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Leiden**  
The Netherlands

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Peña, C.; Silva, P.

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# Boric's Government and Its Transformative Hallmark

*Carlos Peña and Patricio Silva*

One of the characteristics of analysis in the social sciences is that, when a specific case is looked at, it usually has common traits that can then be verified comparatively. This is the case with the analysis of Gabriel Boric's government presented in this book. It describes processes – such as a widespread increase in access to education, an improvement in people's material living conditions, a change in expectations and surprising unease – that have made inroads into the rest of Latin America, either more or less intensely. Beyond the distinctive features of the society in which these take place, the case of Chile is interesting, as demonstrated by a brief review of its main processes.

In 2011, university student demonstrations became widespread in Chile, demanding radical changes to the education system and Chilean society in general. Over the last decade, the Chilean student movement has turned into a powerful actor, with a discourse that challenges the political and economic order that has existed since the return to democracy in 1990. There has been reproach for the perceived leniency of the Concertación governments (1990–2010) when it came to improving the quality of the political system and correcting the defects of the capitalist modernisation the country had experienced. In 2021, the former leader of the student movement, Gabriel Boric, aged 35, launched his candidacy for the presidency. During his campaign – and as per his previous discourse – he promised a true 'refoundation' of Chile's political, economic and institutional structures, declaring that his aim was to put an end to neoliberalism.

His victory in the second round of the presidential elections of December 2021 visibly shook the foundations of Chilean politics. Since the return to democracy in 1990, politics had been controlled by older figures, who had dominated the political stage over the last 40 years. When his government took power in March 2022, many members of the cabinet were under the age of 45. In addition, his original cabinet was made up of more female ministers than male ones, something unique in present-day Latin America.

Gabriel Boric's rise to power in March 2022 has quite rightly led to a renewed interest in current Chilean politics among Chilean and foreign scholars. Some have turned to studying Boric's meteoric political career, given that, in a lapse of only ten short years, he went from student leader

to the youngest President the country has ever seen. Others have started to explore the political and ideological nature of the leaders of the young radical Chilean left, which has become the new ruling elite. Boric and his generation have come to be a point of comparison with the traditional Chilean left and other left-wing governments in the region over the last few years. Expectations have also been raised among global left-wing sectors, given that the radical left-wing, represented by Boric, has set a goal to end the neoliberal model developed during the military government and which has dominated Chilean economic development for almost half a century.

For the first time since the *Unidad Popular* government at the beginning of the 1970s, a coalition of parties and movements representing the radical left has come to power in Chile. This occurred after three decades in which Chilean society underwent a profound change to its material living conditions, making it one of the countries with the best levels of well-being in the region. It seemed as if the country would soon be on the road to development, eluding what literature calls the middle-income trap. For 20 years, the four *Concertación* governments managed to construct a solid social democratic basis of economic and social transformations. This was characterised by moderation and changes implemented gradually, in an effort to maintain a high level of governability in the country. After the *Concertación* era, the people twice chose a right-wing government that, in general, continued the modernisation process and strengthened democracy.

When the *Nueva Mayoría* coalition led by Michelle Bachelet came to power in March 2014, it became obvious that the centre-left forces, who had been behind the process of gradual change after the restoration of democracy, had been radicalised. This translated into the formulation of an ambitious programme of profound changes, aimed at replacing the economic, political and institutional pillars that had supported Chilean politics since 1990. However, by the end of Michelle Bachelet's second term in government, the majority of these aims had not been met. It was in this context of frustrated reforms that the idea took hold at the heart of the Chilean left that the political-institutional legacy of the *Concertación* and the two right-wing governments should be replaced at grassroots level by a different model, breaking away from the 'thirty years' that had come before for good.

In this new political scenario, the radical left that emerged as a result of the 2011 student movement became the driving force behind a notably reform-based agenda in the final stages of Michelle Bachelet's government. In the words of its leaders, this important change of direction would drive the neoliberal model into its grave. That is why, although Gabriel Boric's government came to power brandishing an agenda that it called 'transformative', what it pursues are not isolated reforms but a total refoundation of the system.

The modernisation that occurred in Chile from 1990 onwards was helped by policies that diminished the unwanted consequences of a free market economic model, such as poverty and inequality. Through a system of subsidies and the implementation of a wide range of social programmes, the

Concertación governments managed to dramatically reduce poverty in the country. As Gabriel Boric insisted in his discourse, a transformative government is set on eliminating the structures that produce inequality and social injustice from the bottom up, instead of simply correcting them. Although Boric had to moderate his discourse in order to win support from the centre and centre-left in the second round of the presidential election, his ideological inspiration was still that of completely substituting the path of modernisation that Chile had been on since 1990.

