

URUGUAY

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Political system Portraying Uruguay's political system has been, and still is, a difficult issue. Historically, this has turned into a long-standing discussion between constitutional experts and political scientists. The Uruguayan regime has only two of the four classical features of "pure presidentialism" introduced by Shugart and Carey (1992), namely the popular election of the president and the executive's veto power over bills passed by the legislature. It lacks, however, the other two characteristics, the cabinet's accountability to the president and fixed terms of office for both the president and the members of the legislature. This has led some authors, such as for example Jorge Lanzaro (2000), to argue that the Uruguayan regime represents a scenario opposed to the so-called "majoritarian presidentialism" prevailing in most Latin American countries. Uruguay would be an example of "moderate presidentialism ... which, in the light of the party system composition and regulation ... could be better assimilated, through negotiation and commitment channels, to more pluralistic language due to the characteristics of electoral, institutional and decision-making standards" (Lanzaro 2000, p. 19).

It follows from the current constitution that executive power shall be exercised by the president, acting with the respective ministers, or with the Council of Ministers in which all ministers act jointly. The president and the vice-president of the republic (who will automatically take office as president in the case of temporary or permanent vacancy) shall be jointly and directly elected by an absolute majority vote of the constituency, pursuant to the current election rules which have been in effect since the last 1996 amendment. The rules require that each political party may only nominate one candidate. The term of office is five years and the consecutive presidential re-election is not allowed.

Pursuant to article 168 of the constitution, "[t]he president of the Republic, acting with the respective ministers, or with the Council of Ministers, has the following duties":

- "To maintain internal order and tranquillity and safeguard external security";
- "To exercise the supreme command of all armed forces";
- "To grant retirement and regulate the pensions of civil servants and military employees in accordance with the law";
- "To publish and circulate, without delay, all laws ... which are ready to be published and circulated, to enforce such laws and cause them to be enforced, and to issue such special regulations as may be necessary for their enforcement";
- "To inform the Legislature, at the beginning of regular periods of sessions, about the state of the Republic and any improvement or reform which may deserve consideration";
- "To raise objections or make remarks concerning bills sent by the Legislature and to suspend or oppose their enactment ... To propose bills to the Chambers or amendments to previously enacted laws. Such bills may be submitted with a declaration of urgent consideration."

Constitution

The last significant amendment to the constitution was put to a referendum with a favourable outcome on 8 December 1996. As pointed out by constitutional expert Alberto Pérez Pérez, this was "a partial amendment, as the full text of the 1967 Constitution was not replaced, but only 27 out of its 332 numbered articles and two out of the 23 paragraphs of its Transitory and Special Provisions (including those added in 1989 and 1994), to which, in turn, five additional paragraphs were incorporated (W to Z)" (Pérez Pérez 1999, p.5). As explained below, most of these amendments were focused on changes in the election system.

In section II, under the title "Rights, Duties and Guarantees", and especially under chapter 1 thereof, the recognition of a large number of basic civil rights is included in articles 7 to 39. In Uruguay, there has traditionally been a high degree of respect for these constitutional rights. The most significant constitutional rights are, among others:

- Article 7: "The inhabitants of the Republic have the right of protection in the enjoyment of life, honour, liberty, security, labour and property. No one may be deprived of these rights except in conformity with laws which may be enacted for reasons of general interest."
- Article 8: "All persons are equal before the law, no other distinctions being recognized among them save those of talent and virtue."
- Article 10: "Private actions of persons which do not in any way affect the public order or prejudice others, shall be outside the jurisdiction of judges. No inhabitant of the Republic shall be obliged to do what the law does not require, or prevented from doing what it does not prohibit."
- Article 14: "The penalty of confiscation of property may not be imposed for political reasons."
- Article 17: "In the event of unlawful detention, the interested party or any other person may file a petition for a writ of "habeas corpus" before the competent Judge to the end that the detaining authority shall immediately explain and justify the legal grounds for such detention, the decision of the aforementioned judge being final."
- Article 26: "No person shall be imposed the death penalty. In no case shall mistreatment be allowed in prisons, which shall be only used to secure convicts and prisoners while pursuing crime prevention through re-education and development of aptitudes for work."
- Article 29: "The expression of opinion on any subject by word of mouth, private writing, publication in the press, or by any other method of dissemination is entirely free, without prior censorship; but the author, printer or publisher, as the case may be, may be held liable, in accordance with law, for abuses which they may commit."
- Article 30: "Every inhabitant has the right of petition to all or any of the authorities of the Republic."
- Article 39: "All persons have the right to form associations, for any purpose whatsoever, provided they do not form an association which the law has declared unlawful."

