

# **“Those Who Are Poor, Die Poor” - Notes on the Chilean Elections**

Tuesday 4 January 2022, by [WEBBER Jeffery R.](#) (Date first published: 28 December 2021).

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Premature obituaries of Chilean neoliberalism abound on the heels of the December 19 run-off presidential election. Gabriel Boric of Apruebo Dignidad (Approve Dignity, AD) – a coalition of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA) and the Partido Comunista de Chile (Communist Party of Chile, PCC) – secured a surprisingly robust victory over his far-right opponent, José Antonio Kast (aka, JAK), of Frente Social Cristiano (Christian Social Front, FSC) – a coalition of Kast’s Partido Republicano (Republican Party, PR) and the Partido Conservador Cristiano (Christian Conservative Party, PCC). [1]. Boric took 55.9 percent of the popular vote to Kast’s 44.1 percent, with 1.2 million more people voting in the second round than in the first contest in November. That put voter turnout at 56 percent, the highest of any presidential election since 2012, when voting was made voluntary. [2]. The result represents a serious setback for forces of the far right in Chile, and, indeed, the region more generally – it wasn’t good news for Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, for example, who faces elections in 2022 that he was already likely to lose to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (“Lula”).

Scenes of elation on streets across Chile were as much a collective sigh of relief as a roar of triumph. Only a month earlier, momentum had decidedly shifted to the ultra-conservatives, with Kast coming out on top in the first-round with 27.9 percent to Boric’s 25.8. The simultaneous congressional elections also witnessed right-wing small majorities solidified in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. [3]. The hopeful possibilities unleashed by the insurrection of October 2019 were temporarily replaced by the fear that that cycle was coming to a close, to be replaced with a vicious, restorative reaction. From their antipodal vantage point, investors read November’s election similarly – Chile’s stock market leaped by 9.4 percent, alongside a 3.5 percent gain in the peso relative to the dollar. [4].

In another sign of left retreat, and reflective of the unsettled turbulence of contemporary Chilean politics, third place was occupied by Franco Parisi, a right-wing, anti-party populist for the newly-minted Partido de la Gente (Party of the People, PDG), whose platform emphasized securing the borders against migrants. Parisi is an economist with a PhD from the University of Georgia, whose previous positions include Vice Dean of the Faculty of Business at the Universidad de Chile and Professor of Economics and Business at the Universidad Andrés Bello. He has since relocated to the US. After a stint at Texas Tech University, where a student accused him of sexual harassment, Parisi now lives in Birmingham, where he is an adjunct professor at the University of Alabama. He never set foot in Chile during the campaign, ostensibly because he tested positive for COVID-19, but perhaps more likely because he is in arrears for \$249,000 in alimony payments and would not be allowed to leave the country if he returned until this debt was paid. A social media personality with a popular YouTube show called “Bad Boys Who Make the Elite Uncomfortable,” Parisi captured 12.8

percent of the vote (37 percent in the North, a traditional bastion of the center-left, where anti-immigrant sentiment has surged in recent years). [5].

Back in June 2020, Boric unexpectedly defeated Communist Daniel Jadue in the primaries of the newly-formed Apruebo Dignidad, and there were high expectations for his performance in the forthcoming presidential contest. But Boric was already viewed with suspicion by many social movement and left activists. This was the same person who had personally signed the congressional Agreement for Social Peace and the New Constitution in November 2019, without the support of his party, Frente Amplio, precipitating a split in the latter. That agreement, which set in place a restricted process for the renewal of the constitution, was severely criticized by large sectors of the popular movement, including initial opposition from the Communists. [6]. Boric then made a point of signaling “governability” to the political and business establishment in the lead-up to the first-round elections in November 2021, further alienating layers of the popular movement, and muting enthusiasm for participating in the election. [7].

