



A protest in Santiago, Chile, October 2019.
Photo by Carlos Figueroa.

CHILE

A Social Explosion

By James Gerardo Lamb

“I am part of the problem,” said Chilean Congressional Deputy Gabriel Boric, deliberating on the seemingly vast disconnect between popular sentiment, social movements, and politicians in contemporary Chile. “In Chile, since the return of democracy, professional politicians have been progressively moving away from citizens, building an abyss.” This problem consumes Frente Amplio (Broad Front) — the left-wing coalition Boric helped found and of which his party, *Convergencia Social* (Social Convergence), is a member. “When you are in the institutions, you start to move away from common citizens,” Boric explained.

It was a stunning analysis from the high-profile political figure and former student movement leader. Yet, it very much encapsulated the self-reflective, contemplative, and analytical approach Boric has brought to his political work, both outside and within the government and formal party politics. “I have a point of view,” Boric said, “which, of course, doesn’t prevent me from questioning my own ideas, an exercise that for me is very important in politics and in life.” More than once, Boric shared his favorite quote, “Doubt must follow conviction as a permanent shadow,” which he attributed to the existentialist writer Albert Camus. It is a perspective that continues to guide his political orientation.

Boric spoke at multiple engagements at UC Berkeley on February 10, 2020. He reflected on the current intense conjuncture of Chilean politics and society, rocked since October 2019 by some of the largest and most contentious protests in the country’s history. Boric’s public comments came just as a campaign was about to begin for a plebiscite on a new constitution to replace the 1980 document imposed by the military dictatorship, but before the full force of the global Covid-19 pandemic began unfolding. Boric was central to the all-party agreement, spurred by the protests, that initiated the plebiscite process.

Above all, Boric reiterated his deep commitment to democratic dialogue and democratic political practice, insisting these components would be crucial for a peaceful exit from Chile’s current social ferment. “The problem,” Boric said, “is that there is a deep distrust in institutions and a crisis about the idea of representation. Compromising is perceived as treason, and even dialogue with those you

>>

disagree with is seen as a betrayal.” Boric warned that “people who don’t want to compromise [...] are very likely to become fanatics,” and he argued, “Those people have to be confronted. I don’t like those kind of people. [...] Compromising is important.”

This upheaval — which the Chilean media dubbed the *estallido social* or “social explosion” — has been a culmination of dramatic political changes in Chile this past decade. Generational turnover, social movements, corruption scandals, and the emergence of social media have transformed political institutions, parties, coalitions, and dynamics and have upended long-held assumptions about Chilean politics and society.

This period of rapid change has been particularly surprising given the prior 20 years of stability and continuity under center-left Concertación coalition governments (1990-2010). Those administrations followed the long-entrenched military regime led by General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). Within this context of convulsive transformation and uncertainty, Boric emerged as a progressive icon.

In his talk, Boric claimed that “the political system was not ready for an explosion” and that the country’s institutions were not working well. “The problem that we have,” he continued, “is that all the institutions, [...] President Sebastián Piñera, but also the Congress, the courts, police, don’t have legitimacy.” Boric argued, “That, in my opinion, is one of the most difficult challenges we’re facing: to be able to change institutions in order to defend them and to recover trust in each other.”

Student Movement Roots

Boric first appeared on the national political stage after winning an election to become president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH, Universidad de Chile Student Federation). His closely contested election came in the middle of massive student-led protests in 2011-2012. In his talk for CLAS, Boric called this movement one of several warnings regarding the corrosive nature of inequality that was to spur the rebellion at the end of 2019.

As a law student, Boric had been a very involved political activist, even before winning the FECH presidency. He had served on the university’s student senate and as president of the Centro de Estudiantes de Derecho (CED, Law Students’ Center). During his time at the university, he was also an active member of a political collective known as Izquierda Autónoma (Autonomous Left).

Izquierda Autónoma was a political movement that primarily operated within universities. It claimed



Photo by antitezo.

Chilean students protest by dragging their desks into the school courtyard during the 2006 “Penguin Revolution.”

historical antecedents in broad currents of socialism and autonomism. It drew particular inspiration from the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci and his theory of “hegemony.” Hegemony is the idea that ideological and cultural leadership in the shaping of public opinion is a key instrument of class politics and social control. Whereas dominant groups seek to use this leadership to elicit the consent of subordinated groups, Gramsci advocated for socialists to contest this ideological and cultural terrain. An influential early text of Izquierda Autónoma defined its mission as “the creation and strengthening of the political autonomy of the subaltern classes in opposition to the hegemony of the dominant classes.” Boric was a member of Izquierda Autónoma when he was elected to Congress in 2013 and remained affiliated with the movement until its merger with other left-wing forces in 2016.