Although no section of the current constitution is specifically devoted to political parties, many of its provisions and articles on other topics, especially those dealing with the electoral system, expressly refer to party actions, prerogatives and functioning.

The favourable state of liberal democracy in Uruguay has been frequently recognized at the international level, even in the last few years. There are plenty of examples, but reference will be made to only two of the most recent ones.

State of democracy

According to a report published by the British publication *The Economist* under the heading "*The Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy 2008*", Uruguay is considered the most democratic country in Latin America and was ranked 23rd out of a total 167 countries. Moreover, a study conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation in March 2008 established that Uruguay ranked 1st among 125 developing countries as far as democratic quality was concerned. The study highlighted particular measures of democracy meriting consideration, for instance, consensus on democratic rules, institutional stability, the separation of powers, free and fair elections, social and political integration, freedom of expression and association, the protection of human rights and investigation and legal actions in process around the violation of such rights under authoritarian rule.

For the last five years, this general state of democratic consolidation has continued and even improved as, for the first time in Uruguayan history, and entirely uneventfully, the left-wing coalition Frente Amplio, created in 1971, was brought to power. Until March 2005 Uruguay had been alternately governed by the two "historical" parties, the Partido Colorado, which conducted most of the administrations, and the Partido Nacional – also called the Blancos – along with only a few intervening authoritarian governments with a strong military presence. The last and undoubtedly the most intense period of authoritarian government – for many reasons, especially the practice of state terrorism – was between 1973 and 1985.

Separation of powers As previously discussed, the separation and independence of state powers – with a fair balance between them – have prevailed in Uruguayan history. With a "moderate" and sometimes "joint participation" scheme, executive power has been vested in the president acting jointly with respective ministers or with the Council of Ministers. Despite mixed characteristics and certain distinct differences in its functioning with a "pure" presidential system, the Uruguayan system is essentially presidential. This view is supported, among other factors, by the significant number of legislative powers vested in the president's office by the constitution (such as budgetary initiatives and restrictions on the legislative handling of this matter, veto power and the possibility of proposing projects demanding urgent resolution).

Uruguay's legislature is organized in two chambers, the lower house or House of Representatives and the upper house or Senate, acting both as separate bodies and collaboratively through joint sessions in the General Assembly. The House of Representatives is composed of 99 members directly elected by the people pursuant to a proportional representation system which computes the votes cast for each party – "lema" in electoral terminology – countrywide.

The constitution expressly provides that "[e]ach Department shall have, at least two Representatives" (article 88). The term of office is five years. Pursuant to article 93 of the constitution, "[T]he House of Representatives shall have the exclusive right of impeachment, before the Senate, of the members of both chambers, the President, the Vice-president, the Ministers of State, the members of the Supreme Court of Justice, the Court of Administrative Litigation, the State Audit Court and the Electoral Board, for violations of the Constitution or other serious offences after taking cognizance of the matter upon petition by a party or by one of its members, and having decided that there are grounds for prosecution".

The Senate is composed of 30 members who are directly elected by the people on a national basis under a full proportional representation system. The vice-president of the republic is also a member of this body with a right to vote, and acts as the president of both the Senate and the General Assembly. Senators serve for five years. Pursuant to article 102 of the constitution, "the Senate is competent to initiate the public trial of those impeached by the House of Representatives or the Departmental Legislature, as the case may be, and to pronounce sentence, by the vote of two-thirds of its members".

As for judicial power, it is vested in the Supreme Court of Justice along with lower and intermediate courts pursuant to the formalities set forth by corresponding laws. The Supreme Court of Justice is composed of five members elected by the General Assembly through the vote of two-thirds of its total members, who serve for 10 years and cannot be re-elected until 5 years have elapsed between termination of office and re-election. Pursuant to article 239 of the constitution, some of the major powers vested in the Supreme Court of Justice are, among others:

- "To try all violators of the constitution, without exception";
- "To exercise directive, corrective, advisory and economic supervision of lower and intermediate Courts and other offices of the Judiciary";
- "To prepare the Judiciary's draft budgets and refer them in due course to the Executive for their inclusion in the draft general Budget, together with such modifications as may be deemed appropriate";

- “With approval of the Senate, or during its recess, with that of the Standing Committee, to appoint the citizens who shall be members of the Courts of Appeal”;
- “Appoint lawyer judges [jueces letrados] of all ranks and classes” (an absolute majority of the court’s total members being requisite).

