

Uruguay in the spotlight among Latin American democracies: a spark of hope?

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The instability of democracies in Latin America has intensified significantly in recent years. Polarization, corruption, and the fragility of institutions, mostly due to populist and authoritarian governments, are the main issues, raising questions about the resilience of the region's democratic pillars (Bonifácio et al, 2020). However, amidst the democratic crisis, Uruguay can be highlighted as an example of stability, with a satisfaction of the country's democracy of almost 60%, a very high number amidst Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2023). While many countries in the region face setbacks and political crises, Uruguay appears to maintain a firm commitment to democratic values. The latest electoral process exemplifies this idea: with a smooth transition of power, Yamandú Orsi, the current left-wing president, has maintained good relations with his electoral rival, Álvaro Delgado, and the previous president, Lacalle Pou, both from the right-wing spectrum (BBC, 2024), showcasing the inter-party dialogue that the democratic model suggests.

The main objective of this article is to theorize Uruguay's stability while drawing a clear contrast with Brazil and other democracies in the region, as Guilherme Reis (2017) mentions that it is practically an "oasis in the desert", despite its own authoritarian period. Throughout the text, it will be discussed how Uruguay's elite's democratic values, party collaboration, electoral system, popular deliberation and historical buffer State maintain its democracy stable. Can this country truly be seen as a light at the end of the tunnel, as a model for other Latin American democracies to follow?

The context of the democratic crisis in Latin America

The democratic crisis can be explained by various factors,

but the colonial past was certainly highly relevant. Latin American countries were inserted into the international system mostly as exporters of primary products and importers of manufactured goods, and this continues until this day, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC, 2023). The exorbitant capital derived from the colonial exploitation of the Americas enabled the industrialization of the Global North at the expense of the basic development of these colonies, which functioned merely as reservoirs of natural resources and labor (Jaguaribe, apud Campos, 1985, our translation).

Around the 2000s, due to the exploitative neoliberalism established in the region – which perpetuated inequality and socioeconomic vulnerability –, The Pink Tide emerged with social welfare alternatives (Dos Santos, 2020). Leftist governments strengthened social rights by reducing poverty, and expanding access to basic services, as we can see in the poverty rate decrease in a Economic Commission for Latin America and Caribbean (ECLAC, p. 41, 2024) study, in which it is stated that the latin american people in poverty fell from 45,3% to 27,7% between 2002 and 2014, the major Pink Tide period. However, while representation improved, the Latin American system still relied on its role as a supplier of raw materials, remaining dependent on external capital, according to OEC (2023).

There was no effective structural reform in any country, and the changes were not substantial enough to truly influence new models of production or trade relations under equal conditions, as evidenced by the 2000 "commodity boom", according to the research made by the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS). In the following years, popular mobilizations – such as the 2013 protests in Brazil and the movement in favor of President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment – highlighted the growing ideological disputes and polarization of the agenda. There was room for the democratic rise of populists leaders in Latin governance, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier Milei in Argentina, both made the corrosion of democratic pathways even greater, maintaining the good appearance of a democratic State while "eviscerating its substance" as "elected autocrats" (Levitsky; Ziblatt, p. 5, 2018). However, in Uruguay, the grass stays green – even though there was also an authoritarian period, which is going to be explained in the next topic – differently from its neighbours, as the last year's election was, as always, approved by all spectrums of politics in the country's democracy (BBC, 2024).

Not so perfect: Uruguay's latest authoritarian period

Uruguay is one of the most stable democracies in Latin America, despite experiencing a harsh dictatorship between 1973 and 1985 (Reis, 2017). Although Gabriel Terra's government (1933–1938) is considered authoritarian (Reis, 2017), he was elected by the people and did not exceed his mandate term, so it will be disregarded for analysis until a real coup d'état in 1973 led by President Juan María Bordaberry. Through the Internal State of War decree, he dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution and political parties, and restricted all civil liberties (Castro, 2023). It can be concluded that Bordaberry fully fits the four indicators of an authoritarian leader, as outlined in *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky; Ziblatt, 2018). These criteria include: a feeble commitment to democracy; denial of the opposition's legitimacy; tolerance of violence from far-right groups and the military; and willingness to restrict civil liberties. Bordaberry himself admitted he did not understand what it meant to be a Democrat (Castro, 2023), as well as "not identifying" with any party; he was strictly committed to the interests of large landowners and rose to power through fraudulent elections (Castro, 2023); reinforcing the persecution and silencing of the MLN (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros), a Marxist-inspired group that opposed the government and sought reforms.

