



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

A country at a crossroads: how Chile went from a model of stability to political uncertainty



At a time when much of Latin America is once again leaning towards more authoritarian forms of government, Chile is entering an election cycle that reflects the mood across the continent.

Chile will elect a new president, the entire Chamber of Deputies, and half of the Senate on Sunday, 16 November.

These **elections** represent a crucial moment for a country long considered the most stable democracy in the region, which now approaches the polls with a deep sense of exhaustion, insecurity, and stagnation.

Gabriel Boric, the president elected in 2021 on a wave of mass protests and promises of a new social contract, is leaving office with high ambitions but modest results.

Two attempts at constitutional reform have failed; economic growth has remained below expectations; the government's announced reforms did not receive majority support; and crime has become the country's most pressing issue.

Instead of a continuation of progressive politics, Chile faces these elections with a question that many in the region have already asked: do voters want a return to the hard right?

The return of harsh security rhetoric

First, it has become clear that the public mood no longer matches the spirit of 2019, when the country was at the centre of progressive movements, struggles for human rights, and constitutional reforms.

Today, polls show a shift. The latest surveys, including data from the Centre for Public Research (CEP), give a slight advantage to leftist candidate **Jeannette Jara**, but only in the first round.

In the second round, according to the same

sources, Jara will likely lose to any right-wing candidate. The reason is simple: the ruling coalition bears the burden of failure, and voters increasingly associate it with a sense of insecurity.

José Antonio Kast has built a political identity on harsh security rhetoric, evoking Pinochet's legacy and messages reminiscent of Donald Trump and Nayib Bukele

The role of challenger was assumed by **José Antonio Kast**, the leader of the Republican Party and the most recognisable figure on the right-wing spectrum in the country.

For years, he has built a political identity on harsh security rhetoric, evoking Pinochet's legacy and messages reminiscent of Donald Trump and **Nayib Bukele**.

Bukele, the president of El Salvador, has become a symbol of "strong-arm" politics through mass arrests, crackdowns on gangs, and total control of institutions, making him both extremely popular and deeply controversial.

Kast models his entire political performance on this approach: direct, aggressive, and focused on the promise that the state will regain the monopoly on force and suppress crime without delay or compromise.

His message is simple and aggressive: the country is retreating in the face of crime, migration, and drugs, and it is time for a candidate to take power who will be "ruthless" against gangs and smuggling networks. That message finds fertile ground.

Migration as a key political focal point

Statistics explain why. For decades, Chile had one of the lowest crime rates in Latin America,

but that trend has reversed. According to data reported by the AP, the **homicide rate** has almost doubled in ten years; citizens report a sharp increase in kidnappings, extortion, and armed robberies.

In public opinion surveys, a quarter of the population say they are realistically afraid they could become victims of murder. The private security industry has grown by about 350 per cent in the past decade. Bars and restaurants in Santiago close early; a radical change in daily habits is evident.

A particular fear is caused by the presence of transnational criminal groups that, following the routes of mass migration from Venezuela, have established themselves in northern Chile.

The country is home to more than 660,000 Venezuelan migrants – by far the largest migration wave in its history

The most notorious among them, **Tren de Aragua**, quickly took control of key human smuggling routes, organised extortion, controlled prostitution, and expanded the drug market.

The entry of such a network into once stable Chilean cities has drastically altered the country's security landscape: in some regions, police have had to form special units, and local communities are openly discussing fears that did not exist before.

This crime wave has become one of the main drivers of political polarisation before the elections. At the same time, the country is home to more than 660,000 **Venezuelan migrants** – by far the largest migration wave in its history.

In such an environment, it is not surprising that migration has become one of the key political focal points, a topic on which fears, dissatisfaction, and the sense that the state is losing control are most rapidly growing.

Between social reforms and calls for harder security

Leftist candidate Jeanette Jara is seeking to address growing discontent through a combination of tougher security policies and social reforms.

As Minister of Labour in Boric's government, she implemented the reduction of the working week to 40 hours, increased the minimum wage, and prepared the pension reform.

Her personal credibility is higher than the rating voters give the ruling coalition. Nevertheless, Jara bears the burden of the failure of reforms over the past three years and must defend the government, which many criticise for "talking about structural changes but failing to solve the basic feeling of insecurity."

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On the other side is **Evelyn Matthei**, a politician with extensive experience and a reputation for being a reasonable, institutional right-wing figure. She tries to take a middle course: tougher than the left, but without the radicalism of José Antonio Kast.

Her campaign claims that Chile can restore stability without the drastic solutions offered by populists. The problem is that part of the electorate sees her as the "old establishment" at a time when the mood is shifting towards politicians who promise quick and tough action.

Chile is not only choosing a government, but a direction

Chile finds itself in a vacuum between fatigue with progressive politics and fear of populist authoritarianism. The country is one of the

few in the region that has simultaneously attempted ambitious constitutional reform and the preservation of democratic stability but has stalled in both processes.

The failure of two referendums has resulted in a sense of societal stagnation over the past four years. The mood of the voters shows they are seeking the return of a sense of security and predictability.

Jeannette Jara promised to strengthen the role of the state in public security and social protection

Some see that path in Jara's promise to strengthen the role of the state in public security and social protection, while others believe Kast's claim that the only way out is a radical crackdown on crime and a clear demonstration of state power.

These two visions now define the entire political dynamic in the country and explain why the race remains tense until the very end.

Chile is not only choosing a new government but also a direction that will send a message to the entire region.

The same country that experienced a military dictatorship, then became a model of market reforms, and in recent years a symbol of progressive experiments, is now deciding whether to turn to a tougher security policy, attempt a return to the moderate right, or retain the left despite deep dissatisfaction with its results.

Three distinct visions for the future

The election on 16 November will bring these dilemmas into sharp focus. If Jara wins, Chile will attempt to demonstrate that centre-left projects can succeed in a region that is becoming increasingly anxious and insecure.



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If votes pour in for Kast, it will confirm that even the continent's most stable countries are sliding towards hardline models. If the more moderate right consolidates, there will be a return to Chile's traditional preference for stability and predictability.

In all cases, these elections carry broader significance: they reveal how short the distance is from progressive hope to political disillusionment and how easily uncertainty can shift society's priorities.

Chile, which until recently was a symbol of institutional calm, now faces a choice between three distinct visions for the future, with pressure felt in every area of public life.

Chile enters the elections with a deep sense of fatigue and insecurity but also with the awareness that the current path is unsustainable.

The three options represent three different answers to the same question: how to restore a sense of order and perspective in a society that has been unsettled for years.

The vote on 16 November will show which vision is most trusted – and which candidate has the ability to lead the country out of stagnation without causing new divisions.

In a country long considered an exception in the region, this election will reveal whether Chile will maintain its reputation as a reliable democracy or join a broader Latin American shift towards harder and simpler political solutions.