Nonetheless, the bulk of social movements and left-wing forces in Chile, whether inside or outside of Apruebo Dignidad, rallied to bring out the vote for Boric in the second round. Above all, the priority was to defeat *pinochetismo* and to keep alive for another day the transformative cycle propelled by the revolts of October 2019. [8]. Elated crowds took to Santiago’s main square to celebrate the end to Pinochet’s dynasty of death, where they faced off in confrontations with Kast supporters, and the water cannons of the state. These scenes played themselves out at the base of the now-absent bronze statue of General Manuel Gaquedano, commander-in-chief of Chile’s military during the War of Pacific (1879-1884), in which Chile acquired significant swathes of Peru and permanently cut-off Bolivia from the Pacific. The Piñera government had to remove the statue for safe keeping in March 2021, after protesters attempted to destroy it with hammers, saws, and a fire at its base. Marta Lagos, Chilean political analyst and founding director of the opinion research company Latinobarómetro, points to a remarkable parallel between the election of December 2021 and the 1988 referendum that formally ended Pinochet’s rule. The proportion of votes in 1988 responding “No” to continuing Pinochet’s reign was virtually identical with support for Boric in December this year, with the “Yes” vote in 1988 eerily matching the proportion backing Kast in December. [9].

For the everyday politics of class struggle in Chile, Kast’s defeat ensured a dramatically better terrain for the oppressed in 2022 than the alternative. But every early signal from the president-elect screams a hardening of his already-apparent turn to centrism and a willful lowering of popular expectations. Reviving the radical agenda of the “social explosion” of October 2019 will require reanimation of politically independent struggles by all the myriad social forces of the left that made Boric’s election possible in the first place: the Mapuche struggles in the south; the student movement; popular feminism; pension activism; precarious workers; dockworkers and miners; and the ecological front.

## **Catastrophe Averted: “La derecha sin complejos”**

But let’s begin with what was avoided, or at least temporarily contained. Kast is an ultra-conservative former congressperson, devote Catholic, and father of nine. He is openly inspired and aligned with Spain’s far right Vox, and a host of other constituent forces of the global tide of reaction. [10]. Kast campaigned on a platform of restoring law and order, cracking down on crime, and protecting free markets and traditional values. He railed against immigrants, particularly those from Venezuela and Haiti, and promised to build a 3-meter deep ditch along the northern border of the country. Kast has long proclaimed his allegiance to the legacy of Pinochet, declaring a few years ago that if the dictator were still alive he would receive Kast’s vote. In 2016, Kast declared that, “apart from the subject of human rights, the Pinochet government was better for the development of the country than that of Sebastián Piñera.” He has pledged to reverse same-sex marriage and the

limited rights to abortion in the country, and generally channeled hostility toward recently emboldened indigenous, feminist, and LGBTQ+ activism. [11]

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Authoritarian reaction is something of a Kast family trait. Michael Kast, JAK's father, fought for the German army against the Soviets in World War II, and was a voluntary member of the Nazi Party in 1942. [12]. Kast senior migrated to Chile in 1950, establishing himself in Paine, a rural community south of Santiago. He gradually built a nationwide network of restaurants and industrial centers for the manufacture of packaged meat. [13] The Kast family was elevated politically and socially under Pinochet's dictatorship. JAK's brother, Miguel, obtained a Masters degree in economics from the University of Chicago and served as Minister of Labor and president of the Central Bank during the Pinochet regime. [14]. When Miguel died of bone cancer at 34 years of age, he became a mythic figure on the Chilean far right. Investigative journalists have also exposed a potential facilitative role played by another brother, Christian, alongside Kast senior, in the torture and disappearance of one of their employees in Paine, who was a member of the MIR at the time of his disappearance. [15].

Cleaved internally along the lines of democratic respectability, the travails of the post-dictatorship Chilean right are traceable to the referendum of 1988. Political movements backing the "No" campaign that year subsequently congealed under the center-left coalition of the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia and secured themselves in office for the coming decades. Those behind "Yes" to pinochetista continuity, meanwhile, hunkered down in the defensive trenches of preserving the dictatorship's legacy, especially as symbolized by the 1980 Constitution. [16]. This avowedly pinochetista right-wing proved inadequate to the early democratic contests of 1989 and 1993, on both cases allowing the center-left to win handily in the first round, having captured more than 50 percent of the votes. [17].

Responding to these feeble electoral showings, the Chilean right gradually repositioned itself more proximately to the centrism of the Concertación. In 1999, this strategy forced the center-left into a run-off presidential round for the first time since the return to democracy, and in 2009 it finally ensured Sebastián Piñera's rise to the presidency - the first time in half a century that the Chilean right formed a government via the electoral path. [18]. The break with Pinochet was never clean, with currents of the mainstream right-wing parties refusing to renounce the Pinochet ideal; but more and more, explicit references became a taboo. More roundabout defenses continued to be permitted, as evidenced by the fact that the traditional parties of the post-dictatorial right-wing coalition, Renovación Nacional (National Renovation, RN) and the Unión Demócrata Independiente (Independent Democratic Union, UDI), only formally deleted from their party programs apologia for the 1973 coup in 2014 and 2018, respectively. [19].