In light of the outcomes of the last two general elections of October 1999 and 2004, the composition of the General Assembly (the two chambers acting jointly) has changed, as shown in the chart below:

National assembly

Table 1 | COMPOSITION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AFTER THE ELECTIONS IN 2004 AND IN 1999

Party	Latest election (2004)	Present status	Prior to latest election (1999)
Frente Amplio (FA)	68	PP, GS	52/O
Partido Nacional (PN)	47	O	29/GJ ⁽¹⁾
Partido Colorado (PC)	13	O	43/PP ⁽¹⁾
Partido Independiente (PI)	1	O	– ⁽²⁾
Nuevo Espacio (NE)	–	NR	5/O

⁽¹⁾Since March 2000 the government led by PC President Jorge Batlle was forced to build a coalition with the PN to reach legislative majorities.

⁽²⁾At the end of this period of government the NE was divided in two groups, a majority group which associated with (and later joined) the Frente Amplio, and another group which created the Partido Independiente.

Abbreviations: PP = party of the president | PPM/GS = party of the prime minister and senior partner of a coalition government | P/supp. = party that support the president | GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition | NR = no parliamentary representation.

II. PARTIES AND THE PARTY SYSTEM

II.1 Party System

Under Uruguay’s current legal system there are no specific legal regulations on the internal organization and daily operation of political parties or on their participation in national elections. However, an ambitious bill to pass the Political Parties Act is currently in the last stages of its legislative process, which will likely be enacted soon. Reference to its contents will be specifically made when dealing with new methods for the financing of political parties. Up to the date of this report (June 2009), the only provisions dealing to any extent with legally regulated organization and further matters for the action of political parties in Uruguay can be found in the electoral system guidelines incorporated into the current constitution and the significant innovations introduced after the 1996 amendment.

Legal regulation

These provisions establish that each party must elect a single presidential candidate through simultaneous internal elections to be conducted on the last Sunday of the month of June of electoral years (the first internal elections of 1999 were conducted on the last Sunday of April). Participation in such elections is not mandatory; all individuals registered on the Citizens Register may vote, and in addition to this single presidential candidate per party, the lists for parties’ national and departmental conventions are also elected. The composition of both conventions is by a proportional representation system and pre-candidates are not allowed to accumulate votes. Any reference to convention members includes each party’s electoral colleges or bodies with the electoral mandate established by the statutes or equivalent bylaws of each political party.

Pre-candidates with the highest number of votes will be directly nominated as standalone candidates for each party for the presidency of the republic, provided that they have obtained an absolute majority of valid votes from their party. Each pre-candidate with more than 40 per cent of valid votes within the party and at least 10 per cent more votes than the candidate ranking second, will also become directly nominated. Otherwise, the National Electoral College or the deliberative body appointed for the internal election will nominate the candidate for the presidency at a public poll, by an absolute majority of its members. Candidates running for any position at an internal election may only be nominated by one political party and are then disqualified from nomination for any other office by any other party at the subsequent national and/or departmental elections.

The Political Parties Act, which is about to be passed, includes provisions on a wider range of topics, especially on funding daily political activities (not only in election periods, but also in the periods between elections). Some of these topics, found in the headings of the act's different sections are: "general provisions"; "setting up political parties"; "name of political parties"; "establishment of foundations"; "electoral campaigns" and "individuals in charge of such campaigns"; "public funding"; "private funding"; "controls during electoral campaigns"; "operating costs"; "ongoing public financing"; "private financing"; "prohibitions and sanctions"; and "accounting and accountability".

As has been noted above, the bulk of this act relates to funding and financing issues. In relation to other issues, under specific legal regulations in a number of other American and European countries, in Uruguay the prevailing approach is a relaxed self-regulation for each party (for instance, in relation to the district or departmental organization of the parties). There is no minimum to obtain parliamentary representation in an election, and in this sense, the proportional representation approach is almost comprehensive, based as it is on the distribution of parliamentary seats by parties and not on the strict allocation of seats on a territorial basis.

