 per cent for this to be written by a ‘Constitutional Convention’ totally elected by the people. These results open up the next stage: the election of the representatives to the Constitutional Convention (SERVEL 2020c). On 15 and 16 May 2021<sup>7</sup> Chileans went to the polls to define the political future. These elections elected representatives to the Constitutional Convention and to local governments and, for the first time elected, governors. These elections were held under similar Covid-19 mitigation measures as were applied to the Plebiscite. The only difference was that the election had a two-day process (BCN 2021), with the aim of avoiding the agglomeration of voters in the polling places.

## 8. Conclusions

As James and Alihodzic (2020) demonstrate, the global spread of Covid-19 profoundly impacted the health and welfare of citizens, and the decisions made about elections during the pandemic would affect democracy in the future. In 2019 Chile was tagged as a full democracy under *The Economist* Intelligence Unit Democracy Index (2020), occupying place 17 (of 167 countries and territories) and second place in Latin America. In 2020, International IDEA positioned Chile as a mid-range performing democracy since 2001 and a democracy since 1990. Many things have changed in Chile since 2019.

The Chilean case allows a number of key lessons to be learned.

- Firstly, it demonstrates the importance of assuring democratic processes in times of uncertainty, pandemics, and social and political crisis. This is important to strengthen citizen trust in electoral processes and in democracy.
- Secondly, political agreements to hold institutional, participative and democratic processes are key to canalize social discontent and rebuild confidence and legitimacy.
- Finally, timely decisions and the inclusion of civil society, the scientific community, political parties and other key institutions are also important steps to ensure that democracy works, because democracy needs clear rules, and trust is based on the fact that procedures will continue to be applied even in difficult times.

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## About the author

**Pamela Figueroa** has a PhD in Political and Social Studies (International IDEA-USACH) and a Master of Arts in Latin American Studies (Georgetown University). She is currently a professor at the Universidad De Santiago and Academic Coordinator of the Nueva Constitución Observatory. She is a specialist in institutional designs, political democratization and democratic governance, and has extensive academic and public policy experience. During the government of Michelle Bachelet, Figueroa was Head of Studies of the Ministry General Secretariat of the Presidency, being one of the coordinators of the Constituent Process Open to Citizens. She also coordinated the design and execution of the political reforms carried out in Chile between 2014 and 2018. In 2019 she was part of the Advisory Board of the current Constituent Process. She is part of the Women's Network of Political Scientists, and a member of the Advisory Council of the Observatory of Political Reforms (UNAM-OEA). Figueroa is the author of various books and academic publications.

## Contributors

**Toby S. James**, Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of East Anglia, UK.

**Alistair Clark**, Reader in Politics at the University of Newcastle, UK.

**Erik Asplund**, Programme Officer in the Electoral Processes Programme, International IDEA.

## About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

### What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

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## Endnotes

1. Electoral Service (SERVEL) is the name of the election management body (EMB) in Chile.
2. According to CADEM poll, the government of Sebastian Piñera had a 12 per cent level of support by February 2020.
3. In 2005 there was a mayor Constitutional Reform with the aim to democratize the political system.
4. To execute the Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution, political parties nominated a group of 14 experts to deliberate and write the draft of this constitutional reform, known as the Technical Bureau. I had the honor to be one of those 14 experts.
5. The initial date was 4 April 2021, but because of a religious holy day the election was deferred to 11 April 2021. In Chile the election day is a national holiday so elections are typically held on a Sunday.
6. On 29 November 2020 primary elections of governors and majors were held. These primary elections have not been analysed in this report, in order to focus on the plebiscite.
7. Because of the pandemic this date was recently moved to 15 and 16 May 2021.