Unsatisfied with the moderating turn of the Chilean electoral right, Kast left the UDI in 2016, disparaging the party's departure from its "foundational project." As a political independent in this period, Kast ostentatiously wed himself to the legacy of Pinochet, and gathered 8 percent of the vote on this niche ticket in the 2017 presidential election. [20]. So far, the story runs parallel to

Bolsonaro's long political career on the far periphery of institutional political influence in Brazil, before he was catapulted to the presidency. The similarities don't end there. What were the circumstances that allowed for Kast's ascent from 8 percent in 2017 to the lead position in the first round, and very respectable finish in the second round of 2021? His arch of ascension parallels the timing of early institutional victories for the left on the terrain of the constitutional process. In particular, Kast was boosted by the impotency of Chilean centrism in the face of these left-wing advances.

The first of these moments was the plebiscite on a new constitution on October 25, 2020. To the initial question posed to the population – “Do you want a new constitution?” – the response was a resounding 78.3 percent “Approve.” [21]. “Reject” garnered only 21.7 percent of the vote; even more significantly, the latter gained a majority in only five communes in the entire country, three of which were the wealthiest anywhere in Chile. [22]. A democratic demand sustained for over four decades – to bury the constitution of Pinochet alongside the bones of the grotesque himself – had finally been secured by the revolts of October 2019. “What the parties that administered the democratic transition couldn't do in thirty years,” Pablo Abufom and Karina Nohales rightly point out, “the working class accomplished in a few months.” [23]. “What body should be responsible for the writing of the new constitution?” So read the second question posed in the plebiscite. For 79 percent of voters, all delegates to the Constitutional Convention should be popularly elected, and there should be gender parity among them. For 21 percent, there should be no rule of gender parity, and only half the delegates should be popularly elected, with the remaining half composed by the existing congress, at the time divided between the discredited center-left and center-right. [24].

Body blows against Chilean centrism continued to mount the following May, this time in the form of simultaneous mayoral, local council, and gubernatorial elections, alongside a vote to select delegates to the 155-seat Constitutional Convention. For the latter contest, the center-right joined the far-right under the unity ticket of Chile Vamos. Pundits were unanimous in the view that Chile Vamos would certainly win at least the 52 of 155 seats necessary for veto power. (The Constitutional Convention was designed such that a two-thirds majority was necessary to advance every article in the constitutional process, an in-built conservatizing function.) Instead, the united right would have to settle for only 37 seats, roughly 23 percent of the total. [25]. Meanwhile, the list bringing together the Communists and the Broad Front won 28 seats, three seats more than the combined performance of the social-liberal parties of the former Concertación (15 for the Socialist Party, and only two for the Christian Democrats). [26].

Most novel, though, were those Convention votes that went to leftist expressions of the “anti-political” conjuncture. A remarkable 48 seats were captured by independent candidates, some of whom were right-wing conspiracists, but most of whom were progressive candidates, like feminist Alondra Carrillo (of the 8M Feminist Coordinator), or independents from social movements connected through joint tickets, such as those of the Social Movement Constituents, or the People's List, or, alternatively, delegates numbering among the 17 seats reserved for indigenous peoples, seats now occupied in the main by indigenous activists embedded in historic movements for liberation. [27]. The spirit of October also fed into the municipal disputes. For example, Jorge Sharp, a long-time activist on the anti-neoliberal left, was re-elected mayor of Valparaíso, while Communist Daniel Jadue won the mayoralty of Recoleta, a municipality within the Santiago Metropolitan Region. [28]. Irací Hassler, a feminist activist and Communist, became mayor of the Commune of Santiago, effectively downtown Santiago. At the gubernatorial level, the environmental activist and agricultural engineer, Rodrigo Mundaca, won the region of Valparaíso. [29].