Party financing Since the 1954 election, the Uruguayan parliament has adopted special electoral laws before each election for the purpose of subsidizing parties and candidates' campaign spending. These laws have always been similar and have been enacted for a single election only, and have generally regulated electoral subsidies for parties and candidates. While no minimum number of votes was required in order to qualify for subsidies, public funding was based on the number of votes obtained by a party. For the last elections (2004), the parties received 131 pesos from state bank (Banco de la República) for each vote in the previous election (1999).

The new Political Parties Act will introduce significant innovations around this issue. Some of these are:

- The establishment of foundations by the parties for the purpose of "promoting academic, cultural and educational ideas and their dissemination, funding studies and projects on the national, regional and international reality"; to this end, parties will be expressly authorized to raise funds from specific sources;
- The parties will be required to create "campaign committees" composed of at least three members who will be required "to keep specific accounting records of the electoral campaign with a detail of all the contributions – irrespective of their source or whether private or public – and spending, together with the relevant supporting documentation".
- Provisions and guidelines will be established to define "the state's contribution to the spending of each national departmental or internal election, including calculation rules and fund distribution channels".
- Specific guidelines regulating private financing of parties' electoral activities will also be included; for instance, that private financing should come from known sources and be subject to specific limitations.
- The creation of a "campaign control" system";

- Public and private financing methods for the “ongoing” activities of parties according to clearly specified proceedings, limits and restrictions (perhaps the most significant innovation of this act);
- Finally, a comprehensive prohibition and sanction system including very strict accounting and accountability rules. These provisions clearly imply a highly significant innovation in the legal regulation of parties, especially in the financing methods of all party activities.

The Uruguayan party system consists mainly of the two traditional parties – the Partido Colorado (PC) and the Partido Nacional (PN) – and of the party alliance Frente Amplio (FA). While the PC and the PN date back almost as far as the country’s independence in 1825, the latter was founded in 1971. In the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004, the Frente Amplio won. Since March 2005 and for the very first time in Uruguayan history, this party supplies the president and enjoys a parliamentary majority. In the following paragraphs the history and the profile of the most relevant parties will be sketched briefly.

Relevant parties

Frente Amplio (FA)

As mentioned above, the FA is the result of the Uruguayan left-wing groups coalescing into a complex synthesis of coalition and movement. At its inception, the two historical parties of the traditional left (the socialist party and the communist party) merged together with the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC). This merger also involved splinter groups from both major traditional parties (such as the Movimiento para el Gobierno del Pueblo, of *Batllista* origin, or the Unión Popular, of Partido Nacional extraction), and other leftist groups and movements of diverse origins. Following the end of the dictatorship, Frente Amplio incorporated the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros (MLN-T), a group which in the 1960s and early 1970s had led an urban guerrilla movement which was finally defeated by the military in 1972. The MLN-T became later the backbone of the Movimiento de Participación Popular (at present the majority group within the FA). In 1971 it provided critical support to the leftist coalition in its first electoral appearance. At present the FA groups represented in parliament are: the Movimiento de Participación Popular; Asamblea Uruguay; the Partido Socialista; Vertiente Artiguista; the Partido Comunista; Alianza Progresista (which includes the Partido Demócrata Cristiano) and Nuevo Espacio.

Partido Colorado (PC)

Most governments throughout Uruguayan history have been led by the Partido Colorado. Although on more than one occasion there have been instances of co-participation with particular groups within the Partido Nacional, it is frequently stated (not without debate) that the *Colorados* governed without interruption for almost an entire century, from 1863 to 1959. Thereafter the *Blancos* and the *Colorados* took turns in government, although the latter obtained five more victories in the presidential elections of 1966, 1971, 1984, 1994 and 1999.

In 2004, after heading an administration, which among other difficulties had to struggle with the severe social and economic crisis of 2002, the PC experienced the worst electoral defeat in its history, barely reaching 10 per cent of the total vote. It is currently only the third political force with regard to parliamentary representation. Its different groups have supported a variety of ideologies, reflected in the not-always-smooth coexistence of the *Batllismo* social democracy,¹ with certain groups responding to a “liberal centre-right” trend while others have been more traditional or have followed more populist forms of right-wing authoritarianism. At present, the groups holding parliamentary representation are Batllismo Radical Lista 15 and Foro Batllista, led respectively by former presidents Jorge Batlle and Julio María Sanguinetti. Nevertheless, the hierarchy within the party’s internal map seems to have become obsolete in the face of an emerging new leader, Pedro Bordaberry, founder of the recently created group Vamos Uruguay and son of the former dictator Juan María Bordaberry (who together with the military engineered the *coup d’état* in 1973). Vamos Uruguay is a political group of vague ideology but is perceived by the people as representing a right-wing innovative trend, albeit one lacking deep roots in the “historical *Batllismo*” which has mostly dominated the country for over a century.