In his talk, Boric noted, “I’ve always thought that we should make efforts to link politics with cultural expressions.” He also closed his presentation with a quote from Gramsci: “Educate yourselves because we’ll need all our intelligence. Stir yourselves because we’ll need all our enthusiasm. Organize yourselves because we’ll need all our strength.”

Key aspects of this theoretical perspective continue to influence Boric’s political thought and practice. One

defining aspect of the autonomist movement was its critique of 20th-century left-wing movements. Autonomism objected to the authoritarianism, vanguardism (deference to an ostensibly ideologically advanced leadership), and antidemocratic practices of these movements and parties. Boric echoed this critique in his comments: “Left-wing ideas failed in the 20th century, [...] I’m aware of that, so there is a big challenge to renovate these ideas.” Yet, he argued against the proposition that leftist forces in Chile resembled the authoritarian forces in Venezuela: “None of us is an ex-military authoritarian who wants to start everything from zero. [...] We have a strong conviction in democracy. [...] We want to defend the right of people to think differently.” Autonomism was also defined by a profound skepticism towards established political parties of the left, which were viewed as subordinating social movements to partisan strategic considerations.

As the student movement took off in 2011, the young Communist Party leader Camila Vallejo was president of the FECH. The Communist Party had been excluded from the Concertación since the transition to democracy but was soon to join an expanded center-left coalition called Nueva Mayoría (New Majority) to contest the conservative Chile Vamos (Let’s Go Chile) coalition of President Piñera, a frequent antagonist of the student movement. As FECH

president, Vallejo became a national and international media icon of the protests. In a closely contested student election on December 7, 2011, Boric ran on a coalition list of several student groups called Creando Izquierda (Creating a Left) and beat the high-profile Vallejo by just 189 votes to become president of the FECH. Vallejo remained as FECH vice president. On the occasion of his election, Boric stated that the intention of Creando Izquierda was to distance the student movement from “traditional political parties,” including those of the left. “We are not disposed to continue delegating our transformative cause to the politicians of yesterday,” he said.

During his talk at UC Berkeley, Boric recalled going to Congress as FECH president to meet with the head of the Senate Education Commission, Ignacio Walker, a Concertación parliamentarian from the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC, Christian Democratic Party). According to Boric, the senator told him, “We’ll take it from here,” a reminder to the then-student leader that the political system was effectively closed to broader citizen and social movement participation.

However, as a social movement leader, Boric recognized another problem: social movements needed to engage with institutional and electoral politics, yet they were frequently reticent to do so. Referring to his overall political trajectory, Boric explained that “some of us wanted to push for some changes [...] which were impossible without a social mobilization, social movements.” Yet, Boric noted, “Social movements used to deny politics itself.” Speaking of this misjudgment, Boric recalled, “We had to face this in the 2011-2012 student movement. [...] We understood [...] that we couldn’t just stay in the social movement. We had to give the social movement a political expression.” He argued that “social movements without a political expression [...] become simple petitioners to government.”

Indeed, a central theme of Boric’s reflections on Chile’s current moment was this complex relationship among social movements, formal politics, and social change. “We need to know how to channel this incredible force,” Boric said. Acknowledging Congress’s 2-percent approval rating in a public opinion poll, he admitted, “We haven’t been able, as Frente Amplio, to represent the discontent. [...] We wanted to mix politics and social movements.”

The student movement had gained massive public support. Public opinion polling at the peak of the demonstrations suggested some 70 percent of the population backed the movement’s goals. High school students, members of labor unions, environmental campaigners, and others joined university students in the streets. The approval rating of President Piñera’s first

>>



Three leaders of the Chilean student movement: Camila Vallejo, Giorgio Jackson, and Camilo Ballesteros, September 2011.

government (2010-2014) cratered. Student movement leaders garnered popular support and legitimacy that challenged and even exceeded politicians from the traditional parties and incumbent coalitions, both the center-right government coalition and the center-left opposition.

After the height of the student movement and his term as president of the FECH, Boric became a central player in the most significant efforts of the past decade to represent progressive social movements within Chile's institutional political system.

Electoral Victories

In the parliamentary elections of November 2013, Izquierda Autónoma ran three candidates as independents for the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Chilean Congress. Boric was the only one to win a seat, gaining the most votes among nine candidates in his far-southern District 60, encompassing the regions of Magallanes and Chilean Antarctica.

Boric was elected to Congress in 2013 alongside other student movement leaders including Camila Vallejo, Karol Cariola, and Giorgio Jackson, Boric's frequent collaborator over the past decade. Impressively, Boric was the only member of this so-called *bancada estudiantil* (student

block) to win an election without being part of the center-left coalition, like Vallejo, or forming an electoral pact with them, like Jackson and his *Revolución Democrática* (Democratic Revolution) party.