Not all of the news was positive. The representational crisis of the traditional party system which spawned the polyvalent “anti-politics” of the moment found a depressing expression in the unprecedented rate of abstention. An alarming 61.4 percent of the electorate didn't turn out to vote,

with abstention reaching 65-70% in working-class municipalities. [30]. Still, the overall dynamic of the May 2021 elections, and especially those of the Constitutional Convention, was unanticipatedly weak performance by the united right, and an overarching discrediting of traditional political parties. The Convention would thus be composed by a range of delegates weighted toward an eclectic melange of social-movement and party elements of the left and center-left, with the former stronger than the latter in the progressive bloc.

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It was during the plebiscite on the constituent process that Kast first came to be the face of “Reject.” This was obviously a losing position in the narrow terms of voting on the day, but the campaign built around the Reject platform consolidated Kast as a national political figure, something that had eluded him even in the presidential race of 2017. The campaign also reinforced a coherent right-wing movement identity – conservative, nativist, anti-immigrant, anti-feminist, and anti-indigenous – for all those layers of Chilean society hostile to the possibilities for change opened up by social explosion of 2019. Instead of defending Pinochet, Kast now rallied around the symbol of the dictator’s 1980 constitution. As in Bolsonaro’s Brazil, evangelical TV personalities devoted their influential program content to the most dynamic right-wing force of the day, pivoting collectively behind Reject. [31].

Once the delegates to the Constitutional Convention had been elected, every conservative force in Chile saw the writing on the wall. With the support of the dominant media powers, an aggressive campaign to discredit the very notion of the Constituent Convention began in earnest. Reject/Approve became the most definitive axis of class struggle in the country. According to polls, among those who identified as right-wing, 68 percent held that the citizenry had little to no inclusion in the constituent process. Among those identifying themselves as on the left, the comparable figure was 13 percent. By this time, Kast had already established himself as the figurehead of Reject. While the traditional institutions of the center-right initially backed Sebastián Sichel – a political independent with a past in the Christian Democratic Party – as their preferred presidential candidate, when he quickly proved a non-entity in the polls they shifted their loyalties – as well as their ample war chests and media infrastructures – to Kast. Anything, it seems, to defeat Boric, the face of “Approve.” [32]. With political temperatures rising over the “Mapuche conflict” in the South, and immigration in the North, Kast’s Reject platform was ever-more inflected with security and order. The pandemic, meanwhile, introduced new anti-science and anti-globalist elements, although not to the same degree as Trump or Bolsonaro. [33].

## **Looking Back**

Election reporting invites presentism. So, let’s insist on some history. If, in Gramscian terms, Boric appears today as the “plough-man” of history, the molecular processes of movement “fertilizer” have been at work for some time. Between 1967 and 1973, the socio-political capacities of Chilean workers and peasants reached their modern apogee. That historical cycle posed the possibility of



redefining all the entire terrain of or social life, from institutions of the state to the organization of the economy. [34]. Once in office, the Unidad Popular (Popular Unity, UP), along with the pressures of popular mobilization on an incredible scale, altered previous frameworks of the law and other state-institutions. Experiences of workers' management in the industrial belt and peasant seizures of *latifundios* in the countryside were propelled not only autonomously from the state, but on occasion with independence from party lines, including those of the most radical parties on the left. [35].

"The Popular Unity program and the authors of its economic strategy envisioned a carefully controlled revolution from above," Peter Winn suggests in his magisterial *Weavers of Revolution*. [36]. It was "to be carried out legally, using the instruments created by the bourgeoisie and the powers granted the state." Allende's mass base saw things differently. Workers, peasants, and shantytown dwellers understood the election of the UP as an invitation to seize the initiative themselves, through direct action, oriented to fulfilling decades of pent-up demands. Allende's pledge never to turn the coercive power of the state on the Chilean masses meant that they were released from the threat of repression. Because the UP's program included promises of far-reaching transformations of society, the distribution of wealth, and coverage of basic necessities for the poor, the popular classes understood that when they assumed responsibility for advancing the revolutionary process in their interests they were carrying out the government's agenda. [37].