Partido Nacional (PN)

Since the very beginnings of the state in 1830, this party has been – within a binary and dialectic framework – the Partido Colorado's traditional adversary, despite having fully or partially co-participated with it in government on several occasions.

During the 19th century the Partido Nacional gradually became a rural-based party and of a more nationalist and Latin American character, promoting decentralization and the more classical trends of liberal democracy. This orientation was effectively in opposition to that of the *Colorados*, who were traditionally more urban and cosmopolitan, more centralist-minded and less sensitive to poliarchic claims, entrenched as they were in their hegemonic position in government and the state. Following *Herrerismo's*² internal hegemony, the PN consolidated in the early decades of the 20th century, though not without facing opposition, sharp divisions and spin-offs. The dominant trends in the nationalist field were supportive of the classical principles of economic liberalism. This internal hegemony experienced a shift by 1970 with the rise of the innovative leadership of Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, who re-oriented the party along a new majority logic more in keeping with a "developmental" ideological approach and more inclined towards state-led planning.

Following the end of the dictatorship, and particularly since the 1990s, ideological hegemony within the party has returned to the *Herrerista* groups, which have a more clearly defined liberal profile. Despite having frequently co-participated with the Partido Colorado in government, as observed above, the PN was victorious in three elections, 1958, 1962 and 1989. After the 2004 election and up to the present, it has come to be a player within a new bipartisan format, this time in direct confrontation with the Frente Amplio, with the Partido Colorado a distant third.

Partido Independiente (PI)

This party, organized in 2004 as a splinter group from the Nuevo Espacio (which is today part of the Frente Amplio), failed to obtain significant support in that year's election, having succeeded in securing barely one parliamentary seat at the House of Representatives. Centrist in profile, its survival as a symbol of the possibilities of a "fourth space" within the Uruguayan party system does not seem likely. Although other parties have competed in the latest elections, none have obtained any parliamentary representation.

Party families Using the concept of party families is difficult in the Uruguayan political system. This is mainly due to the aforementioned characteristics of these parties: the high level of factionalism within parties internally; the fact that particular parties include groupings which have been operating independently only to later merge as founding parties to become sectors, as is the case with the Frente Amplio; or the fact that certain parties have recently become sectors of other parties, as is the case with Union Cívica within the Partido Nacional. Since the last constitutional amendment of 1996, several relevant leaders within the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional have drawn upon the concept of "ideological families", which has been discussed within such organizations.

This appeal has seemed to work more to give way to a tacit "coalition government" of the PC and PN as an alternative to the Frente Amplio government. But, not without controversy, this has led to the consolidated idea of two possible governments, a coalition made of the PC and PN, like the one in place in the period 2000–05 under Jorge Batlle, or the Frente Amplio government with its own legislative majority, like the current term of President Tabaré Vázquez since 2005. This theory is questionable in the event, for instance, that the Frente Amplio succeeds in the presidential elections at a second round without its own legislative majority, which would lead it to need to negotiate agreements, at least with sectors of the remaining parties. This notwithstanding, the following table is an attempt to position Uruguayan parties according to common identification keys of party families and ideological identification:

Table 2 | IDEOLOGICAL COMPOSITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

	Name and founding year	Present situation	Situation prior to present
Left-wing, labour parties	Frente Amplio (FA), 1971	PP ⁽¹⁾	O
	Partido Independiente (PI), 2004	O	NR
	Partido Socialista (PS), 1890	PP ⁽¹⁾	O
	Partido Comunista (PC), 1921	O	O
Parties with religious values, programmes and voters	Union Cívica ⁽²⁾ (UC), 1910	NR	NR
	Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), 1962	P/supp., GJ	O
Liberal (conservative)	Partido Colorado (PC), 1836	O	PP
Conservative (centre-right)	Partido Nacional (PN), 1836	O	O
Left-extremists	Asamblea Popular (AP), 2008	NR	NR

⁽¹⁾The Partido Socialista (PS) is the party of the current president, Tabaré Vázquez. However, since the PS is part of the party alliance of the Frente Amplio (FA), Tabaré Vázquez actually ran for the FA in the presidential elections in 1994, 1999 and 2004.