Boric's win was especially significant because under the Chilean electoral law in effect since the transition from military rule, smaller parties and forces outside the two main coalitions were greatly disadvantaged. Under that "binomial majoritarian" system, two candidates for Congress were elected per district. A coalition list could only win both seats if their total votes were twice that of the next list. Such an electoral set-up strongly incentivized electoral competition to channel into a two-coalition dynamic. And, indeed, the two main coalitions had dominated Chilean politics for a quarter century to that point.

Boric's victory was heralded in the media as "breaking the binomial." After winning the election, Boric announced, "We demonstrated that a left-wing project outside the Concertación can be raised up and, importantly, that in Chile there aren't just two options." In that crucial election year, Boric and Izquierda Autónoma maintained a conscious distance from the coalition of center-left and left-wing parties led by former President Michelle Bachelet of the Socialist Party.

Under the banner of the Concertación, Bachelet had served as president from 2006-2010, a period that began with the first mass protest movement of Chilean students called the "Penguin Revolution" for the navy blue and white uniforms worn by most Chilean high school students. Bachelet left office with huge popularity but was barred by the 1980 Constitution from running for a second consecutive term. The Concertación lost the 2010 presidential election to Piñera, and during his first term, the historic center-left coalition expanded leftward, incorporating the Communist Party, which had demonstrated significant strength and organization within growing social movements, including the labor and student movements. This new, more progressive coalition was dubbed the Nueva Mayoría.

The Nueva Mayoría won resounding electoral majorities in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in the elections on November 17, 2013. Bachelet finished clearly ahead in the first round of the presidential elections that same day, besting the conservative second-place finisher 47 percent to 25 percent. Nevertheless, unlike the rest of the student bloc, Boric declined to back Bachelet in the presidential run-off held on December 15, 2013.

Characteristically, he maintained that "our position is for autonomy, but [also] dialogue."

Bachelet triumphed in the run-off 62 percent to 38 percent over the center-right Alianza (Alliance) coalition candidate, former senator and Minister of Labor Evelyn Matthei, and became president for a second term (2014-2018). It was thus as part of a broader progressive wave that Boric arrived in Congress in March 2014. In particular, the Nueva Mayoría had committed to progressive educational reforms inspired by the student movement during the electoral campaign.

Progress and Complications

The Bachelet administration started off its second mandate with a high level of public approval. Progressive social movement ideas such as education system reform and replacement of the binomial majoritarian electoral system were taken up by the administration. Indeed, in 2015 Bachelet promulgated a reform that put an end to that system and finally broke the virtual duopoly on congressional representation by the two coalitions that emerged from the transition. The new rules, billed as an "inclusive proportional" system, governed the 2017 elections and the new Congress inaugurated in 2018.

>>

Gabriel Boric being interviewed as a candidate for Chile's Congress, April 2013.



Photo courtesy of Foros TVN.

Education reform, a top priority for Boric and the student bloc, was complicated and progressed slowly. These complications owed, in part, to divisions within the Nueva Mayoría and particularly to opposition from conservative sectors of the PDC, which had enjoyed significant political influence since the transition back to democracy. Tensions between the government and social movements began to mount.

In February 2015, the Caso Caval, an influence-trafficking case against President Bachelet's son, became a major public scandal. Public opinion swung decisively against the government as the economy decelerated. The Bachelet administration tacked to the center with policy compromises (including on education reform) and a revamped cabinet in a political recalibration promoted as "realism without renunciation."

By early 2016, this strategy had alienated Jackson's Revolución Democrática party, which had supported Bachelet in the run-off and supplied prominent officials to the Ministry of Education. Boric and Jackson began discussions in January 2016 about forming a broad alliance of left political forces outside of the Nueva Mayoría.

This effort was inspired by Uruguay's then-governing Frente Amplio (Broad Front) and Spain's Podemos (We

Can), progressive coalitions based in social movements. It was given strategic impetus by the new incentives of a reformed electoral system.

Crucial political moves came in the months that followed those initial discussions. At the end of May 2016, Revolución Democrática withdrew from the Bachelet administration. It cited, above all, frustration with education reforms.

At the same time, Izquierda Autónoma split. Boric led a dissident group known as Convergencia Autonomista (Autonomist Convergence) out of the movement, which was then in the process of considering whether to constitute itself as a legal political party. This faction represented four of the nine members of Izquierda Autónoma's executive directorate, 21 of the 42 members of its expanded directorate, and three out of seven presidencies of university federations, as well as Boric, its only national parliamentarian. The group founded a new political movement known as Movimiento Autonomista (Autonomist Movement).

The main point of contention was precisely the emphasis Boric's group gave to the formal political process, especially the upcoming 2016 municipal and 2017 national elections, and the looming possibility of establishing an

President Michelle Bachelet visits a Chilean school, August 2016.



Photo courtesy of Gobierno de Chile.

alliance with Jackson and Revolución Democrática. When asked in the media about controversial accusations during the heated split that he was a "traitor" or "sell-out," Boric said, "When one passes from the social movement to institutional politics, there are those who have adjectives on the tip of their tongues, and on social media, they come out all the time. I believe it has happened to Giorgio [Jackson] and Camila [Vallejo] as well, but those characterizations block the debate."