The consequent unfolding of "a revolution from below" more often than not outpaced the "legalistic and modulated revolution from above," revealing the limits of Allende's guiding hand. The revolution from below consisted of the transformation of ordinary workers, peasants, and urban poor into, "active agents of change, the protagonists of their own destiny," through their relatively unchoreographed socio-political experiments. In a complex blend of spontaneity and coordinated activity with organized political groups, plebeian Chile entered center-stage on its own behalf. [38]. With a horizon bent toward the end of capitalist society, this revolutionary impulse from below and deep reformism from above were brought abruptly to a close with the coup d'état of 1973, which installed Augusto Pinochet's regime of terror.

After a few years of experimentation, Pinochet adopted a single-minded agenda of neoliberal counter-revolution. From the mid-1970s forward, the country witnessed the execution of momentous socio-economic restructuring, "linking social life in Chile with the rest of capital worldwide," through the gun barrels and torture camps of state terror. [39]. The regime dismantled the dense infrastructures of class struggle built-up over time, and eradicated popular organizations of the left. It retooled the institutions of the state as brazen instruments of capital, the entire edifice ultimately constructed on the base of the 1980 Constitution. For Karina Nohales and Javier Zúñiga this was a true capitalist revolution, with constituent power, "a refoundational impulse that lasts to this day, consolidating a political-institutional regime that is based on the generalized precarity of living conditions, the weight of large rentier capitalists, the financial sector, alongside a commercial sector that promotes debt, and with pauperized working conditions to the benefit of capital." [40].

Despite its heroism, the movement for democracy in Chile in the 1980s was unable to overturn this epochal defeat of the left even after Pinochet was ousted in 1989 and electoral liberalism restored to the country by 1990. The audacity of social experimentation from below characteristic of the Allende period was replaced over the 1990s and early 2000s by resignation in the face of a post-political technocracy. Alongside a commitment to neoliberal continuity, authoritarian enclaves underpinned the new order, with legacies from the dictatorship enmeshed in the nodes of an ostensibly democratic state structure.

Beginning in 2006, the first cracks in the neoliberal consensus emerged, kicking off a cycle of movements that would culminate in the social explosion of October 2019. The wave began in the opening year with the so-called revolt of the Penguins – referring to the black and white uniforms of

high-school students – which brought more than 1.4 million students into the streets across the country, more than any demonstrations since the pro-democracy mobilizations in the closing years of the dictatorship. By 2011, the generation of militant high-school students were now in university, igniting mass mobilizations across the higher education sector, this time in a more or less syncopated rhythm with Mapuche and other indigenous liberation struggles, socio-ecological movements in the “sacrificial” mining zones, and a reviving movement of precarious, contracted-out laborers. [41].

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Women and youth assumed a dominant position in the new assemblyist forms of mass democracy which presided over the emergent and newly forming movement cultures. Out of the many-sided infrastructures of this milieu, left-wing feminism stormed to the frontlines. Feminist militants rooted in the myriad struggles around agro-ecology, housing, territory, education, health, labor, pensions, gender violence, and abortion organized the Chilean iteration of the International Feminist Strike in March 8, 2018, out of which the 8M Feminist Coordinator was born.

The following year, Chile’s feminist strike amounted to one of the biggest demonstrations in Chilean history, at least until the quasi-insurrections broke out a few months later. Amid the latter revolts of October 2019, the 8M Feminist Coordinator was the first organization to call for a general strike, soon joined by the militant dock workers, who had just emerged on the other side of a series of successful sectional strikes of Chilean ports a year earlier. Student federations at all levels shuttered schools and universities. By October 23, banks and businesses were closed, classes suspended, 20 ports paralyzed, 75 percent of industry shut down, and still more was running at only half capacity. [42].

October established the foundations of possibility for a new historical period, one which would be characterized by open contestation between life and capital, by struggles in which the minimal conditions for social reproduction were pitted against profitability – climate crisis, gender violence, pauperized labor conditions, and social rights. Out of these struggles the demand for a new constitution cannot be reduced to an empty juridical abstraction. It became the centripetal focus of multiple class struggles: plurinational, feminist, and popular for which changing the constitution was not ultimately an end in itself, but a vehicle for pushing the next set of conditions for more general and profound changes to the conditions of life in Chile. [43].

