

Gabriel Boric's triumph puts wind in the sails of Latin America's resurgent left

The decisive victory reflects Chileans' revolt against a threadbare welfare system and a society systematically stacked in the favour of the rich



The streets of Santiago exploded in celebration Sunday after leftist Gabriel Boric was declared Chile's new president with an unexpectedly large victory over his far-right rival.

Laurence Blair *in Santiago*

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At the age of 14, Gabriel Boric – the great-grandson of a Croatian migrant and an avid reader of Marx and Hegel – formed a city-wide student union in the Chilean city of Punta Arenas.

At 21, and by then a law student, he led a campus sit-in for 44 days in Santiago, Chile's capital, to oust a senior professor accused of plagiarism and corruption. Two years later, in 2011, he was elected figurehead of a massive student rebellion against profiteering private universities, and in 2013 became a congressman for his remote home region.

After protests over meagre pensions, living costs and police brutality brought millions more on to the streets from October 2019, Gabriel Boric helped channel public rage into a peaceful outlet: the redrafting of Chile's dictatorship-era constitution.

And on Sunday, Boric, 35, trounced José Antonio Kast – a Catholic law-and-order candidate nostalgic for the bloody dictatorship of Gen Augusto Pinochet – by a 12 percentage-point margin to become the youngest president in Chilean history.

Turnout on Sunday was the highest – at nearly 56 percent – since voting became voluntary in 2012. When he takes office on 11 March, Boric will be Chile’s most leftwing leader since Salvador Allende was overthrown in 1973 – and the first from outside the centrist blocs that have swapped the presidential sash since the return of democracy in 1989.

The triumph of the avowed feminist and environmentalist has also been hailed as historic by his progressive counterparts across Latin America, who after nearly a decade in the doldrums have won a string of electoral victories in the past year – and are set to notch up even more in 2022.

Brazil’s former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – who pollsters predict will deal a thumping defeat to another far-right dictatorship-apologist, Jair Bolsonaro, in late 2022 – shared a grinning picture of himself wearing a Boric-branded baseball cap, and said he felt “happy for another victory of a democratic and progressive candidate in our Latin America”.

As Chile went to the polls, Gustavo Petro, a Colombian former guerrilla who is currently leading in polls ahead of presidential elections in May, favourably compared Boric as a “social democrat” against Kast, the son of a card-carrying Nazi.

The Peronist president of neighbouring Argentina, Alberto Fernández, invited Boric to “work together to end inequality in Latin America”. Luis Arce of Bolivia’s Movement towards Socialism (MAS), which returned to power a year ago with an even greater electoral margin after dislodging a rightwing caretaker government, also praised Boric’s win fulsomely, calling it “the triumph of the Chilean people”.

In Peru, the leftist teacher turned president Pedro Castillo – who narrowly avoided impeachment earlier this December after a chaotic four months in office – tweeted: “Your victory is shared by all Latin American peoples who want to live with liberty, peace, justice and dignity.” Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela’s authoritarian leftist ruler, praised Chileans “for their resounding victory against fascism”.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico’s old-school leftwing president, spoke of his “joy” at Boric’s victory, adding that “the people of Chile had “given an example to Latin America and the world”.

But some responses to Boric’s win – or the absence thereof – hinted at dividing lines of a generational and philosophical nature within Latin America’s left.

The Cuban leader Miguel Díaz Canel expressed his wish to improve ties with the Chilean public and the incoming government – perhaps a nod to Boric’s remarks in July that his “solidarity” was with Cuban protesters and not the country’s Communist government.

Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua’s Sandinista strongman, made no comment – perhaps reflecting Boric’s recent comments – soon after Ortega was elected to a fourth consecutive term after first jailing most of the opposition – that the Central American country “needs democracy, not fraudulent elections nor persecution of opponents”.

Xiomara Castro, the progressive incoming president of Honduras has also made no comment so far.

This reluctance to immediately jump on the Boric bandwagon perhaps reflects not only geographical distance but the gulf between what Javier Rebolledo, a journalist and writer, described as the traditional “Marxist” left and the softer, more Scandinavian cut of Boric’s politics.

But few Chileans see themselves as locked in a continental battle between left and right, cautioned Rebolledo. Most are fed up with a threadbare welfare system and a society systematically stacked in favour of the rich, concerns to which Boric has spoken eloquently for a decade.

“Boric is part of the path that Chile has been walking for a long time,” he argued.

Fears of Venezuelan-style socialism and economic ruin pushed some voters into Kast’s arms. But conversely, the sobering example of racial hatred and mob violence stirred up by Donald Trump, and the deadly incompetence of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro – on whose watch nearly 620,000 Brazilians have died from Covid-19 – may have helped inoculate Chileans against far-right populism.

“Chile today demonstrated that we can choose for ourselves,” said Daniela Pardo, a midfielder for a Santiago football club. She had donned a crown of paper flowers to join the jubilant Boric supporters in the emblematic plaza called Dignity Square by anti-inequality protesters. “In the United States and Brazil, far-right governments terrified the public. It was good to learn that lesson.”