

# "Elections in Uruguay: The Future of the Small Latin American Nation"

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Uruguay, known for its high democratic standards in the region, is undergoing an electoral process in 2024. In June of this year, political parties selected their candidates to compete in the presidential election scheduled for October 27 to determine the next leader of this small Latin American country. As re-election is not permitted, President Luis Lacalle Pou cannot seek another term despite his relatively high approval ratings. His coalition, known as the "Coalición Multicolor" and led by the "Partido Nacional," faces a considerable challenge in maintaining power. The government has navigated difficult moments, such as the pandemic and various scandals, which may impact its electoral prospects. The left-wing opposition, represented by the "Frente Amplio", which governed Uruguay from 2005 to 2020, aims to regain leadership.

Pre-election polls indicate a slight favor towards "Frente Amplio". Despite Uruguay's political stability, the outcomes of the October elections, or a potential runoff on November 24 if no candidate secures more than 50% of the vote, will have implications for the country's future. This analysis will first outline the major milestones of President Lacalle Pou's current administration to provide context. It will then describe the electoral process underway in Uruguay, mapping out the key presidential candidates. Finally, the analysis will conclude with future perspectives, focusing on how the election of a new president could impact Uruguay's foreign policy.

## **ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT GOVERNMENT**

A few months after Luis Lacalle Pou took office in March 2020, his coalition government was confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, which defined the early years of this administration. The initial response to the pandemic was relatively effective, although there was an increase in deaths at the beginning of 2021. The early arrival of vaccines helped to curb the virus's circulation and prevent dramatic situations, resulting in exceptionally high approval ratings for the government (Rossell & Monestier, 2021). However, this did not prevent a deterioration in the economic and social situation.

Once the pandemic was under control, the government's political agenda was shaped by the presentation of an Urgent Consideration Law (LUC), which encompassed over four hundred articles on various topics and was subjected to a referendum by the opposition in 2022. The pandemic and the referendum impeded the implementation of the government's agenda, resulting in low legislative productivity (Schmidt &

Repetto 2022). Nevertheless, the government's victory in the referendum on the (LUC) gave Lacalle Pou and his administration a boost to accelerate their political agenda.

Education and social security reforms were two of the government's flagship areas. Despite rigorous internal negotiations within the coalition concerning social security reform, it was ultimately approved (Vairo & Antía, 2023). Also, significant changes were sought within the Urgent Consideration Law regarding domestic security issues. While some indicators may have improved, such as the rates of violent and non-violent robberies (El Observador 2024), there has not been a substantial change in results. It remains a significant concern for the public due to high homicides and violence closely linked to drug trafficking and gang conflict (Fynn et al., 2024).

Recent years have been marked by two highly visible political scandals that led to the loss of government control over the agenda and the resignation of ministers (Interior and Foreign Affairs). One scandal involved the head of presidential security for Lacalle Pou, and the other implicated two ministries due to issuing a passport to a Uruguayan known for links to international drug trafficking (Vairo & Antía 2023). Although both issues were addressed through the judicial and parliamentary systems, they presented significant challenges for the government. Additionally, the country's post-pandemic economic context has been affected, resulting in social issues, particularly with poverty increasing due to the impacts of the pandemic and the lack of policies targeting this sector of society (La Diaria 2024).

## **ELECTORAL PROCESS AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

The presidential election process in Uruguay began on June 30 with the internal elections within the parties, allowing citizens to choose the candidates. This stage determines the presidential candidates for political parties.

The “Frente Amplio,” the country's major party that governed from 2005 to 2019, is currently undergoing a leadership transition following the deaths of two of its prominent figures: former President Tabaré Vázquez and Danilo Astori, a former Minister of Economy and leading moderate within the party. Additionally, former President José Mujica, known internationally for his speeches and austere lifestyle, is stepping back. The contest within the party resulted in Yamandú Orsi, Mayor of Canelones (second biggest department in the country) and supported by Mujica's faction, defeating Carolina Cosse, the Mayor of Montevideo. The party's presidential ticket (Orsi for president and Cosse for vice president) was finalized that night after a strong performance in the internal vote.

The “Partido Nacional”, the leader of the governing coalition, needed to select a presidential candidate as the current president is ineligible for re-election. Álvaro Delgado, the Secretary of the Presidency and the most visible government figure during the pandemic was chosen as the candidate, with a clear lead over the second contender, Laura Raffo. Delgado's ticket includes Valeria Ripoll, a former trade unionist who recently joined the party. The decision to exclude Raffo generated criticism within the party, and it was not an easy decision.

The competition was expected to be closer in the “Partido Colorado” with four potential presidential candidates. Andrés Ojeda, a 40-year-old criminal lawyer who joined the campaign late and led a new faction within the party, emerged as the winner. Ojeda became a significant novelty in the electoral campaign after that victory.

On October 27, the presidential and legislative elections (compulsory for citizens) will take place, with voters electing 30 members to the Senate and 99 members to the Chamber of Representatives. To win the presidency, a candidate must secure more than 50% of the votes. If no candidate achieves this, a runoff between the top two candidates will be held on November 24. Additionally, two referendums will be held in October: one on whether to permit nighttime police raids and another on a proposed pension reform, which lacks support from any of the presidential candidates but was initiated through a petition by the labor movement and certain factions of the “Frente Amplio”.

