

Opinion **Global Insight**

## Chile's social upheaval leaves presidential race wide open

Newly elected left-leaning constituent assembly holds huge sway in fragmented contest

**BENEDICT MANDER**



A person casts their vote in Santiago during July's primary presidential elections, which ended with leftwing candidate Gabriel Boric as one of the favourites to win November's poll © Getty Images

**Benedict Mander** in Buenos Aires AUGUST 2 2021

---

Investors breathed a sigh of relief when the communist Daniel Jadue, one of two favourites to win Chile's presidential race in November, crashed out of party primary elections last month.

But huge uncertainty still hangs over the race, the first since mass protests in 2019 set in motion a peaceful transformation of the Chilean state, as power shifts away from traditional elites to a younger generation. With the economy hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, the poll is shaping up to be unpredictable, not least because of the influence that a left-leaning assembly tasked with drawing up a new constitution could have on the election.

On the left, 35-year-old Gabriel Boric, who shot to fame a decade ago during student protests against inequality in Chilean education, secured more than 1m votes in the primaries from the leading leftwing coalition, against 693,000 for Jadue. On the right, Sebastián Sichel, a 44-year-old former social development minister for President Sebastián Piñera, won his coalition's nomination with just 660,000 out of 1.3m votes. In the country of 19m, those primaries are normally good barometers for the presidential contest.

“It might not last, but Boric does have momentum,” said Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist at New York University, pointing out that the right receive three times as many votes as the left in the 2017 primaries, which foreshadowed Piñera's return to power.

Other factors favour the left. After the 2019 social upheaval that left the billionaire former airline tycoon's now deeply unpopular government on the verge of collapse, “the right is in a shambles”, said Navia. “Whoever is [seen to be] close to Piñera is doomed.”

Nevertheless, the race is wide open. As many as half a dozen candidates could run in the first round in November, possibly both to the left of Boric and to the right of Sichel, as well as at least one from the hotly disputed centre. Yasna Provoste, the well-liked centrist Senate president, threw her hat into the ring 10 days ago.

Another element of uncertainty in the campaign is the [new constituent assembly](#), which in July began work to draw up a constitution to replace the one imposed during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. This reform is the most palpable victory of the 2019 protesters so far.

Robert Funk, a political scientist at the University of Chile, said this assembly is the “biggest threat, no doubt.” Its leader and members “seem bent on pushing the narrative that they're truly representative of the Chilean population”, he said. This will probably put pressure on whoever is elected to comply with them for fear of retaliation — the new assembly could, for example, weaken the presidency's powers in the new constitution. Chileans are due to vote on the new text in a plebiscite in the third quarter of next year.

Boric could be inclined to cater to his leftwing voters to keep the assembly's supporters onside. At the same time, Sichel will have to beat opponents from the far right — analysts warn that José Antonio Kast could defeat him in the presidential run-off round in December if he moves too far to the centre. This makes it difficult for either of them to make too strong a bid for support from centrist voters.

Before her election as leader of the new assembly, Elisa Loncón, a [Mapuche indigenous rights activist](#) and a respected academic, told Chilean newspaper La Tercera: “It’s possible to dialogue with us, you do not need to fear us.”

The question is whether the assembly’s emphasis on identity, diversity and political independence will “make it impossible to actually agree on anything”, said Funk. All of this could leave the newly elected president with much less room to manoeuvre.

The uncertainties mean that [investors will remain cautious](#). There had been a renewal of the faces leading Chile’s political class, said Lucia Dammert, a sociologist, reflecting the kind of change that Chileans themselves might want for their country. “But it is still too early to say whether these are solid coordinates, or part of a process.”

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2021. All rights reserved.

---