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## LATIN AMERICA

# Chile's Presidential Election Upends Centrist Legacy

Voters in country long led by business-friendly moderates choose two candidates on polar ends of the political spectrum



People prepared to cast ballots at a polling station in Santiago, Chile, on Sunday.

PHOTO: CARLOS VERA/REUTERS

By [Ryan Dube](#)

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SANTIAGO, Chile—Two antiestablishment politicians from opposite ends of the political spectrum have advanced to a runoff vote to select Chile's next president, deepening the political instability in Latin America's most affluent country.

The first round of voting on Sunday upended the future of a centrist political system that over the last three decades made Chile a global model for free trade and a magnet for foreign investments while slashing poverty.

José Antonio Kast, a 55-year-old conservative who has defended Gen. Augusto Pinochet's military dictatorship and pledges to crack down on violent protests and crime, finished first with 28% support with nearly all ballots tallied, according to the electoral council.



Chilean presidential candidate José Antonio Kast, who voted Sunday in Paine, says he will defend the economic model enacted under dictator Augusto Pinochet.

PHOTO: TAMARA MERINO/BLOOMBERG NEWS

He will now face Gabriel Boric, a 35-year-old leftist who wants to scrap Chile's free-market model, in the Dec. 19 runoff. Mr. Boric got 26% of the vote while two centrists who offered Chile continuity and three other candidates were sidelined. The two frontrunners finished far from the 50% of the vote needed to win outright in the first round.

“This is the worst scenario for Chile,” said Rodrigo Silva, a 69-year-old retiree who voted on Sunday for a centrist candidate. “We don’t need extremes. I don’t want to live through the polarization we faced 50 years ago.”

Chileans also voted for half of the seats in the senate and all of the seats in the lower-house.

The 13% of voters who backed third-place candidate Franco Parisi will be decisive in the runoff, said Patricio Navia, a Chilean political scientist at New York University.

Mr. Parisi, a political outsider who campaigned from the U.S., supports the market economy but has railed against Chile’s business elites, blaming them for not allowing regular Chileans to benefit from the system. He won support from voters upset with the political establishment but who don’t back the far left, said Mr. Navia.

“I think Kast has the early advantage,” said Mr. Navia.

The election echoes the kind of polarization that has taken root from the U.S. to Brazil, Mexico to India—countries where anger at the ruling political class opened the door to populist rule.

In Chile, the political divide has jolted a country whose stability long stood out in politically volatile Latin America.

“This is definitely the end of the period we knew as kind of the boring Chile, both economically and politically,” said Roberto Funk, a political scientist at the University of Chile. “We are going into a much less stable period.”

The election has increased uncertainty about the future of the world’s biggest copper producer, where decades of fiscal prudence and openness to foreign trade and investments lifted millions to the middle class, reducing poverty from 45% of the population to 8%. That success, dubbed by economists as the Chilean Miracle, was overseen by centrist leaders such as Patricio Aylwin, who steered Chile into democracy, and more recently, moderates such as Michelle Bachelet and Sebastián Piñera.

## **“We are going into a much less stable period.”**

— Roberto Funk, University of Chile

But the coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 38,000 people in Chile, caused the economy to contract 6% and increased poverty. The peso is down 14% against the dollar this year, one of the biggest drops among emerging-market currencies. Some large corporations have ramped up the payment of dividends to shareholders who are sending their money abroad for safekeeping.

“The business community is extremely concerned about the coming election,” said Ricardo Escobar, a former head of Chile’s tax agency whose law firm in the capital, Santiago, works with business owners. “They are taking as much of their assets as possible out of Chile at the moment.”

Mr. Boric and Mr. Kast have vastly different visions for Chile, where a backlash against the traditional political class erupted during mass protests in late 2019 over grievances from meager pensions to shoddy healthcare and schools. The protests led President Sebastián Piñera to launch a process to rewrite Chile’s dictatorship-era constitution.



Chilean presidential candidate Gabriel Boric, speaking to media Sunday in Punta Arenas, seeks to raise taxes to increase spending on healthcare and education.

PHOTO: JUAN CARLOS AVENDANO/REUTERS

Mr. Boric, a congressman who upon turning 35 this year met the minimum age to run for the presidency, calls for raising taxes to increase spending on healthcare and education. Son of an oil company engineer who grew up in a small city in Chile's southern Patagonia region, he supports dismantling a private pension system and creating a state-run lithium company. He backs universal healthcare and the legalization of abortion.

Mr. Kast, a father of nine, says he will defend the economic model enacted during the 1973-1990 dictatorship and enshrined in the current constitution. With a focus on curbing crime, he has promised to bring order to a nation shaken by the violent protests of 2019, which led to about 30 deaths.

An ally of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Mr. Kast has pledged a clampdown on immigration with proposals such as building ditches on the country's northern border to impede people from entering Chile. He backs using the military to end a dispute between indigenous communities, white landowners and forestry companies in southern Chile that has led to bloodshed.

"On December 19, Chile has to choose between freedom and communism," Mr. Kast said Sunday to cheering supporters.

In the run-up to Sunday's vote, both candidates have had to answer questions about where they stand. Mr. Boric had to distance himself from communist allies in his coalition when they offered glowing praise for what the U.S. called a sham reelection in Nicaragua won by authoritarian President Daniel Ortega.

Mr. Kast has long come under fire for appearing to question whether Pinochet's rule was really a dictatorship because the general permitted a transition to democracy.

“Tell me, do dictatorships hand over power?” said Mr. Kast, who once asserted that Pinochet would vote for him if he were alive. Facing criticism, he later acknowledged the general led an authoritarian government that committed rights abuses.

Axcell Fuentes, a 29-year-old in Santiago, plans to vote for Mr. Boric, saying he likes the candidate's support of mental-health programs and environmental protection.

“He's been one of the main faces for so many social fights in recent years,” he said.



José Antonio Kast, at far left, and Gabriel Boric, next to him, were among presidential candidates to participate in a debate in Santiago, Chile, on Nov. 2.

PHOTO: MARCELO HERNANDEZ/GETTY IMAGES

Rodrigo Hevia, a small-business owner in the capital, wants to maintain the free-market model, worrying Mr. Boric's proposals will scare off private investors. “That would have an impact on [my business],” he said.

Voters cast their ballots with Chile's economy booming and the worst of the pandemic appearing to be over. The International Monetary Fund expects 11% growth this year, one of the world's fastest expansions.

But economists say that upsurge is temporary. Pension withdrawals that have injected \$50 billion into the economy, and a government cash-transfer program, have fueled the growth—and higher inflation.

Chileans say they expect tough times no matter who is elected. While some voters worry about Mr. Boric's economic plans, they also expect Mr. Kast, who finished fourth in the 2017 election, would struggle to govern as he will likely face a congress controlled by the left and street protests.

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