Chile’s victorious “new left” brings hope, but it’s all to play for

Former student activist Gabriel Boric, 35, will become the youngest president in Latin American history when he takes over as Chile’s head of state this March *writes Franck Gaudichaud*. But with capital already taking flight and the right on the rise across the continent, he isn’t in for an easy ride.

Many Chileans breathed a sigh of relief on the night of 19 December – not just in the headquarters of the Chilean left but also in their homes and on social media – at news of the electoral defeat of the reactionary neoliberal far right, nostalgic for the old dictatorship (1973-89). José Antonio Kast had lost the presidential race to the leftwing coalition Apruebo Dignidad (AD, Approve Dignity), led by Gabriel Boric, an alliance of the Communist Party (PC), Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) and regional green parties. Crowds rejoiced in the streets of Santiago and nationwide. The sounds of car horns and singing went on late into the night. The former laboratory of neoliberalism had turned to the left.

The result had not been a foregone conclusion, however, given the high number of undecided voters. In the first round 53% of the electorate didn’t vote, confirming a trend observed since Chile’s transition to democracy in 1990 and especially pronounced since the end of compulsory voting in 2012: a huge abstention rate and growing disenchantment with a democratisation process characterised by uninterrupted neoliberalism and many lingering legacies from the dictatorship.

Between the two rounds of voting, Boric’s campaign team tried

to reach out beyond Santiago's middle-class, his core demographic, to remoter parts of the country, including rural areas and poor neighbourhoods. Their aim was to mobilise the abstainers and close the gap in areas where Kast had received strong support. It worked: turnout jumped to almost 56% in the second round, and for the first time over eight million Chileans voted. Boric beat Kast by more than ten points.

Boric's campaign manager Izkia Siches, 35, played a decisive role in this winning strategy, successfully revitalising the campaign. Siches, who was president of Colmed, the Chilean Medical College, during the pandemic, is known for her opposition to the incumbent president Sebastián Piñera's health policy. Early election data suggests that women, the working class and the young were the key factor behind the victory, contributing significantly to the almost one million difference in votes between the candidates. The left did especially well in Santiago's poor western districts, scoring over 70% in some of them. Estimates indicate that 68% of women under 30 voted for Boric, while Kast won among people over 70 [1]

The first-round result was a surprise: Kast, a 55-year-old ultraconservative Catholic lawyer and father of nine, came first with 28%, ahead of Boric on 25.8%. However, hope of a decisive Boric victory remained, given his exceptional trajectory over the past decade: he had begun in the autonomous left of the 2000s, then led the University of Chile Student Federation (FECH) in 2011, during the great mobilisation of young people for "free, public, quality" education.

Reformist and post-neoliberal

He entered parliament in 2013 as an independent without any party support, an achievement in the Chilean electoral system, which favours coalitions of centrist parties over

independents. He was then re-elected alongside figures from the student movement such as Camila Vallejo of the Communist Party and Giorgio Jackson, who became his right-hand man. Boric and Jackson co-founded the FA in 2017, strategically positioning it between the historical Communist left, whose touchstones were Castro and Bolívar, and the traditional parties of the old centre-left Concertación, the coalition of the Socialist Party and Christian Democrats which governed from 1990 to 2010 and was reviled for its faithful adherence to neoliberalism.

This institutional, frenteamplista (broad-front) "new left" which sought to be reformist and post-neoliberal, was a far cry both from the "radical left" label that the international press lazily applied to it and the accusations of communism in Chile's dominant media. Winning the primaries against the very popular (and more leftwing) Communist mayor of Recoleta, Daniel Jadue, Boric and the FA saw their tactics pay off.

Boric's presidential manifesto contained a new fiscal policy aimed at taxing the wealthy and the big companies to fund social reforms. These included public health; education; the return of the pension system (privatised by General Pinochet) to state control; the legalisation of abortion and the promotion of the rights of women and sexual minorities; the quest for a greener economy; and the negotiation of new fundamental rights for the Mapuche people.