A second issue was the leadership faction's decision to continue meeting with Ministry of Education officials. Such a meeting was held despite a decision by the Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH, Confederation of Chilean Students) to freeze such contacts with the administration in the wake of its climbdown on education reforms that the student movement supported. An umbrella organization for university student unions across Chile, CONFECH had organized and led the iconic protests of the 2011-2012 student movement. Boric articulated a strategy that allowed frustration to mount over the failure of more ambitious education reforms and translated that discontent into electoral support for the left rather than the more modest proposals of the Bachelet administration.

Frente Amplio Is Born

In January 2017, the Frente Amplio coalition was officially inaugurated. Its formation was the culmination of a complex process of convergence uniting seven political movements and seven parties. Boric and Jackson were the two most prominent public figures of the new political referent, and their political movements boasted the greatest support and visibility. Frente Amplio emphasized a message of pluralism, participatory democracy, and political and financial independence from Chile's powerful business lobby.

Boric and Jackson were also key proponents within Frente Amplio of a strategy to run a full slate of congressional candidates and a presidential campaign to compete with the two historic coalitions. The Frente Amplio coalition ran 166 candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and 23 candidates for the Senate in 2017 and fulfilled its commitment to gender parity in its parliamentary candidature lists.

In the presidential election process, Boric and Jackson also played critical roles. They recruited Beatriz Sánchez, a popular independent radio journalist who had never run for elected office before. They offered her key support, first in the Frente Amplio primary and then in the general election. She announced her candidacy at the end of May 2017, campaigning on a strong social democratic policy mix



Image from Wikimedia.

The logo of Chile's Frente Amplio.

of free universal public education from preschool through university, universal health care and social security, sectoral collective bargaining, and a progressive tax system that would raise additional revenues from upper-income brackets. Her main themes included government transparency, citizen participation, and women's rights. Sánchez handily won the Frente Amplio primary on July 6, 2017, garnering nearly 70 percent of the vote. Boric served on the Sánchez campaign team as a political advisor during the election.

Frente Amplio, Sánchez, and Boric all achieved significant electoral success in the national elections on November 19, 2017. The new coalition got nearly a million votes and elected 20 out of 155 deputies and one senator. The Chamber of Deputies election was contested by 10 lists, 51 parties, and 960 candidates, and the staid two-coalition-dominated politics of post-transition Chile was left behind. The newly elected Congress was far more diverse than previous legislatures in terms of party representation, ideology, and demographics. This fragmentation and diversity extended to the right as Evolución Política (Political Evolution, known as Evópoli), which self-described as "classical liberal," joined the traditional two parties of the center-right coalition by seating six deputies and two senators.

>>



From left: Giorgio Jackson, Gabriel Boric, Beatriz Sánchez, and Jorge Sharp, candidates for office in 2017.

Although previous presidential candidacies had challenged the incumbent coalitions from the left, Sánchez won far more support than any prior attempt since the transition. With more than 1.3 million votes, she surpassed 20 percent in the first round. That showing nearly bested the 22.7 percent for Nueva Mayoría candidate Senator Alejandro Guillier and almost broke through to the run-off.

For the 2018-2022 congressional term, Boric handily won re-election in the newly formed District 28, improving upon his first performance. He finished first among six candidates with 32.8 percent of the vote, well ahead of the second-place candidate, Deputy Sandra Amar Mancilla of the conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI, Independent Democratic Union) party, who finished with 12.1 percent of the vote. In the new parliamentary term, Boric joined the Chamber of Deputy's permanent Constitutional Committee, a crucial position when talk of a new constitution suddenly came to the fore in the wake of the social explosion of October 2019.

Challenges for the Left, Victories for the Right

Despite these successes for the new social movement-based left, the broad center-left suffered a series of divisions and internal crises. After 28 years, the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC, Christian Democratic Party) broke away from its Concertación-Nueva Mayoría partners — the

Socialist Party, the Partido por la Democracia (PPD, Party for Democracy), and the Partido Radical (PR, Radical Party) — and ran its own presidential candidate in the first round: Senator Carolina Goic. This decision ultimately led to the dissolution of the Nueva Mayoría coalition. Nueva Mayoría presidential candidate Senator Guillier was himself an independent, though he aligned with the Partido Radical, which was a break from the post-transition streak of PDC and Socialist Party nominees on the center-left.

Just as Sánchez and Frente Amplio surprised many observers, so did the first round of presidential polling results for the independent conservative candidate José Antonio Kast. The uncle and close political ally of Evópoli Senator Felipe Kast won more than 500,000 votes — nearly 8 percent of the total — and outpolled the PDC candidate. He ran on a “pro-life, anti-illegal immigration” platform espousing lower taxes, less government, and unabashed support for the military government, including a proposal to forgive some convicted of human rights violations under the dictatorship.