⁽²⁾Today the UC is part of the PN.

Abbreviations: PP = party of the president | P/supp. = party that support the president
GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition

NR = no parliamentary representation.

Uruguayan political history is a rather exceptional case within Latin America in terms of the longevity and endurance of the main political parties over an extended period of time. Two of them, the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional (or the *Colorados* and *Blancos* respectively), were born in 1830 at virtually the same time as the state's own birth, following the country's independence wars (which were the result of a more general revolutionary process within Latin America as a whole).

Origins of parties

For its part, the current party in government, the Frente Amplio, is a mix of "coalition"-cum-"movement", founded in 1971. It includes the Partido Socialista and the Partido Comunista, which trace their roots back almost a century. Many have described today's Frente Amplio as an evolved "coalition party", emphasizing the consolidation of its individuality as a whole while the contours of its components, whether parties or movements, have become increasingly blurred. Finally, the Partido Independiente emerged in the last election in 2004 as a spin-off from the so-called Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoría, which later consolidated to become the comprehensive Frente Amplio, with the full membership of groups that did not originally belong to it.

At their earliest stage, the traditional parties of the *Colorados* and the *Blancos* were based on charismatic leaders and territorial factors, while for the origins of the Frente Amplio and the Partido Independiente the central constituting factors were clearly ideological. In spite of these beginnings, the present profiles of the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional show distinct ideological contents, albeit internally factionalized. Meanwhile, the Frente Amplio, particularly following the dictatorship and the impact from the fall of "real socialism", now in fact manifests a more "traditional" make-up, basing its political identity within systems of strong symbolic-emotional loyalties.

General significance of parties The history of Uruguayan politics has been one of “party politics” since the 19th century. This feature is still persists, something which is unusual in the context of Latin America’s different political systems. Aside from the fact that in Uruguay there is an “anti-political reaction” with increasing (indeed, rather confusing) questions around party action and representation, and despite the fact that there has been an increasing personalization of political life, the general balance sustains a situation in which strong legitimate parties are the central (though not exclusive) actors in politics, both as driving forces and the brains behind fundamental civic action. In this sense, it can be stated that all Uruguayan parties, though differently qualified, play a role in the consolidation of democracy, namely through the political integration of voters, policy formulation and the democratic selection of candidates. Likewise, as distinct from other political systems around the continent, parties affirm their legitimacy for the elections, while the emergence of personalist organizations, cross-cutting the existing parties and able to reach government, is very unlikely.

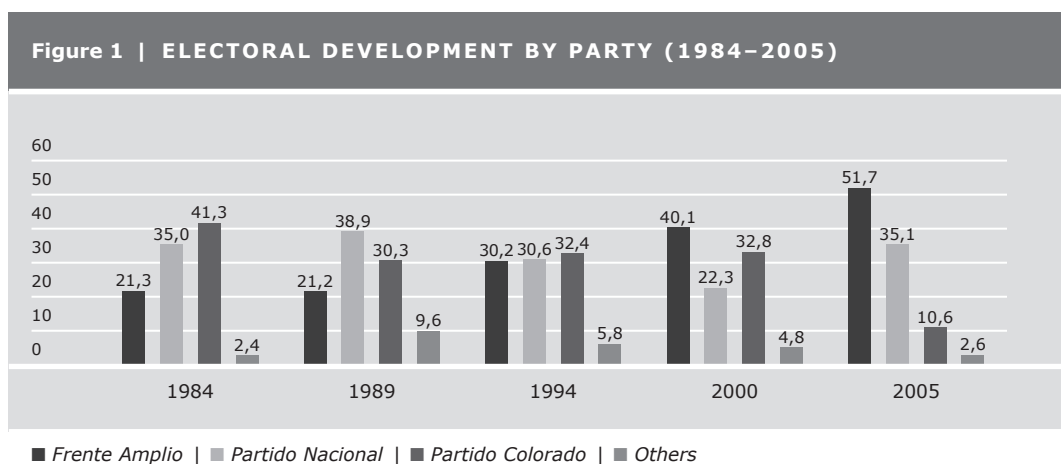
Voter-party relations In the political history of Uruguay, even before compulsory voting for all citizens was included in the constitution, there was a high voter turnout, near 80 per cent of the registered voters. When the principle of compulsory voting was included in the 1967 constitution, the turnout grew even more, usually reaching the threshold of 90 per cent of all registered voters. This high voting turnout has also been historically linked to a strong and loyal relationship between the different parties and their respective constituencies. This traditional situation, however, as will be discussed below, has undergone constant changes, significant after the end of the dictatorship in 1984 and subsequent decades, although it has not taken turns as dramatic as in other Latin American countries. In this sense, save for the electoral collapse of the Partido Colorado in the election of 2004 (when support fell from 33 per cent to only 10 per cent), it can be pointed out that, despite the decline of the so-called “captive vote”, the relation between voters and parties can be considered stable in today’s Uruguayan political system.