High turnout against far right

This platform successfully rallied people from far beyond Apruebo Dignidad. But the spectacular increase in turnout in the second round – especially in the cities, and in regions that had been hostile to the left in the first round (such as the northern port city of Antofagasta) – was above all a reaction to the emergence of the far right, at whose rallies pro-Pinochet chants were often sung. So some Chileans voted

against Kast as much as for Boric, as demonstrated by the many declarations by social and feminist collectives and organisations, such as the Popular Assembly of La Granja in Santiago, which lent its support to “stand up to fascism”, without giving Boric carte blanche. [2]

In his first speech as president-elect, Boric stressed he would serve as president for all Chileans, and alluded to Salvador Allende, the socialist president who died in the 1973 coup. He also reiterated his support for the ongoing constitutional process, “a source of world pride”: “For the first time in our history we are writing a constitution in a democratic and equal manner … Let us all take care of this process so that we have a Magna Carta that is a meeting point and not a source of division.”

Following the October 2020 referendum and the election of a Constitutional Convention by universal suffrage last May, Chile is at last on track to replace the 1980 constitution inherited from Pinochet. [3] The traditional centre-left and centre-right parties are in a minority in this body, which is dominated by independents (partly from social movements, especially feminist and indigenous peoples’ organisations) and representatives of the left from the PC and the FA. Kast, by contrast, has consistently expressed a wish to scupper the constitutional project.

Boric has said he plans to implement “structural changes without leaving anyone behind; grow economically; convert what are for many consumer goods into social rights regardless of wallet size”, but he has also sought to reassure his opponents by promising to be “responsible”. In the period between the two rounds of the election he reorientated his programme towards the centre, angering the Communists.

Boric began to look more like the parties in the former Concertación, even adding some of their most prominent economists to his team – such as the former head of Chile’s

central bank Roberto Zahler and the ultra-liberal Ricardo Ffrench-Davis – to try to "reassure the markets". In addition to seeking the support of former social-liberal presidents Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, Boric addressed business leaders at its Enade 2021 convention.

Crisis in "neoliberal paradise"

Having committed to respecting the austerity budget for 2022 passed by Congress, he revised his fiscal ambitions downwards: his plans to raise new taxes have progressively gone from the equivalent of 8% of GDP over two mandates to a much more modest objective of 5% over four or five years, depending on the economic growth rate. This change was presented as a sign of his fiscal "responsibility" and determination to control inflation. But the issue of inequality (the richest 1% capture about a third of Chile's income), precarity and debt are at the root of the crisis in this "neoliberal paradise". [4] The themes of crime and drug trafficking also appeared in Boric's speeches, a response to Kast's successful deployment of the language of security.

According to New York Times journalist Binyamin Appelbaum, what Gabriel Boric is defending is simply "social democracy"; in no sense could his project be called "communist". [5] Despite the – often fake – alarm of Kast supporters, Boric has never mentioned the possibility of even partial nationalisation of the country's vast natural resources, currently in the hands of the multinationals and bourgeois exporters. Chile possesses huge lithium and copper deposits, but Boric has spoken only of increasing the "royalties" that private operators pay. Allende nationalised copper, which he called "Chile's salary", but that doesn't feature in the programme of this "new left", and its Communist allies don't believe that the time is yet right to raise the question of nationalisations.

Despite the victorious coalition's caution, some of the elite still regard it suspiciously. The stock market and the currency both plunged at the news of the result. The day after the election, Ignacio Walker, a former Christian Democrat minister and paragon of "Chilean-style" neoliberalism, expressed concern about whether the "social democratic" and "reformist" orientation of the newly elected government – which he welcomed – would turn out to be a façade for a return to the "'refounding' zeal that has characterised the Communist Party and the Broad Front parties". [6]

The Communists' participation in the government is a cause for concern in high places, and for some it raises the spectre of a return to the "Chilean path to socialism" and Popular Unity, the coalition that backed Allende (1970-73). However, the PC has insisted it will respect Boric's commitments, as when it showed moderation in joining the "New Majority" at the start of Michelle Bachelet's second term (2014-18).

'Social peace and the new constitution'

Some of the social movements of the left have criticised Boric, as they are less concerned than he is with achieving consensus. As a result, the label of amarillo (yellow) has sometimes stuck to him. He has indeed remained vague on the Mapuche question (especially their right to self-determination and the restitution of ancestral lands) and the issue of labour law. He has opted not to support the proposal for a general amnesty for those the social movements refer to as the "political prisoners of the revolt" (of October 2019), some of whom have been in prison or under house arrest for two years without trial.