The meaning of October remains in flux. Political parties, including the PCC and the FA, were marginal to the uprising. While militants from these parties were embedded in the unrest, an overwhelmingly anti-party sentiment predominated and extended even to parties of the left. The idea of Chile as a neoliberal model for the world, an oasis of stability amid Latin American turmoil, was decisively ruptured. A new disposition for militant class struggle was on display among the

heterogeneous layers of the working class, together with a radicalizing orientation of significant layers of the precariously indebted middle class. But the atmosphere of “anti-politics,” without more effective political leadership from an organized left, remained vulnerable to eventual dispersal, fragmentation, and eventual canalization in different political directions.

As Noam Titelman points out, few in the streets in October were members of unions, much less political parties, and many of the activists were very young. [44]. Revealingly, a study from the Centro de Estudios Públicos shows that the percentage of people who identify with a position along the left-right axis fell from 65 percent in 2006 to 38 percent in 2019, and, in the same period, the percentage of the population that identified with any party fell from 53 to 22 percent. [45].

With the hindsight of two years, it is clear that the politicization of Chilean society initiated by the social explosion of October has not simply been an unmitigated turn to the left. Thousands of people have been politically activated on the left and right alike without necessarily identifying as such. To be clear, this is not an equilibrium. To the extent that the popular sectors have been politicized it has mainly been through objectively feminist and leftist socio-political organizing in the broad activity of the process of change propelled forward by the bolt of October, ranging from street-level activism to electoral campaigns around the Constitutional Convention. This activity has been “massive, open, self-managed, participatory and constructive, with a plurality of voices.” [46].

On the right, by contrast, politicization has been reactionary, channeled through conservative and anti-communist groupings, evangelical churches, and neo-fascist street organizations on a scale unseen since the Allende period. [47]. It has also been minoritarian, constituted by small numbers of organized cadre, financed by large-scale capitalists, and amplified by more traditional right-wing political figures. Kast, above all, has cohered these sentiments and activities under the banner of Reject. [48].

## **Boric Moves to the Center**

Despite an objective opening for further left politicization, Boric’s presidential acceptance speech set a conciliatory tone: “I know that beyond the differences that exist between us, in particular with José Antonio Kast we will find a way to build bridges that can bring a better life to our compatriots. Because what unites us is our love of Chile and its people.” [49]. There were gestures to some of the social themes arising from the October revolts, mixed with appeals for calm and unity – economic growth with less inequality, social cohesion, true and sustainable development, stability of Chile’s democratic institutions, healthcare, pensions, housing, basic services, workers’ rights, gender equality, and the promise of a new relationship with indigenous peoples.

But ideal pacing was the real order of the day. Get ready to go slow: “advances, to be solid, need to be the fruit of broad agreements. And in order to last, they must always be step by step, gradual, in order not to ruin nor put at risk what each family has achieved through its own effort,” Boric insisted. [50]. The speech contained none of the ruptural energies of October: “Of course, not everything can be done at the same time, and we will prioritize in order to achieve progress that allows us to improve, step by step, the lives of our people. It will not be easy, it will not be fast, but our commitment is to move down the path with hope and responsibility.” [51].

Multiclass alliance was another recurring motif. “We are going to work with all sectors,” Boric emphasized. “The challenges are too important to stay tied to the trenches. Here everyone is necessary. The workers who day to day produce the wealth of our country. The cooperation of the business world, to build alliances, to bring our visions closer. We are here to assure that prosperity reaches every corner of our land, and for that no one can be left out.” [52]. Naturally, this required textbook assurances of monetary rectitude. “In this night of triumph,” Boric said, “I repeat the



commitment that we made during the entire campaign: we will expand social rights and we will do it with fiscal responsibility, we will do it while protecting our macroeconomy. We will do it well and that will allow improvements to pensions and health, without having to go back on these in the future.” [53]. Finally, there was a nod to dialogue across the aisles of a divided congress: “We have a balanced congress, which means at the same time an invitation and an obligation to dialogue. I honestly see it as an opportunity to meet again, to unite in great feats for the welfare of our country, to achieve wide and lasting agreements that will improve the quality of life of our compatriots.” [54].