An analysis of recent history also reveals a dynamic evolution, in particular if seen as part of a more “long-term” perspective on the shifts experienced by Uruguay’s party system from the end of the dictatorship to date. In the 1984 elections Uruguayan citizens participated in the restoration of what was basically a two-party structure, which until that time had been threatened only potentially (as in 1971) by the reconstruction of a united and competitive left. But the 1989 elections struck a hard blow to the two-party structure formed by the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional.³ The total number of legislators obtained between the two traditional parties barely exceeded the magical figure that provides the special majorities required to adopt certain decisions (which in Uruguay’s constitution is set at 66 per cent).⁴ The Frente Amplio, for its part, achieved a significant third place, even after enduring a break with particular groups in its coalition, and its position was strengthened by its victory in the capital, Montevideo, which secured it its first ever municipal government. These elections also saw the emergence of an important “fourth power” in Uruguayan politics, with the participation of the Nuevo Espacio, which had recently broken away from the Frente Amplio, which obtained 9 per cent of the vote.⁵ The system that emerged from the 1989 elections was dubbed a “two and a half system” by the political scientist Luis Eduardo González. Five years later, an already deeply eroded and declining two-party system would be definitively broken: an almost three-way tie resulted between voters of the PC, the PN and the Frente Amplio, with the first and third places separated by a smaller than 2 per cent vote difference, while the Nuevo Espacio managed to retain a little over 5 per cent, even after suffering a split (see Figure 1).⁶ By then, national analysts were beginning to talk of a “two and two system” of “politics of blocs” or “ideological families”. The latter however was highly controversial and difficult to apply in practice.

The profound changes caused by these shifts in the party system, with their ensuing effects on the way the country imagined how it should be governed in the future, led the traditional parties to push for a radical transformation of the electoral rules, focusing in particular on modifying an electoral provision known as the “ley de lemas” (“party law”). The main amendments under the 1996 electoral reform, aside from those explained earlier, include the following: a legislative election must take place on the last Sunday in October in the election year; for a candidate running for president to

be elected in the first round, a total of 50 per cent plus one is necessary; if no candidate reaches this figure, the two with the most votes go for a second round on the last Sunday in November and the one with the highest vote then becomes president; and municipal elections for the 19 departments must take place on the same day nine months after the first round.

The first time these new electoral rules were implemented in 1999, in the first round the left (then comprised of the newly formed Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoría) secured 40.1 per cent of the vote, the Partido Colorado obtained 32.8 per cent and the Partido Nacional 22.3 per cent, leaving a marginal 4.6 per cent for the Nuevo Espacio. The presidential run-off, held a month later in November, confirmed the predicted victory of the Colorado candidate Jorge Batlle, who won with 54.1 per cent of the total against the Frente Amplio candidate, Tabaré Vázquez (Caetano and Rilla 2004, p. 549–52). Following the elections, a government coalition with narrow parliamentary majorities was configured, based on an alliance between the second and third most-voted parties, relegating the party that had the highest number of legislative seats – the coalition known as the Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoría – to the opposition. The confirmation of the “politics of blocs” and the “doctrine” of ideological families, now promoted by the constitutional amendment that changed the electoral rules, could not conceal the existence of a dynamic and unstable multiparty configuration.