This inevitably brings up the president-elect's controversial role in the protests of October 2019, an explosion of rage at the "neoliberal model" that nearly toppled the Piñera

government and was met with a level of state repression unseen since 1990. Boric is one of the deputies who in November 2019 helped devise the agreement for “social peace and the new constitution”, which was signed by the right and centrists but rejected by the PC and some of the FA, who condemned it as a stitch-up that ignored the will of the protesters. Some activists regard this agreement, which enabled the establishment of the Constitutional Convention, as a lifeline for Piñera and an attempt to channel the protests into institutions while the country was in a state of emergency.

A month later, Boric also voted for the even more controversial “anti-barricade law”, which gave legal backing to state repression at a time when the police’s human rights abuses were being severely criticised at home and abroad. Boric and his FA colleagues later apologised for voting with the right. Finally, in a region where the left shows unconditional support for the Cuban revolution, some saw Boric’s support for the 2021 Cuban anti-government protests as a betrayal.

The spirit of rebellion of October 2019 is very much alive in Chilean society. It was evident in the slogans the crowd chanted as they celebrated the left’s victory on the streets and in Santiago’s renamed Dignity Square on 19 December. And even if the territorial assemblies have lost their dynamism after months of pandemic and economic crisis, many demands for social justice remain and the fire of revolt is still smouldering.

The new president, who’s a former activist and excellent organiser, knows this. He has promised a “fairer Chile” and “to extend social rights”, while acknowledging that “the days ahead will not be easy”… Already, the country is experiencing considerable capital flight, which will reduce his room for manoeuvre. He will have to deal with a legislature that will be largely hostile, because even though the old parties were excluded from the second round of the presidential election

after finishing third and fourth in the first round, they maintain their presence at municipal and regional level and in Congress.

Tough negotiations ahead

The right won a Senate majority in November's parliamentary election. The lower house is split between the left/centre-left and right/far-right. The parliamentary left is stronger, especially the Communists (with 12 seats) and Apruebo Dignidad, with 37 (in a 155-seat body), while at the same time it has consolidated its municipal base in key cities such as central Santiago, Valparaíso, Viña del Mar and Valdivia. But progressive politicians face tough negotiations over any major reform with the centrists and the parties of the former Concertación coalition, which Boric has long disdained and which remains hostile to any significant change.

And though Kast has just lost a battle, he is far from defeated. His rise may only just be beginning. That, at any rate, was his message to his supporters on the night of his defeat. The "Chilean Bolsonaro" wants to keep making advances: as the brother of an economy minister under the dictatorship and son of a German Nazi, he might seem a throwback to the old authoritarianism of the 1980s.

But that would be to underestimate a phenomenon at work throughout Latin America: the emergence of radical rightwingers, who mobilise moral discourse, the evangelical churches and Catholic hardliners, xenophobic agitation against migrants and fear of feminist gains and the LGBTQ movement. Kast congratulated himself for entering parliament in force with 15 deputies (and one senator), at a time when the traditional right retains its hegemony in the conservative arena, even if it has decreased from 72 to 53 deputies.

Undoubtedly, the Chilean people have won an important victory, which explains this election's regional and global impact. But now the real work begins.

Source: Translated by George Miller for ***Le Monde diplomatique*** *(English edition).*

Footnotes

[1] *La Tercera*, Santiago de Chile, 20 December 2021

[2] Marco Teruggi, 'De la abstención al voto anti-Kast: las razones de protagonistas del estallido' (Abstaining from the anti-Kast vote), *Sputnik Mundo*, 17 December 2021.

[3] See Franck Gaudichaud, 'Who wins in Chile's new constitution?', *Le Monde diplomatique,* English edition, April 2021.

[4] See Luis Sepúlveda, 'Chile, no peaceful oasis', L*e Monde diplomatique*, English edition, January 2020.

[5] *Diario Financiero*, Santiago, 8 December 2021.

[6] *El Mostrador*, Santiago, 20 December 2021.

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