While it’s true that Boric moved to the center between the first and second rounds of the presidential contest, the predominant characterization in the international media of a Chilean political scene polarized between a far-left and a far-right has always been a radical distortion. In other words, Boric had long-since begun his adaptation to centrism. “In the case of Boric,” the discerning and sympathetic journalist Pablo Stefanoni reports, “in spite of being the candidate of an alliance to the left of Concertación, his program is very far from being radical. It is, rather, the expression of a project of social justice of a social democratic type, in a country where, in spite of the advances in terms of the struggle against poverty, unacceptable forms of social inequality – and hierarchies of ethnicity and class – persist together with the marketization of social life.” < [55]

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***Boric is tilting hard to the center, and every structural expression of capital will try its best to pull him further in this direction.***

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The welfare plans of Boric and his team of advisers are not premised on socio-political polarization, nor are they linked to the historic demands of the radical left. Tax-system restructuring and redistributive policy define the parameters of the possible in this vision, and would only require changes at the margins of the model of development. These are the outlines of a more robust welfare state. In many ways, Boric is pledging to carry out the change that the Socialist Party has long promised but never delivered, hollowed out as it has been over thirty-years of alternating in-and-out of centrist coalitions, often with partners to its right. [56]. In terms of public policy – on pensions, education, health, housing, taxes, and social welfare – there is considerable ideological overlap with the more reformist elements of the ex-Concertación. High-profile academic supporters of Boric, like Claudia Heiss, celebrate this reality and insist that under the new government not all of the promised changes will be possible in one term, but that at least there will be progress in the discussion of these matters, which there wasn’t under the Concertación. [57].

For their part, the eyes and ears of international capital are wary of prejudging the new government. They worry that remnants of Boric-the-young-student-radical might have outlived adolescence. They acknowledge, too, that he has just won a considerable mandate for change, and the scary thing would be if he took it seriously. Overall, however, the tenor of Boric coverage in the financial press has been sedate, pointing to persistent signals of centrism and moderation. Boric has lowered the bar for his planned tax reforms, promised a slower and trimmer rollout of his social program, and has based it all on fiscal prudence and a commitment to macroeconomic stability. The new head of state seems to recognize that he will need to thoroughly dilute reform measures if they are to survive a divided congress. The hope and expectation of leading financial pundits is that Boric will form a government that more closely approximates Lula’s years in office in Brazil or Ollanta

Humala's in Peru, rather than, say, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's in Argentina, or, worse still, Hugo Chávez's in Venezuela. [58]. "His challenge," writes Michael Stott, Latin America editor of the *Financial Times*, "is to negotiate a path towards the green, sustainable, fairer economy many Chileans want without destroying the country's appeal to business." [59].

It is very early days, but Boric appears committed to the path of least resistance, much closer to Lula's first term in office than Allende's. A significant part of his strategy going into the second round, after all, was courting the support of Christian Democracy and the Socialist Party. The most dramatic success to this end was Bachelet's bold embrace of the Boric ticket. The former president, now the acting High Commissioner of Human Rights at the United Nations, flew to Santiago to cast her ballot, and released a short video in which she called on Chileans to back Boric. [60].

The president-elect has indicated that he will take a month to name his cabinet, but omens thus far suggest the composition will include a broad coalition. It is likely to encompass the center-left beyond Apruebo Dignidad, in order to reward centrist support for Boric in the campaign for the second round, and, most importantly, to lubricate deals in the divided congress. In the week since the election, the president-elect has been working arduously on the configuration of his governing coalition, expressing his disposition to open the door to myriad forces of the center-left, including the Socialist Party, Partido por la Democracia (Party for Democracy, PPD), Partido Radical de Chile (PRC), and the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party, PL). [61]. Key ministerial positions, particularly the portfolios of Finance and the Interior, are likely to signal the new government's moderation, with nominations being announced before the month is up. [62]. Within ex-Concertación political circles, the talk has apparently been of an inverted Portuguese model. Since 2015, in the Portuguese case, the Socialist Party of Antonio Costa has been supported in parliament by the Communist Party and the Left Bloc, although without the left parties' participation in cabinet. The ostensible Chilean inversion would see parties of the center-left supporting Boric from congress, with the twist of also holding positions in cabinet. [63].

Chile's gross domestic product grew at reasonably high levels by regional standards in the years immediately following the 2008 global crisis - 5.8 (2010), 6.1 (2011), 5.3 (2012), 4.0 (2013) - before slowing in the wake of the end of the commodities boom, with 1.8, 2.3, 1.7, and 1.3 percent growth between 2014 and 2017. Accumulation picked up in 2018, however, with 3.7 percent growth, although it slowed again in 2019, reaching 0.9, before plummeting to -5.8 percent in 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. [64].

