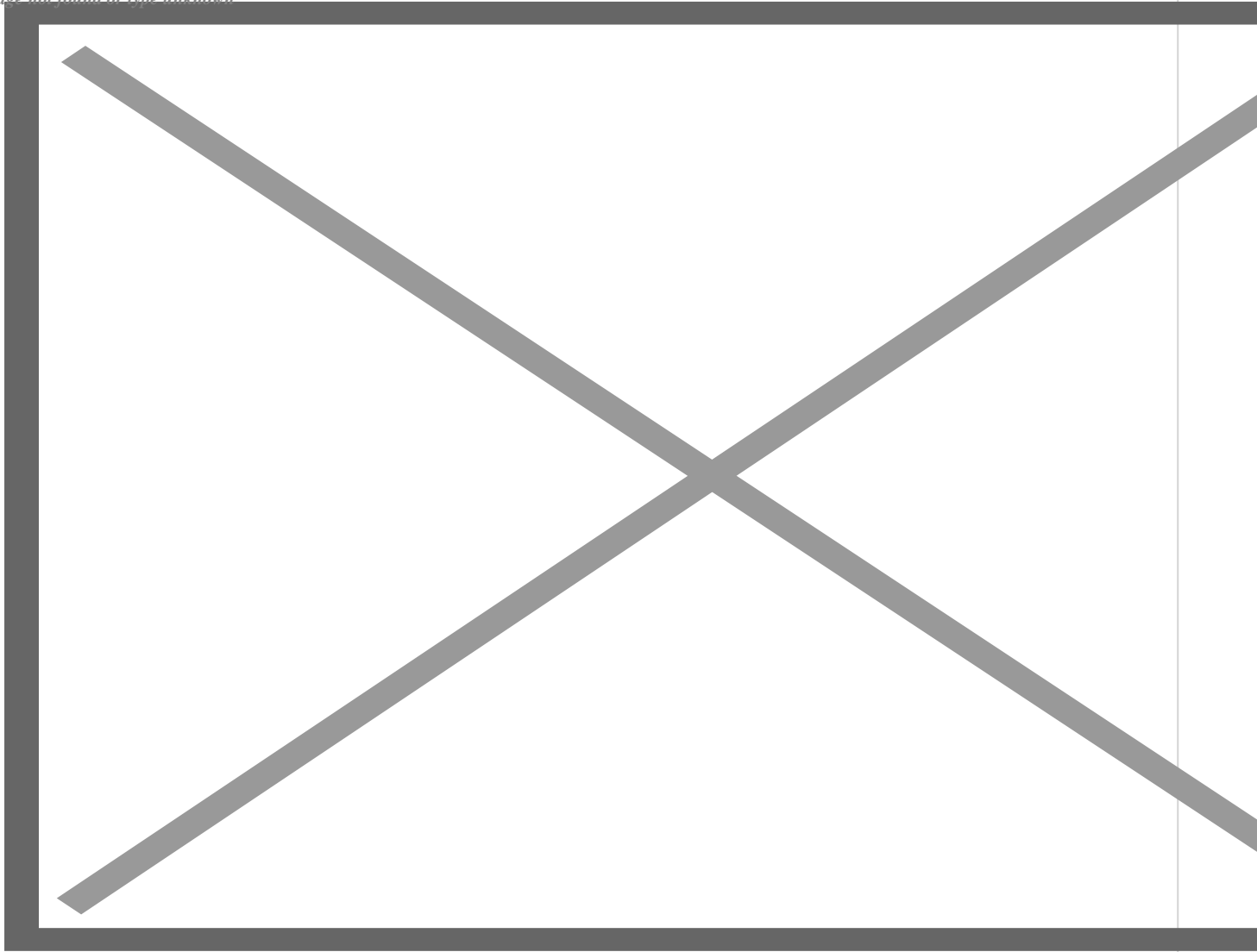


Chileans vote in divisive presidential election runoff

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Gabriel Boric, a former student protest leader promising social change, votes Sunday morning?

Santiago de Chile, December 19 (RHC)-- Chileans are heading to the polls to vote in the Andean nation's most divisive presidential election in decades, with two candidates offering starkly different visions for the future.

On one side is Gabriel Boric, a 35-year-old former student protest leader promising social change, who has edged ahead in pre-election polls, versus ultra-conservative Jose Antonio Kast, 55, a lawyer who has won support for a hard law-and-order line.

“Two models for the nation are going face-to-face,” Kast wrote in a letter published on Saturday in local newspaper El Mercurio, citing Boric’s plans for “total transformation” and his own promising “change with order and stability.”

Polling stations opened on Sunday at 8 a.m. and will close at 6 p.m. (11:00 – 21:00 GMT), with the first results expected early on Monday morning. Both candidates come from outside the centrist political mainstream that has largely ruled Chile since its return to democracy in 1990, after the years of military rule under General Augusto Pinochet, whose ghost still looms large.

Both candidates got less than 30 percent of the vote in a fragmented first round in November and have been battling hard since then to win over sometimes sceptical moderate voters in the copper-rich country of some 19 million people.

“It is not that I am 100 percent with Boric, but now it is time to decide between two opposing options and Boric is my choice,” said Javier Morales, 29, a construction worker who attended Boric’s campaign closing event this week.

Boric supporters say he will overhaul the country’s market-oriented economic model that dates back to Pinochet. It has been credited for driving economic growth but attacked for creating sharp divides between rich and poor.

Kast, meanwhile, has defended Pinochet’s legacy and aimed barbs at Boric for his alliance with the Communist Party in his wide leftist coalition, which has resonated with supporters. “I feel Chile needs a bit of order,” said Florencia Vergara, 25, a dentistry student, who is supporting Kast as the “lesser evil” for the economy. “I like his proposals on economic issues, although I don’t agree with all his political ideals.”

Boric, who rose to prominence leading a student protest in 2011 to demand better and more affordable education, wrote in an open letter that his government would make the changes Chileans had demanded in widespread social uprisings in 2019.

“(That means) having a real social security system that doesn’t leave people behind, ending the hateful gap between healthcare for the rich and healthcare for the poor, advancing without hesitation in freedoms and rights for women,” he said.

The 2019 protests, which ran for months and at times turned violent, sparked a formal process to redraft Chile’s decades-old constitution, a text which will face a referendum vote next year.

The final polls ahead of the runoff election show Boric widening his lead against Kast, though most polls show a close race.

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