The triumph of Boric – and that of the radical left – poses several questions, mainly about the existence of a genuine transformative strategy, going beyond any general diagnosis made. Doubts are also raised about the environment of opportunities in which the government operates and whether this will allow it to implement an agenda of this nature. Finally, there are also questions about the government's capacity to guarantee the country's political and economic stability. The greatest test for Boric's government will be to control the growing spiral of political violence and crime that has affected Chilean society since the October 2019 uprising.

A large number of the questions raised by the rise of Gabriel Boric and his Frente Amplio coalition make it necessary to examine whether the left he represents will be capable of substituting the left that followed the Third Way – represented by Ricardo Lagos, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Lula da Silva – and that governed the region until it was replaced by right-wing governments. In Latin America, the left has gone from being anti-imperialist and not particularly keen on capitalist modernisation in the 1960s to seeing the market and the internationalisation of the economy as an opportunity for development in the 1990s. Today, the question is whether the left will offer up a new version that is more suitable for the current cultural agenda or whether it will simply replicate a previous model.

This is all happening in a country that has undergone a profound and drawn-out modernisation process that has definitely not been problem-free. In this sense, analysing the Gabriel Boric case (as his political project could be called) could help understand the extent to which successful modernisation changes citizens' political culture and restricts radicalism.

This book, therefore, has three aims. Firstly, it aims to explain the radical left's triumph in Chile after three decades of centre-left and right-wing governments, looking at the series of profound cultural and social transformations the country has experienced over the last three decades. These changes have paved the way for the emergence of a new generation that has set itself the task of radically transforming the country constructed by previous generations. Secondly, it intends to analyse the main characteristics of Boric's new government, in terms of both this administration's aims and its performance during its first year in power. Finally, this book evaluates the likelihood of Boric's government pursuing its original aim of 'refounding' the country. This final question emerges from the fact that the country is facing a severe economic crisis, with Boric's government having faced many stumbling

blocks in its first year and with a lack of consensus with the opposition about the contents of a new constitution.

What are the characteristics of the political forces that came to power with Gabriel Boric's victory? What explains the obvious change of emphasis regarding issues once he took office? What are the restrictions he has faced and what can be inferred about the course of his future administration? How will the changes in political culture in Chile and the forces behind it influence the opportunities for action? These are some of the questions that this book will try to answer exactly a year after Gabriel Boric's government came to power. It is the result of the work of a group of scholars from the Diego Portales University and the University of Leiden who have been following the work of Boric's government in different areas of Chilean society since March 2022.

The first three chapters look into the main political-cultural traits of Boric's government.

In Chapter 1, Carlos Peña emphasises the generational traits of the political forces that support the new government. In his opinion, Boric's generation, born around 1985, has a dynamic timeframe and direction that is radically different to what came before. This is the generation of social networks and is the most educated in Chilean history, growing up in the middle of a socialisation crisis. This explains why it is a generation that shows a certain degree of anomia and is increasingly concerned with choosing its identity.

The generational left that came to power with a heterogeneous political discourse based on different sensibilities has not managed to create its own ideology. These sensibilities flourished during the Constitutional Convention (2021–2022), when they almost seemed to compete among themselves instead of trying to fulfil a common aim. However, these are key to the self-image and identity of the young generation in power and explain why it has been difficult for Boric and his closest collaborators to adapt the government's initial transformative project after defeat in the plebiscite on September 4<sup>th</sup>. The fact that they have sensibilities rather than ideologies stops the government from fully understanding the problems facing Chilean society although, as part of the younger generation, they have actually detected these to a certain extent.

In Chapter 2, Javier Couso analyses one of the previously indicated characteristics that is specific to public culture in Chile, namely the focus on using the law for even radical initiatives. This is laid bare in the way in which the constitutional crisis – the result of the October 2019 uprising – was managed, with Boric's explicit backing. Boric effectively staked all of his political capital on supporting the November 2019 agreement as an institutional way out of the political crisis created by the social uprising. This earned him widespread criticism from his own political sector, who saw this agreement as an attempt to put an end to the demonstrations and restore the status quo. A historical revision of the traditional relationship between the Chilean left and constitutionalism shows that, except for some episodes in

which legal limits were actually overstepped, the left has always tended to favour institutionalism to move forward with its agenda. The same seems to be the case with Boric's approach to the two constitutional processes. From the very beginning, he transmitted important messages to his sector to avoid an overly partisan attitude that would make it impossible for across-the-board agreements.