In this context of center-left division and far-right emergence, Piñera scored a resounding victory in the second round of voting on December 17, 2017, and became president for a second time. With 54 percent of the vote, he had gained nearly 1.4 million votes after a relatively weak showing of 37 percent in the first round of the election.

Conversely, Frente Amplio experienced a process of internal convergence and mergers during 2018 and 2019: the original seven parties and seven movements became seven parties and two movements. Boric played a leading role in this reorganization, which consolidated and strengthened the left wing of the coalition, and he remained among its highest-profile representatives. The changes shifted the balance of Frente Amplio, in which Jackson's more moderate Revolución Democrática had previously been dominant.

Boric's Movimiento Autonomista began discussions on a process of amalgamation with three other left-wing Frente Amplio forces in January 2018. They held a foundational congress in November 2018 and resolved to combine into a single movement and seek recognition as a political party. In January 2019, the new group, Convergencia Social, was officially launched. The new organization was formed out of the dissolved Movimiento Autonomista, Nueva Democracia (New Democracy), the Izquierda Libertaria (Libertarian Left), and Socialismo y Libertad (Socialism and Liberty). Boric is currently one of four Convergencia Social parliamentarians in the Chamber of Deputies. During the 2018 congress, Boric told the media, “We want to form a new party to dispute the politics of the transition, of which we don't feel a

part.” Convergencia Social was inscribed in the electoral register as a legal party in three regions in March 2020.

Boric's old movement, Izquierda Autónoma, fused with Poder Ciudadano (Citizen's Power) in 2019. Together, they formed a “feminist, popular, and democratic” political party called Comunes (Commons), which seats two deputies in Congress. From this sector of the movement, Emilia Schneider Videla became the first transgender president of the FECH in April 2019, representing Comunes and Frente Amplio in that position.

Frente Amplio, particularly its left wing, has positioned itself as an often-fierce critic of the Piñera administration. Boric has been a prominent voice of dissent during the current conservative presidency.

Social Explosion

This was the state of play on Friday, October 18, 2019, when the social explosion detonated in Chile to the shock of many in the nation and around the world. Yet, Boric was not among those taken by complete surprise. In his talk at UC Berkeley, he claimed, “Some of us [...] were expecting [this] a long time ago,” although he noted that “what has happened in the last months in Chile has surpassed all our expectations.”

continued on page 58 >>

President Sebastián Piñera surrounded by military officers at a parade in 2010.



Photo courtesy of Gobierno de Chile.



Photo by Rodrigo Abd/AR Photo.

A Chilean *carabiniero* pepper-sprays a demonstrator in Santiago, October 2019.

A Social Explosion

(continued from page 31)

On that day and through the night, what had been four days of student-led mass fare-evasion protests in response to increased Santiago Metro prices became spontaneous massive demonstrations, street blockades, riots, looting, and arson attacks. In images replayed endlessly in Chilean and global media, dozens of metro stations, commercial establishments, and even the skyscraper that houses the headquarters of Chilectra, the national electric company, were set on fire.

At dawn on Saturday, October 19, 2019, President Piñera declared a state of emergency in the Greater Santiago region and a curfew to begin that evening, both enforced by the military. Within days, the state of emergency was extended to 15 of the 16 provincial capitals. This was the first experience of martial law in Chile since the transition back to democracy. Piñera announced in the media that the nation was “at war.”

Protests and repression escalated rapidly. At least three dozen people died in confrontations with armed authorities, arson-related fires, and violence between citizens, with at least five people killed by the military.

Chile’s Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos (INDR, National Institute for Human Rights) has established that 8,812 people were arrested and 3,349 civilians wounded between October 17 and December 6. Four separate reports — by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights — documented “grave violations” of human rights on the part of the armed forces.

On October 25, the so-called “Biggest March in Chile” shattered all previous records for mass social demonstrations in the country’s history. Although difficult to estimate, up to 3 million people — more than a million in Santiago alone — flooded the streets and plazas, despite the state of emergency and curfew still in effect.

Though lacking organized articulation, the main emerging demands of the protest movement revolved around the dual issues of economic inequality and political legitimacy. Pervasive demands for a “dignified life” or simply “dignity” often came with more specific complaints around meager pensions, low wages, tremendous inequities in access to education and health care, expensive transportation, and the burden of debt on many Chileans.

The rejection of neoliberal policies and the massive inequalities they created was summed up in the ubiquitous

protest slogan: *No es por 30 pesos* (It’s not for 30 pesos), the amount of the Santiago Metro fare increase; *Es por 30 años*, (But for 30 years), the time since the transition that many Chileans hoped would mark a more significant break with the dictatorship’s economic model. Boric argued in his talk that such policies “could only have been done in an authoritarian regime” and were “softened by democratic transition, but fundamental policies were maintained.”