The democratization of Uruguay after this period occurred due to several factors: external debt crisis; the unhappiness of the population regarding the military repression; the loss of purchasing power from the working class; the clandestine reorganization of unions and political parties; and the general strike of 1984 were some of them (Escola Latino-americana de História e Política, 2023).

Through the Pacto del Club Naval, in 1984, military and politicians negotiated the return to democracy, guaranteeing free elections, but with the benefit of the Ley de Caducidad — an amnesty law absolving them of crimes due to the expiration of prosecution time limits (Reis, 2017). This law was partially overturned under José Mujica's government in 2011, as said in BBC, demonstrating the country's intention to seek ways in honoring the memory of its authoritarian past, also seen in the research of Latinobarómetro (2023), which shows that 71,2% of people would never support a military dictatorship.

What explains the democratic stability in Uruguay and comparing it with the other countries of Latin America

But why does the democracy in Uruguay stand out when it comes to stability compared to the other countries of Latin America? There is not one correct answer to this, as the political process is affected by multiple variables, but it is possible to find a good number of hypotheses that separate Uruguay's democracy from the rest and consolidate an election as calm as the last one was, with the opposition President Lacalle Pou congratulating Yamandú Orsi for the victory and putting himself available to help in the government transition, as seen in a post in his X account. Possible explanations are as follows: the elite's interest in maintaining democracy and the consequent tradition of collaboration between opposition parties, the electoral system of Uruguay, bigger popular participation in politics, and a history of pacification and appeasing in the region.

Starting with the elite's interest in democracy stability, there is a historically strong connection starting since the Constitution of 1918. The politics in Uruguay were, for a long time, controlled by the two biggest parties that created the political landowning elites: the Colorado Party and the National Party (Castro, 2023). What prevented these two parties from becoming authoritarian was the fact that even though they were both dominant, they didn't have the capacity to impose their will on the opposition (Reis, 2017). As time passed on, the democratic system would become even more ideal for these parties, as they would start to collaborate in each other's mandate. This phenomenon became a tradition in Uruguay's democracy, and it helps in stability as the opposition receives a part of the government's power and can ask for accountability from the inside, creating horizontal accountability, as Reis calls it (2017). With this type of accountability, the opposition parties maintain their skeptical view of the government, but in a much more moderate way in comparison to other countries, such as Brazil and Venezuela, where the communication between government and opposition is full of imperfections, like the attempt of assassination of President Lula and Vice-president Alckmin in Brazil, reported by G1 (2024) and the

persecution from the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro against his oppositors, for example, María Corina Machado and Edmundo González, also reported by G1 (2025).

An example of this collaboration between parties, the so-called co-management and co-participation by Buquet and Chasqueti (2004) can be seen in the government of Ex-President Pepe Mujica. At the beginning of his government, he made a deal with Colorado and National parties that would name members of these parties to high cargos of state companies, directly applying the horizontal accountability “loyalty system” between the opposite political spectrum. This is one of the factors that explain why 58,9% of Uruguayans rate the functioning of its democracy more positively than the average of Latin America, 28,1% (Latinobarómetro, 2023).

Another key factor that maintains Uruguay as a stable and trustworthy democracy is the functioning of its electoral system, which has some particularities. To start, since the re-democratization, there is not a constitutional change that permits reelection, differently from what happened in Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela (Castro, 2021). Curiously, these three countries have more volatile democracies, which can be explained in numerous ways. However, focusing on the reelection factor, when a president leads the country two times in a row, he has a lot of time to mold politics in favor of his interests. As Morlino writes, “stability is the predictable capacity that a system has of extending itself in time”, so it is necessary to differentiate the stability of immobilism, given that a certain system is stable because of its capacity to adapt to adversities (Morlino apud Castro, p. 2, 2021, our translation). The fact that presidential reelection is not possible prevents the President to govern thinking about his continuation in power. It is exactly this continuation that authoritarian leaders desire, so that there is more time for the leader to consolidate his image. Therefore, when there is no reelection, the chance of consolidation of power is lower.