For his part, Patricio Navia in Chapter 3 asks whether Gabriel Boric has been tempted to go down the path of populism during his first year in office. After a brief look the use of the term populism in contemporary Latin America, Patricio Navia looks at Gabriel Boric's political evolution over the years.

Despite his radical stance during his time as a student leader, Boric was not personalist, nor did he overlook the organisational bodies of the social movements created from 2010 onwards. He did not adopt a populist attitude during his legislative career either. Although he cultivated the personal vote to be elected as an MP, Boric was simply doing the same as all other successful candidates had done to win seats in the Chilean Parliament. Regarding the national elites, Boric's discourse during his parliamentary career was not completely anti-establishment and he transmitted a message that favoured generational change. Finally, as President, Boric has formed his cabinet and team of close advisors taking the current political equilibrium between the different organisations and political parties that support his government very much into account. Despite the many difficulties, he has had to face in his first 12 months in government, Boric has not let himself be tricked into populism.

In the following four chapters, the book examines the forces that make up the environment of opportunities – both politically and in terms of governability – that Gabriel Boric's government has had to deal with, something clearly seen during his first year in government.

In Chapter 4, Patricio Silva explores the history of the tense relationship between the radical left (represented by Boric and the student movement) and the moderate left (represented by the Socialist party, the Party for Democracy and the Radical party). During the Concertación governments, the radical left was always critical of the centre-left, due to their reformist nature and tacit support of the neoliberal model. Therefore, Boric's political ascent was mostly based on his ongoing contempt for the social democratic left. Ironically, during the December 2021 presidential elections, Boric sought out electoral support from the moderate left, which ultimately led to him winning the election. In addition, Boric has been forced to incorporate experienced figures from the centre-left into his cabinet. Patricio Silva describes the complex correlation and equilibrium between the political forces that support him, underlining the fact that Boric is probably going to face a zero-sum situation in terms of loyalties. If he sides with the moderate sectors, he will end up alienating the more radical left he has been loyal to culturally in the past. On the other hand, if he sides with the radical left to make the sector more hegemonic, he will force those who prefer social democratic reforms to abandon him or withdraw their support for him in Parliament.

In Chapter 5, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser examines the emergence of a more radical right in the country. In his opinion, this forms part of a global phenomenon consistent with the appearance of a sector that is explicitly authoritarian and populist in conservative circles. In the case of Chile, this sector is represented by Antonio Kast and the Republican party. This trend is competing for right-wing hegemony with the other right-wing sector, represented by National Renovation (RN) and the Independent Democratic Union (UDI). Despite having authoritarian roots, the latter have modified their agenda, adopting more liberal and reformist points of view. The December 2021 presidential election showed that, despite the visible differences and tension between the traditional right and Kast's republicanism, the right-wing electorate voted decisively for Kast in the election to prevent the triumph of Boric's radical left. After Boric's triumph however, the traditional right chose to keep the channels of communication with the new government open, in an attempt to push through policies in which they could reach agreements with the Executive. In addition, after rejecting the draft constitution in September 2022, the traditional right has kept its word and is supporting the constitutional process that will ultimately result in a new constitution.

In Chapter 6, José Joaquín Brunner looks at governability and its stormy evolution, from the social uprising in October 2019 to the present day. It can be deduced from his analysis that the governability crisis in Chile did not emerge suddenly as a result of the October uprising, but rather governability had been gradually getting weaker since democracy was restored in 1990. José Joaquín Brunner identifies the different moments and factors that have contributed to the country's decreasing levels of governability during the four Concertación governments, the Nueva Mayoría government and two right-wing governments led by Sebastián Piñera. All have faced serious problems attempting to accommodate, both sustainably and coherently, the wide variety of political and institutional actors with different goals and aims in order to achieve government objectives. This problem has partly been due to a political sphere – the state and Chilean society, in general – that is highly fragmented and lacking in credibility and effectiveness. In addition, things have got worse in the last few years, given the country's severe economic restrictions, the many social demands not dealt with and a general feeling of pessimism regarding the future.