On the economic issues, Piñera attempted to respond to the social explosion quickly. On October 19, he announced the suspension of the Santiago Metro fare increases. On October 22, Piñera apologized for “a lack of vision” and proposed a “New Social Agenda” that included increased minimum pensions, emergency health-care coverage, a new guaranteed minimum wage, and increased taxes on the wealthy.

The most frequently voiced political demands were twofold. The most prominent was for a new, democratically written constitution, along with the frequent stipulation that it be authored by a popularly elected Constituent Assembly. The second was more diffuse but revolved around a rejection of “corruption.” Many unseemly and illegal financial and political links among businesses, special interests, politicians, and government officials had come to light in recent years, which left a preponderance of Chileans feeling “abused.”

Having failed to suppress the protests by force and facing a fearsome popular backlash, Piñera announced

on October 27 that the state of emergency would be lifted as of midnight, and the military would return to its barracks.

On October 28, Minister of the Interior and Public Security Andrés Chadwick, who had command responsibility for the armed forces and Carabineros (the national police), was accused of human rights abuses and resigned from office. On October 30, a group of 10 parliamentary deputies, including Boric, filed a constitutional accusation against Chadwick for violations of human rights. The charge was approved by the Chamber of Deputies on November 28 in a vote strictly along coalition lines. Chadwick was found guilty by the Senate on December 11 in another vote that broke along coalition lines. This conviction bars Chadwick from holding any public office for five years.

Towards a New Constitution

The most important political result of the social explosion was the accord for a new constitution, in which Boric played a central role. Ever since the military government imposed a constitution in 1980, many Chileans have demanded a new, democratically developed, fundamental charter. President Ricardo Lagos signed a series of reforms in 2005, and President Bachelet convoked a constitutional process to write a new document in the last year of her second term. Upon assuming office, Piñera discontinued the

>>

Demonstrators throw paint at police vehicles in Santiago, November 2019.



Photo by cameramemories.

process, saying he wanted to improve the reigning Constitution instead.

On October 20, however, Piñera met with the presidents of the Senate, Chamber of Deputies, and the Supreme Court: Jaime Quintana (PPD), Iván Flores (PPD), and Haroldo Brito, respectively. After the meeting, Quintana and later Brito called for re-initiating Bachelet's process and producing a new constitution to channel social demands. Initially, Piñera was ambiguous in response to those demands. On November 7, the Asociación Chilena de Municipalidades (Association of Chilean Municipalities), with members representing the entire political spectrum, called for a citizens' consultation or unofficial vote on a new constitution in one month's time. This announcement forced the government's hand, and on November 10, Minister of the Interior Gonzalo Blumel declared that the administration would initiate the redaction of a new charter via the standing members of Congress, which would then be submitted to popular ratification in a plebiscite through a process known as a Constituent Congress. Two days later, all 14 opposition parties — from the PDC to Frente Amplio — released a declaration demanding instead that a fully elected Constituent Assembly draft a new constitution.

On November 13 and 14, intense negotiations on a new constitution were held between the ruling coalition and part of the opposition. Three main issues were at stake: what form the convention to write a new constitution would take; the quorum necessary to approve its articles; and how popular participation would be incorporated into the constitutional process.

In the early hours of November 15, the “Accord for Social Peace and a New Constitution” was announced. Boric was a crucial actor in these negotiations and in the ultimate achievement of the multiparty agreement. He was also one of the 11 signatories of the historic document, along with the presidents of 10 political parties.

The accord's central compromise on the form of the convention was that it should be resolved by a plebiscite comprised of two questions. The first would be a yes/no vote on whether to write a new constitution. The second question would address the form the constitutional convention will take, should the first question gain majority approval. The two options with the greatest support among the political forces in the negotiations would appear on the ballot: a “Constituent Convention” and a “Mixed Constituent Convention.” Under the former, a 100-percent

The two parts of the ballot for Chile's October 2020 constitutional plebiscite.