## **PERSPECTIVES AND FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS**

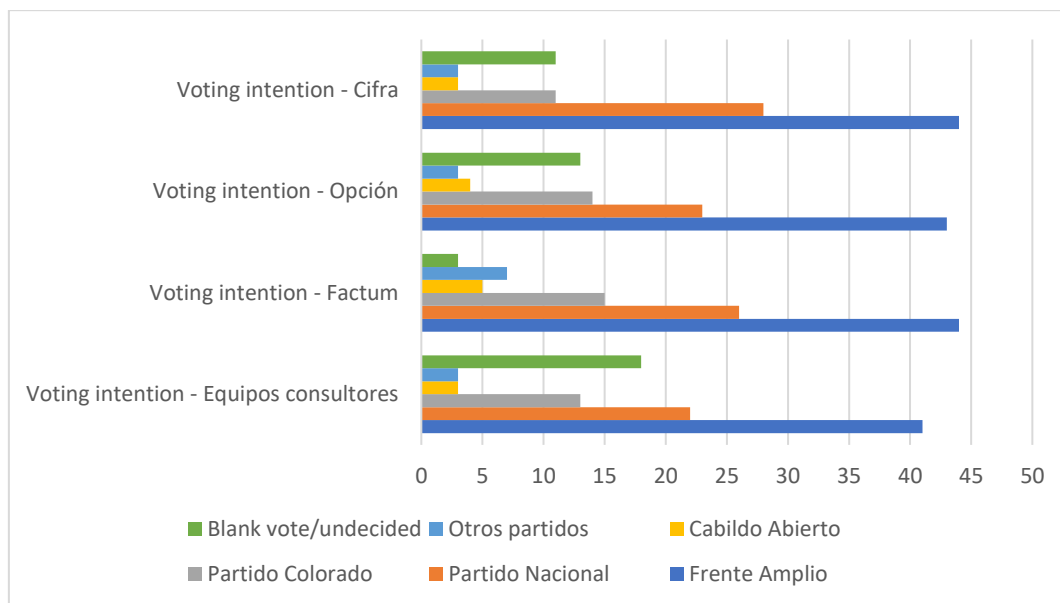
Public opinion polls are what can give us an indication of what might happen. Adolfo Garcé, one of the country's leading political scientists, suggested that any of these three scenarios are possible: a first-round victory for the “Frente Amplio,” a second-round victory for the “Frente Amplio,” or a victory for the ruling coalition, being the second option the most likely<sup>1</sup>. The outlook is favorable for the “Frente Amplio” due to two factors: the capitalization on the dissatisfaction of opposition groups (syndicalism and progressive people) with some implemented reforms and the decline in real wages in the post-pandemic context, as well as political scandals that have damaged the image of the government, who make difficult for the government to show superior administrative capabilities (Fynn et al. 2024).

Recent polls show the consolidation of the “Frente Amplio” as the most-voted party, with a projected vote share of around 43% to 45%. This implies that a first-round victory is difficult to achieve, but it is not unlikely that they will obtain an absolute majority in Parliament. The “Partido Nacional” shows a decline in voting intention (from 27% to 22%), mainly following the internal elections in which, as previously mentioned, the presidential formula was not resolved easily. The “Partido Colorado” has increased its voting intention from 6% to 13%. However, it is difficult for them to secure second place by October, which would allow them to advance to the second round as a coalition candidate. In a possible second round between the “Frente Amplio” and the Multicolor Coalition (comprising the “Partido Nacional,” “Partido Colorado,” “Cabildo Abierto” and “Partido Independiente”), the formula led by Orsi (“Frente Amplio”) has more probability of winning. The next graph shows the voting intention according to the main opinion consultants.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Adolfo Garcé on Al Weso – AWENO TV  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5R10VnL2YY>

Figure 1. Public Opinion Polls



Source: Monitor electoral – El País

The victory of the “Frente Amplio” or the Coalition will have repercussions in the coming years. In terms of domestic politics, this is a left-right contention, as has been the case for decades between a center-left and a center-right bloc representing the Uruguayan party system (Buquet and Piñeiro, 2014). However, it is a country with continuities: the rule of law, solid macroeconomics, and strong democracy. This means that there are aspects that will not change beyond a change of government, and modifications will be moderate, a characteristic feature of Uruguay.

Regarding the possible impact of the new candidate's election on relations with other Latin American countries, “Frente Amplio” has a much more regionalist perspective than the current government. This implies that if they win, there will be an effort to build closer ties with Brazilian president Lula and prioritize connections with the region. Additionally, Orsi has emphasized the pursuit of mediation, so, likely, there will not be a strongly condemnatory policy toward Venezuela. Venezuela's authoritarian drift is a very present theme in Uruguayan domestic politics. The “Frente Amplio” has been very cautious in condemning the Maduro regime; however, in recent times, certain sectors have taken a more critical view. In contrast, with the continuity of the current government, there may be a tendency to distance itself from the region and a continuous criticism stance toward Venezuela.

The pursuit of more free trade agreements (FTA) and economic opportunities for the country can be observed in both coalitions. However, being part of Mercosur (a regional bloc including Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil) makes it difficult for Uruguay to achieve FTA since it needs to negotiate with partners due to the customs union characteristics of Mercosur. Although Argentina with Milei has a more open stance, the opinion of the major actor in the bloc, Brazil, is essential to give Uruguay approval to negotiate with other actors outside the regional organization. This makes it difficult

to conclude FTA (with China, for example) beyond a certain consensus in both Uruguayan political parties.

Finally, regarding international actors, Uruguay has maintained a foreign policy towards China that has not changed much, regardless of the political parties in power. The high economic and commercial dependence on China means that the positions of both “Frente Amplio” and Coalition are similar. If the “Frente Amplio” wins, greater engagement with China could be expected while still considering the red lines that the United States might set on certain issues like defense agreements or technology investments. Russia is not a prominent dispute in Uruguayan foreign policy, and regarding its position on international forums, Uruguay maintains a policy of condemning the use of force while promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes. No major differences are expected regarding whether Orsi or Delgado wins about that topic.

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