In Chapter 7, Camila Jara examines the social movement situation and the way in which these could modify the environment in which Gabriel Boric's government is operating. After a brief theoretical review, she presents a historical account of the main cycles of social mobilisation and demobilisation in the country from the 1960s to the present day. The focus of this analysis is on the period of hyper-social mobilisation that emerged after the outbreak of the social uprising in 2019. From then onwards, a destituent power was shaped that saw a way to develop a new form of governability in this void. Afterwards, the spirit of the October uprising was articulated in the Constitutional Convention, in which the idea that 'anything is possible'

took precedence. After Boric's presidential triumph, then the rejection of the constitutional draft on September 4<sup>th</sup> and the appointment of another body to draw up a new constitution, social movements entered a state of latency. Jara suggests that there will be a progressive social demobilisation as a result of the specifically political restrictions that have defeated the liberal agenda. She concludes that there will be varying reactions and levels of unrest, as well as latent mobilisation while the evasive problem of social unease, which takes on multiple forms and causes, is not resolved.

The following three chapters examine specific aspects of public policy, namely in the areas of economics, social policies and citizen security.

In Chapter 8, Mauricio Villena explores the complex economic scenario Boric faced when he came to power and the main challenges he will have to face during his administration. Among these are the needs to reduce inflation, encourage economic growth, investment and employment and carry out a tax reform. With the appointment of Mario Marcel as Finance Minister, Boric sent a powerful signal to local and international actors in the economy that he was aiming to reduce the high levels of uncertainty in the markets caused by his victory in the December 2021 elections. However, the draft drawn up by the Constitutional Convention once again created high levels of uncertainty, due to the fact that several of its articles would have profound consequences on matters related to private property, the state as a regulatory body and the issue of employment, as well as eliminating incentives for investment. The resounding rejection of this draft in the plebiscite on September 4<sup>th</sup> has led to a renewed sense of optimism in the business community that the economic reforms that Boric's government eventually implements will not be as radical as initially feared.

A key issue for the viability of the social reforms of Boric's government is maintaining fiscal sustainability. Keeping his electoral promise of considerably expanding social rights cannot be sustained solely by permanently increasing public debt and fiscal deficit. That is why, during its first year in power, Boric's government has been forced to adopt measures to strengthen international trade, small- and medium-sized businesses and foreign investment.

In Chapter 9, Rossana Castiglioni analyses the social agenda formulated as part of Boric's government programme and the attempts to put it into practice during his first year in power. Since the social uprising, there has been a huge increase in citizen demands in Chile regarding issues such as the pension system, public healthcare and education, all of which demand the state's response. Many of these demands were accommodated during the constitutional process, which integrated a series of social rights that would be guaranteed by the new constitution. However, the rejection of the draft constitution in September 2022 was an abrupt setback to the programme of social reforms that Boric's government aimed to implement. This chapter explores the difficulties the government has had with pension reform and transforming how public healthcare is financed. In both areas, the government has tried to increase the state's presence and control to the detriment of the private

sector, leading to strong resistance from the business and right-wing sectors. The complex economic and political scenario Boric's government is in a year after coming to power has made the ambitious agenda of social policies that it initially promoted more difficult to carry out.

In Chapter 10, Claudio Fuentes analyses the challenges for public security during Boric's government. In the last few years, the issues of security and crime have taken a foothold in politics, the media and in public opinion surveys. During the presidential elections, right-winger Antonio Kast presented himself as the candidate for 'law and order' and someone who could put an end to the population's fear of being victims of crime. Since coming to power, Boric's government has been continuously criticised for not dealing once and for all with drug dealing, organised crime and violent groups in the country's northern and southern regions. Fuentes analyses a series of historical, ideological and institutional determining factors that have structured Boric's public security agenda. In addition, a sharp increase in the population's perception of insecurity and their demands for more drastic anti-crime measures have led the government to seek closer links with the Chilean police force (Carabineros) and the criminal investigation police (PDI). Boric's initial promise to initiate a profound reformation of the police system was quickly abandoned, since he has needed the help of the very same to deal with the growing challenges in the area of public security. However, despite increasing citizen demands for a more robust policy against crime, Boric has not dared to take a hard line during his first year of government, given that his own political coalition has rejected taking punitive actions.

In the final chapter, Carlos Peña and Patricio Silva briefly evaluate the first year of Boric's government, identifying the main challenges it will have to face during the rest of its time in power.

Of course, the proximity of this analysis means what is expressed in it should be considered *cum grano salis* – in other words, cautiously. What is dealt with is happening right now and it is impossible to know for certain what the eventual outcome will be. Even so, the analyses and conjectures in this book will help identify the probable direction things will take, looking at the political effects that may arise and providing a reason to evaluate them.