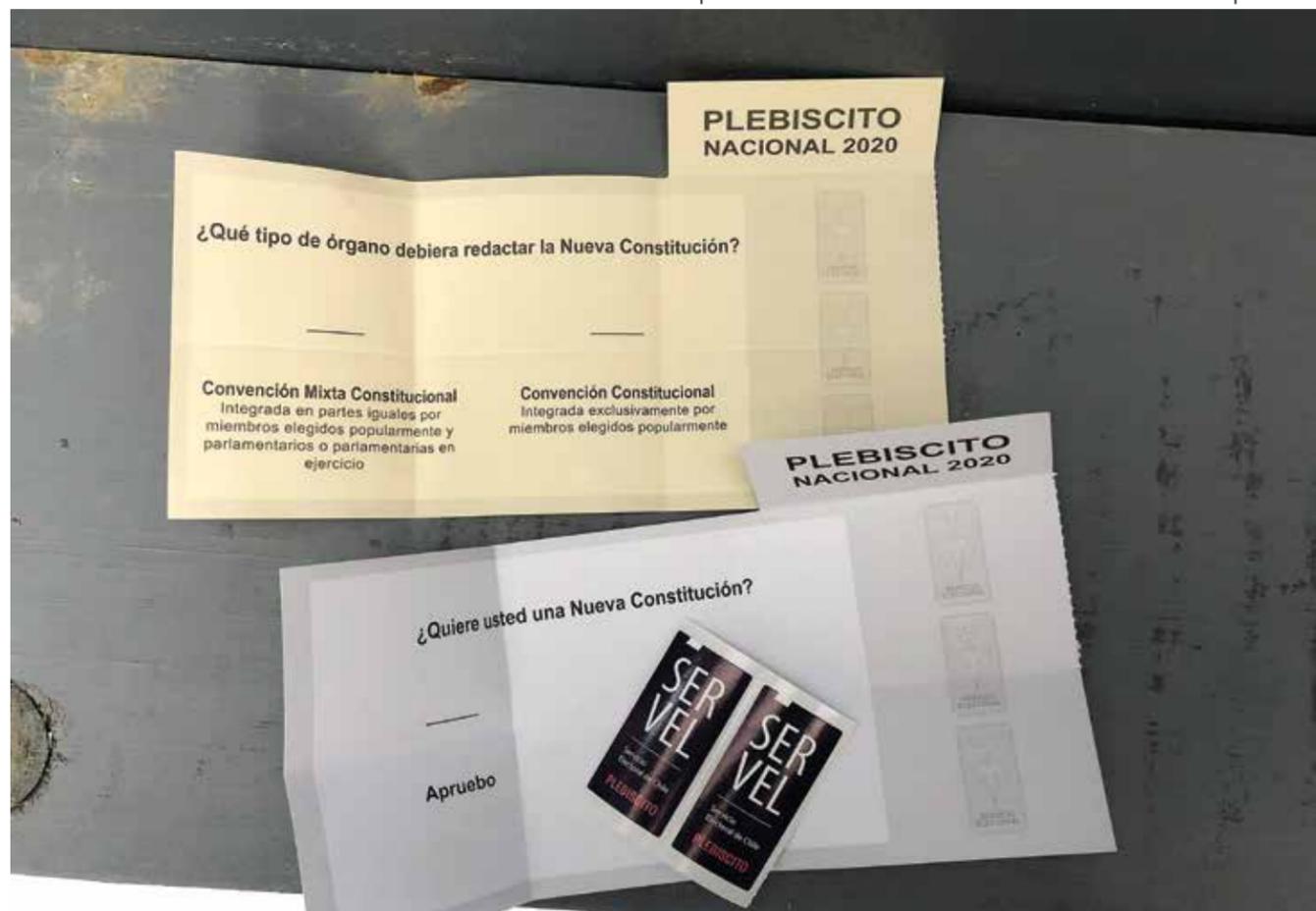


Photo by Janet Vagstad.



Photo by Nico Novoa-Marchant - www.sfpaidvisual.com.

At UC Berkeley, Gabriel Boric explains the drive to re-write Chile's Constitution in 2020.

newly elected assembly would write the Constitution; under the latter, the assembly would be composed of standing parliamentarians and directly elected members in equal part. In either case, the convention election will take place on April 11, 2021. The convention will have nine months to do its work and could be postponed only once for three months. The final product should be submitted for ratification in a plebiscite expected in 2022.

The accord fixed the quorum for articles to the new Constitution at two-thirds, a matter of ongoing contention. The day after the landmark agreement was signed, Boric told Chile's largest newspaper, “We would have preferred three-fifths, but [...] this Constitution cannot be of the left nor of the right.”

For all its transpartisanship, the accord generated major dissent and division on the left. The Communist Party and part of Frente Amplio refused to sign on. Indeed, the agreement — and Boric's adherence to it — caused the most significant fracture to date in Frente Amplio and in Boric's own Convergencia Social.

Only three parties from Frente Amplio ended up taking part in the agreement and having their presidents sign it: Comunes, the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party), and Revolución Democrática. Meanwhile, the Partido

Ecologista Verde (Green Ecologist Party), Igualdad (Equality), and the Partido Humanista (Humanist Party) dropped out of the coalition, costing the bloc 20 percent of its deputies in Congress.

Convergencia Social as a whole did not support the agreement, with party president Gael Yeomans emphasizing that “profound social change” was the goal of the group. For this reason, Boric signed the accord as an individual rather than as a representative of the party. Still, this move provoked the renunciation of scores of leaders from the party, including Boric's close ally Valparaíso mayor Jorge Sharp.