Besides the impossibility of reelection, the Uruguayan electoral system proposes a closed-list election. In this sense, when the voter chooses his presidential candidate, he can only vote for members of the parliament who have similar thoughts as him (REIS, 2017). This happens so that the elector cannot vote for a congressman opposed to the president he chose, and this makes it more likely for the Executive Power to have a government majority in the Legislative. The consequence is that the relationship between the Executive and Legislative powers becomes

more aligned than the relationship we see in Brazil, for example, where there is not a closed-list election. To illustrate this in reality, the last parliamentary elections did not give President Lula governmental majority in the National Congress, and this prevents the Executive Power from putting its plans in practice, as shown by a report of CNN Brasil (2025).

To illustrate this situation, it is possible to note that all of the Frente Amplio (the Uruguayan leftist party) governments, according to the Electoral Court, counted with a parliamentary majority, which made their policy come out of the paper easier (Chasquetti, 2011). Contrary to Brazil, where the second mandate of Dilma Rousseff lost the government majority in the National Congress, which allowed the president to be deposed more easily. It is also important to mention the stronger popular participation in the politics of Uruguay, as its people are more interested in political life in comparison to other countries of Latin America, according to research from Latinobarómetro (2023). The most obvious explanation for this phenomenon is the high level of education in Uruguay, as the country has, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the second-highest education index in Latin America. It is possible to connect the great education rating to the civil participation in politics shown by data from Latinobarómetro (2023): 52,7% of people entrust the electoral process as the best form of action to develop the country and another 37% say that peaceful protests and voting are the best ways.

As so, an essential factor of politics in Uruguay is the capability of the electorate to call for a plebiscite. In other countries, such as Brazil, a plebiscite can be called only by the National Congress, according to the third article of the law 9.709 of the Federal Constitution (1998). However, in Uruguay, only the signatures of 10% of the electorate can call a plebiscite, making this tool more frequently used, increasing the popular participation in decision making (Reis, 2017)

A higher participation of the people in the political process surely makes the democratic value more connected to the population, as they feel themselves part of the construction and development of the State. This can explain one of the reasons the democracy in Uruguay is much more stable.

The last argument found to the stability of Uruguay comes from a historical approach: another explanation of the more stable politics in the country may have roots in the creation

of its State. Uruguay conquered its independence after the Treaty of Montevideo in 1828 as a buffer state between Argentina and Brazil. According to Real de Azúa (1984, apud Castro, 2021), the creation of the Uruguayan State made the society of the country with a buffer culture, diminishing the social tensions and valuing pacification and dialogue.

Conclusion

The democratic stability of Uruguay seen in the election of Yamandú Orsi in 2024 is not a matter of chance, but the result of a historical process that involves popular participation, respect for institutions, and a robust electoral system. Since re-democratization, the country has managed to consolidate a political model that values dialogue and prevents the excessive concentration of power in a singular party. The tradition of collaboration between opposition parties, the impossibility of presidential reelection, the elites' interest in maintaining the system, and the population's level of education are factors that contribute to this democratic resilience.

Moreover, Uruguay stands out for its political culture based on dialogue and consensus, whether through co-management between parties at the domestic level or internationally, as a reflection of its origins as a buffer state between Brazil and Argentina. As Bonifácio et al (2020) conclude, if citizens live in a quality democracy with representativeness and strong institutions, the propensity to turn to authoritarian forms of governance is much lower.

In light of this, the democracies in Latin America can learn from the Uruguayan case. The country shows that political stability depends not only on solid institutional structures but also on a culture with democratic values, where the decision-making process is fulfilled by popular participation. The other Latin American nations must understand that strengthening trust in institutions is built into mechanisms that encourage an active sphere of citizen participation and diverse interests, with dialogue between political parties and polarization reduction.

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