

Fascist wins first round of presidential elections in Chile

Friday 26 November 2021, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 25 November 2021).

Dave Kellaway takes a look at the first round presidential election results in Chile.

Following Pinochet's US supported fascist coup in 1973 up to 30,000 were killed or "disappeared" in Chile. Gradually 17 years later there was a managed democratic transition led by centre right and left of centre parties (the Concertacion). This process did not really purge the fascist military or its administrators and kept intact many of the neo-liberal anti-working class policies and institutions.

In 2019 the transition was challenged by a student rebellion which later spread to the whole population. The police and army responded violently, dozens were killed and a number of people lost an eye or were blinded by rubber bullets. An agreement to hold a referendum on writing a new constitution and the COVID pandemic meant the uprising subsided. The people voted overwhelming for a new Constitutional convention and then in 2021 elected a majority of progressive, feminist and indigenous representatives to that assembly.

The 21 November presidential elections confirmed a continued marginalization of the mainstream Concertacion parties and an affirmation of the left and progressive forces which have a majority in the convention. However the new element is the success of a Pinochet defender, Jose Kast, as the winner of the first round. Boric, who was a student leader in 2019 and subsequently became an MP, is only two points behind. However, the polls had him ahead before the vote and in all the elections since 1990 the winner in the first round was confirmed in the second. Nevertheless, it is still all to play for since none of the usual mainstream parties made it to the second round and only 44 per cent voted, less than in previous presidential elections. Although it is assumed that the USA based candidate, Parisi, will support Kast, his votes given the lack of definition of his politics, might not all transfer to the fascist.

It is worth getting a flavour of the threat posed by Kast. Here is his post vote declaration:

I am the only candidate that can secure peace, that can stand up to the criminals, delinquents and the narco-traffic gangs and that can end terrorism. Gabriel Boric and the Communist Party want to link up with the terrorists and assassins and have never been on the side of the victims of terrorism and criminals. (EL PAIS 22.11.21, MY TRANSLATION)

Kast stands full square behind the neo-liberal policies of the so-called Chilean "miracle" which have resulted in massive inequality, low wages, privatised pensions, welfare and education. He is ultra-Catholic, against abortion rights, gay marriage, indigenous rights for the Mapuche and wants to set up a physical barrier in the north (think Trump's wall) to stop migrants. Unsurprisingly he is a fan of the previous US President Donald Trump, President Bolsonaro in Brazil and the Vox fascist group in the Spanish state. He hopes to negotiate an agreement with Sichel before the second round. The latter has already said he cannot vote for the far-left Boric and is willing to discuss with Kast.

Clearly both the state's repressive response to the 2019 mobilizations and the way capitalist extreme

inequality breeds crime, provides Kast with a basis for portraying himself as the defender of security and law and order. Racism against the indigenous minority also can win over less radicalised voters. As with other hard right populists Kast wins votes outside the metropolitan areas in the rural areas and small towns. The rich and the better off middle class also fear the redistributive policies of Boric. All those years of the Pinochet regime and then the tepid changes of the transition have meant that those social layers who gained in those years are willing to support Kast's politics - particularly if the traditional right of centre parties no longer seem able to see off the left.

We should not let Kast's success blind us to the breakthrough represented by Boric's votes. His policies to increase state intervention in the economy such as ending privatised pensions or his defence of women's, gay and indigenous rights are more radical than the left of centre parties' traditional positions.

Although Kast represents another example of creeping fascism we also see like Boric's candidacy a number of progressive, left counter tendencies developing in various countries with different degrees of radicalism. Just across the border in Argentina the Trotskyist-led Workers Left Front (FIT) just won a million votes and four MPs. It is now the third national political tendency. In Bolivia we saw the return of a pro-Morales government team and Lula is looking a good bet to replace Bolsanaro. The victory of these new hard right or fascist currents is not inevitable. In Chile, Boric represents a radical riposte to the rise of the fascist right.

Boric is faced with some difficult tactical choices if he is to extend his support sufficiently to win the second round. He has already acknowledged that he has to listen and respond to public concerns on violence and insecurity. Winning votes outside the metropolitan areas has to be one area to work on. How far should he negotiate with Provoste, the Christian Democrat, who said she cannot vote for Kast? Are there concessions that could be made? It is difficult to judge these issues from here. A fascist led Kast government would make it even more difficult to develop a socialist political alternative. As long as certain lines were not crossed some adjustment of policy may well be a price worth paying to stop Kast and get a government that can begin to roll back the privatised economy and protect people's living standards.

At the same time there are 56 per cent of voters who did not turn out in the first round. Abstention rates were even higher - as much as 64 per cent - in the working-class areas of Santiago. The traditional left parties like the CP and Socialist Party failed to mobilise these people. Continuing a radical, dynamic, popular campaign could win enough of those votes to make a difference. Another dilemma is how far do you focus your electioneering on pinning the pro-Pinochet label on Kast and how far do you emphasise the positive social changes you want to bring about? Clearly Kast has the advantage that whole sections of the capitalist mass media will amplify his own accusations that Boric is pro-communist and pro-violence.

Many of the commentators in the Spanish language press have highlighted the polarization of Chilean society reflected in these elections. It is a conflict over the very direction and model of our societies today. If Kast were to win there would be a material and constitutional conflict between the President and the probable outcome of the constitutional convention. The left in Chile needs to build the broadest possible front both electorally and in the workplaces and communities for Boric and against Kast.

If Boric wins he will have the additional problem of a congress and upper house where the right-wing parties and the Kast current have reinforced their support in elections that took place alongside the presidential first round. Furthermore, the scale of the social and Covid crisis also weighs on the capacity of the Boric campaign to mobilise people against the fascist threat. The degree of social disaggregation and crisis can also favour the law and order narrative of Kast.

Pinochet tried to physically eliminate the left and the labour movement. The moderate parties of the democratic transitions tried to paper over the contradictions of Chilean society. Eventually the struggle of working people – including in all their diversity as women, gays, indigenous – against a capitalist system that makes them poorer, unhealthier and is destroying the planet, will always re-ignite. Let us hope they can win a victory on 19 December.

25 November 2021

Dave Kellaway

Chilean Presidential Election results first round (second round on 19 December between top two)

JOSE ANTONIO KAST: PARTIDO REPUBLICANO DE CHILE
27.9 per cent 1939198 votes (Fascist sympathiser of Pinochet)

GABRIEL BORIC : CONVERGENCIA SOCIAL
25.8 per cent 1792006 votes (Left wing former student leader of the 2019 mass protests)

FRANCO PARISI: PARTIDO DE LA GENTE
12.8 per cent 891566 votes (Political independent business man right of centre, campaigned from the USA!)

SEBASTIAN SICHEL : EVOLUCION POLITICA
12.8 per cent 885337 votes (supporter of current right of centre president Pinera -traditional right of center party)

YASNA PROVOSTE: PARTIDO DEMOCRATA CRISTIANO
11.6 per cent 807377 votes (traditional centre party, like Pinera "s party part of the Concertacion bloc governing the post 1990 managed democratic transition)

MARCO ENRIQUEZ-OMINAMI PARTIDO PROGRESISTA DE CHILE
7.6 per cent 528839 votes (emerged from Socialist party which was part of the Concertacion)

EDUARDO ARTES: UNION PATRIOTICA
1.5 per cent 102069 votes (Communist party of Chile which also is supportive of Boric)

Abstention rate: 56 per cent

P.S.

• IVP. 26 November 2021:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7413>

A first version was published in [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#)

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