The amendments to the existing Constitution to allow the plebiscite, as well as three crucial additional changes, of which Boric was a crucial proponent in the Constitutional Committee, then went to the Congress. The amendments passed 127-8 in the Chamber of Deputies and 38-3 in the Senate. They were promulgated by President Piñera on December 24, 2019.

The additional amendments assured gender parity, reserved seats for Indigenous communities, and made provisions for the participation of political independents in the eventual election and convention. The gender parity amendment provoked a split in Piñera's Chile Vamos

>>

coalition. The more socially conservative UDI suspended its participation in the bloc when Renovación Nacional (National Renewal) and Evópoli supported the measure.

On January 14, 2020, Frente Amplio filed a criminal complaint of crimes against humanity against President Piñera, as well as current and former Ministers of the Interior Gonzalo Blumel and Andrés Chadwick, Governor of the Santiago Region Felipe Guevara, and Director General of Carabineros Mario Rozas. Presenting the charges at the Palacio de los Tribunales de Justicia, Beatriz Sánchez said, “We came to present, as Frente Amplio, this complaint for violations of human rights in Chile. It cannot be that if we are in a democracy, there are no guarantees for the people who want to protest in whatever city of our country.”

Between Hope and Anguish

In his talk at UC Berkeley, Boric confessed that the uncertain but momentous time in Chilean history left him “transitioning every day between hope and anguish.” Hope arises because “I see people discussing in massive assemblies, not just in wealthy or leftist neighborhoods, but across the country. [...] Everyone has propositions, [...] everyone is thinking collectively.” Yet, he continued, “It seems we don’t have the capacity or ability or even the will to listen to each other. [...] My anguish is that we won’t be able to listen to each other, and intolerance is going to win.”

On March 24, 2020, shortly after Boric visited UC Berkeley and spoke for CLAS, the Chilean Congress agreed to reschedule the plebiscite due to the exploding Covid-19 pandemic. The date was moved from April 26 to October 25. This change required a constitutional reform, which was promulgated by President Piñera on March 26, 2020. Boric was once again a central negotiator in this “transversal” agreement of parties across the political spectrum.

The months between the agreement to reschedule the plebiscite and the vote were dramatic and tragic in Chile. The first case of Covid-19 in Chile was not confirmed until March 3, but by March 18, President Piñera had placed the country under a “state of catastrophe” for 90 days, a decree extended by the Minister of the Interior for 90 more days on June 15. Among other things, these legal dispositions prevented mass protests and in-person campaigning for the constitutional referendum. Different zones of the country were put under total quarantine at different times under the government’s “Step by Step” plan. With more than 15,000 Covid-19 deaths by the end of November, Chile became one of the countries most affected by the pandemic.

On August 3, the Chilean Health Ministry approved a “Sanitary Protocol for a Safer Plebiscite,” which became

law on September 10. The official campaign for the plebiscite was reinitiated on August 26, running until midnight on October 23. From September 25 until October 23, fifteen minutes of programming on the national television station ran both for and against the option for a new constitution, the so-called *franja electoral*. During the latter stages of the campaign, mass protests and incidents of political violence again came to the forefront of national attention. Particularly intense scenes marked the one-year anniversary of the *estallido social* on October 18, 2020.

Despite all this uncertainty and tension, polling remained remarkably stable and consistent for many months leading to the plebiscite. Polls generally showed around 75-percent support for creating a new constitution and 50- to 60-percent support for the “Constitutional Convention” option for generating the new charter.

In the midst of this tumult, a perhaps surprisingly orderly and peaceful referendum was executed on October 25. In the end, more than 5.8 million Chileans, more than 78 percent of voters, supported the “approve” option, which called for writing a new constitution. Nearly as many citizens, more than 5.6 million voters representing 79 percent of valid votes on the question, chose the “Constitutional Convention” option to produce the new foundational document.

Boric has continued to be an important strategist for the left, an effective political leader, and an influential parliamentarian. When the Covid-19 outbreak in Chile and subsequent national quarantine made it necessary to postpone the plebiscite and the constitutional process, Boric again took a leading role. He was a prominent voice in the successful opposition to conservative attempts to scuttle the plebiscite because of the emergency and redirect the constitutional process into Congress. Social movement demands will resurge when the pandemic passes, Boric has assured the media.

Gabriel Boric’s capacity for leadership during crisis — his ability, in the words of *Revolución Democrática* Deputy Pablo Vidal, to “cross the river” and “dialogue [...] without giving up his positions” — has even spurred talk of a presidential run within Frente Amplio.

Deputy Gabriel Boric represents the XII Region in Chile (Magallanes and Chilean Antarctica). He was elected to Congress in 2013, when he was 27 years old, and re-elected in 2017. Boric spoke for CLAS on February 10, 2020.

James Gerardo Lamb is an instructor in the Department of Sociology at UC Berkeley.

References for this article are available online.



A mural by Calozzama with a banner that reads “New Constitution” in Santiago, Chile, 2019. Photo by José Giribás/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo.