

11:16 08 Dec RTRS-FEATURE-Ignored farmers may break tight Chile vote

By Tiffany Woods

RETIRO, Chile (Reuters) - No one asks them what they think. They go on plowing, planting and harvesting crops just as they have done for generations under central Chile's blue skies.

They live in a land of flat-brimmed straw hats, guitar folk music and red-and-white checkered table cloths. Roses climb in their well-swept dirt yards pecked clean by scrawny chickens. Golden fields of wheat wave in the wind and barbed wire fences enclose slick, fat horses that graze on belly-high grass. The white-tipped Andes mountains are never out of sight.

They live in rural towns like Retiro, 205 miles (330 km) south of Santiago and grow fruit for export, irrigate tobacco and harvest grapes for wine. They are the ones most pollsters have ignored in surveys on the Dec. 12 presidential election.

And they could hold the decisive votes in what appears to be a tight election, analysts and campaign organizers say.

"We have been forgotten," said Raimundo Medel, 53, who spends much of his day pedaling his bike along the highway near Retiro looking for work on farms.

OVERLOOKED GROUP

A poll released in November gave Socialist Ricardo Lagos 41.5 percent and Joaquin Lavín, a right-wing former mayor of an upscale district in Santiago, 41.7 percent in a first-round vote. Other polls have given Lagos, who is running on the ticket of the ruling center-left coalition, an advantage.

Pollsters have tended to interview people in cities of more than 40,000 people, which means they have not consulted about a third of the country.

"Polls have ignored the rural vote. We will see this on Dec. 12. This is going to be the key to triumph," said Sen. Hernan Larraín, who helped launch Lavín's agrarian campaign.

"The (rural) vote is important when two candidates are competing so closely," said Guillermo Holzmann, analyst at the University of Chile's Political Science Institute. "We're talking about a small number of votes but they are important. They can offset the scattering of votes caused by minority candidates."

About 15 percent of Chile's roughly 15 million people are rural, meaning they live in areas with 1,000 people or less. If larger towns that revolve around agriculture are included, the rural vote may climb to 25 percent of the national vote, said Carlos Furche, head of the Agriculture Ministry's research office and head of Lagos' rural development committee.

"In a tight election this can be very important," he said.

Carla Lehmann, polling coordinator at the Center for Public Studies, said rural residents vote like the national average. But she noted a CEP poll in September-October showed that Lavín's support in rural areas had doubled to 42.9 percent from 20.5 percent in an April-May survey. Lavín's backing was highest in rural areas, the more recent poll said.

CAMPAIGNING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Lehmann attributed Lavín's jump to his strong campaign in the countryside and the fact that he targets his message to the poor. The man who says he gathers with his family every Sunday for lunch has pressed the flesh across Chile. At one point he slept in the bedroom at a "typical" Chilean couple's home.

Unlike Lagos' advertising, Lavín's dominates the agrarian O'Higgins and Maule regions south of Santiago. His brush has left few cement walls unpainted and his high school yearbook smile is plastered on billboards, urging a "vote for change."

This promise of change appeals to Isabel Aguilar, 31, who lives near Longavi in central Chile. She wants higher prices for agrarian produce. "We want a change because the situation for agriculture is bad," she said as her husband hoed a field.

Lavín's agrarian platform rests on subsidizing demand rather than supply, giving more power to city governments in allocating funds, forming alliances between producers so they can market their goods better, and favoring a weak peso against the dollar to foster exports.

Lagos calls for investing \$650 million a year in basic infrastructure and letting seasonal workers hold collective labor negotiations. He wants to invest about \$130 million yearly in irrigation and lift the number of producers the state INDAP agrarian lending agency helps to 130,000 from 70,000.

He is familiar to rural voters because he spent much of his time as public works minister cutting ribbons on bridges and roads. But his time on the public payroll could hurt him if voters feel neglected by the coalition, Holzmann said.

Maria Alvarado is a faithful Lagos supporter. A big picture of him, arms open wide, stands before her humble house, his nose slightly askew from a bullet that punctured it one night.

A tenant farmer for landowners most of her 62 years, she got 30 acres in an agrarian reform in the 1970s but lost them because of debt. Now a grandmother, she earns \$6 a day under the hot sun farming the land that once was hers behind her house near Cumpeo, 140 miles (225 km) south of Santiago.

"I hope the situation changes so that salaries are improved. If Lagos wins we are going to dance and have a barbecue here," she said, pointing to a dirt patio shaded by grape vines.

But in the end it does not matter who is elected, Medel, also a Lagos backer, said as he hopped on his bike to pedal home for lunch. "Regardless of who wins, we will still have to work just like always."

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