One of the major indications of the strength of the October rebellions - and a lesson on the importance of extra-parliamentary class struggle (or its downturn) in determining Chile's next steps - is the fact that social movements had created a scenario in which, when the coronavirus pandemic hit Chile, it was impossible even for a Conservative government, in full control of congress, to avoid a sizeable spending rollout. Indeed, the Piñera government responded to COVID-19 with one of the largest emergency aid programs anywhere in the Global South, amounting to 14 percent of GDP. This counter-cyclical boost tipped GDP growth to between 11 and 12 percent for 2021, after a 5.8 percent contraction the previous year. [65].

Next year's projected growth is expected to fall sharply to 2 percent, and the pressures on the Boric government to comply with capital's demands for social austerity in a context of low growth, high inflation, and rising interest rates will be relentless. [66]. Indeed, these pressures are already evident in Boric's repeated campaign pledges to guarantee fiscal responsibility. According to Chile's Central Bank, more than \$50 billion has already fled the country by way of capital flight in the wake of uncertainties following the events of 2019, and more of that is likely to follow unless Boric concedes to neoliberal metrics of good economic governance. [67]. With a split congress, ex-Concertación elements, whether from outside or (more likely) inside of cabinet, will apply the

conservative instincts on this front that they have displayed so consistently since 1990.

But the tenor of Boric's administration is hardly up to Boric alone, or even Boric together with the most conservative sections of his coalition. His government will remain vulnerable to the social forces of disruption that animated the social explosion of October two years ago, especially if the new president proves maladroit in his efforts to balance appeasing capital with responding in some minimal sense to the popular demands opened up by the events of October. While a divided congress will be a conservatizing pull, the Constitutional Convention is still likely to gravitate in the other direction. And we shouldn't forget the 44-percent of the population who embraced the extreme right.

The media has tended to emphasize the centrality of the center-left's cooperation in improving Boric's standing in the second round. Unsurprisingly, this misses the important role played by popular movements to Boric's left in the get-out-the-vote mobilizations between the first and second rounds of the presidential election. These are important to remember because they are one of the signs that significant layers of the Chilean population are willing and able to creatively defend the constituent moment using a variety of tactics. Ebullient demonstrators who took to the streets to celebrate Kast's defeat are unlikely to simply go home quietly and accept a more or less straightforward return to the disgraced past of the Concertación era.

The present conjuncture is open-ended. On one side of the field of force, Boric is tilting hard to the center, and every structural expression of capital will try its best to pull him further in this direction. His likely coalition and cabinet partners from the ex-Concertación social-liberal parties demonstrated in the recent past an enormous capacity to integrate and decapitate popular energies from below. Outside of the governing coalition, the far-right may have been defeated at the polls, but they are clearly more powerful and popular than at any point since the Pinochet era.

On the other side, the period in which the Concertación was able to integrate and demobilize popular forces so effectively was characterized by dynamic and expansionary capitalist growth, as well as a left physically and psychologically scarred by years of state terror – i.e., all of that predated the earth-quaking political experiences of October 2019. There remains a chance, therefore, that important social reforms will be enacted during the Boric government, but it's evident that they won't originate from initiatives on high. Politically independent class struggle on a variety of fronts will be required at every turn.

The stakes could scarcely be higher. “‘Those who are poor, die poor. The riches of our country are badly distributed,’ said Carolina Cavieres, a 35-year-old mother of two who cast her vote on Sunday in La Pintana, a working-class suburb to the south of Santiago.” [68]. A centrist consolidation under Boric would leave unaltered all of the sources of grievance that led to popular, leftist eruptions in the recent past. A centrist turn will not provide an exit to the multi-sided crises facing Chile's capitalist order. If a government elected on the basis of a left coalition moves to the center and thus precludes an exit to the crisis involving robust solutions for the social welfare and dignity of the majority, we are unlikely to have seen the end of Kastism, whether or not the next iteration is channeled by the figure of Kast himself, and whether or not it is restricted to the legal niceties of electoralism.

**Jeffery R. Webber**

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## P.S.

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- Jeffery R. Webber is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics at York University, Toronto. *Impasse of the Latin American Left*, co-authored with Franck Gaudichaud and Massimo Modonesi, is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

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