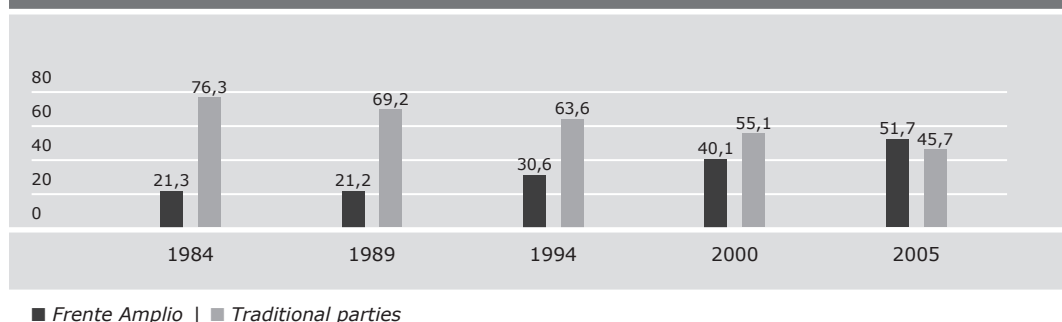


Source: Author's own calculation.

In 2004, following Jorge Batlle's turbulent administration, the changes in the party system became even more pronounced to an extent not envisaged in previous decades. For the first time ever the centre-left alliance – first called “Encuentro Progresista-Frente Amplio-Nueva Mayoría” and later renamed simply “Frente Amplio” – won the national elections. It did so in the first round of October of the same year with 51.7 per cent of the valid votes cast, while the Partido Nacional secured 35.1 per cent and the Partido Colorado plummeted to an all-time low of 10.6 per cent. The Partido Independiente, born from a new fracture in the Nuevo Espacio, obtained less than 2 per cent (Caetano and Rilla 2004, p. 576).

On the strength of these figures, it is therefore possible to conclude that a new two-party system had emerged between the governing centre-left alliance and the Partido Nacional, while the Partido Colorado, having obtained the worst electoral result in its entire history, turned into a marginal political force, with the Partido Independiente holding a single seat in the lower chamber. The following figure reflects these changes, from the dominance of the two traditional parties to the contemporary prominence of the centre-left alliance.

**Figure 2 | ELECTORAL DEVELOPMENT BY BLOCS:
FRENTE AMPLIO AND TRADITIONAL PARTIES (1984–2005)**



■ Frente Amplio | ■ Traditional parties

Source: Author's own calculation.

In less than a quarter of a century, Uruguay's party system acquired an extraordinary dynamism, changing its format several times following transformations in electoral behaviour. However, despite all these changes, it appears that so far only two government options have emerged as viable in the country, the *Blanco-Colorado* coalitions that governed the country in the two decades spanning 1985–2005, and the current Frente Amplio majority government. This raises the question of whether there is really no other alternative government coalition apart from these two historically implemented options. This question undoubtedly gains increasing relevance as the highly competitive 2009–2010 electoral cycle unfolds, especially with so many uncertainties persisting as to the final outcome. In light of what has happened under the current administration, it does not seem likely that this scenario will change.

A consistent assessment of the true historical significance of an election or an election cycle is actually a very complex analytical process, and can only be satisfactorily performed from a considerably distant temporal perspective. Even taking into consideration such circumstances and arguing only tentatively, one can point to a variety of reasons and events behind the decisive, historic 2004 election victory of the Uruguayan moderate left: Among other factors, the confirmed and uninterrupted upward trend in the electoral vote from 1985 onwards; the radical changes to take place during that period in the Uruguayan political system as a whole; the strong local impact of significant change on the regional and international scenes; the depth of the social impact of the recession, which began in early 1999 and only ended in the second half of 2003, including the 2002 peak of the crisis; the political transformations – some of them completely new – which became apparent not only in the electoral behaviour patterns of citizens but also in partisan activity during the electoral process, which peaked with the historic electoral results of 2004 and 2005.

II.2 Individual Parties

Party membership Despite the comparatively high degree of institutionalization of the parties, there is no tradition of party membership in Uruguayan political history. In the past, there have been several parties with more stringent membership policies (such as the socialist and communist parties) or more relaxed membership policies (like those of the *Colorados* and the *Blancos*), but in the past decades this practice has sharply decreased, along with a process of increasing citizen participation in politics in general. This tendency deepened further with the electoral reforms of 1996, which instituted simultaneous internal elections – not compulsory and without the obligation for membership – to be held in June of each electoral year in order to select the nominees to run for president and for the national and departmental conventions for the national election. Thus the number of party members cannot be faithfully reported, because there are no party membership lists beyond party leaders and because such lists are regularly renewed for each internal election, leaving only the core party faithful (in the case of the Frente Amplio, where there are also internal elections during years with no national election, they are used in order to renew the main party bodies).

Apart from their formal involvement in the institutional network resulting from the electoral legislation that came into effect with the 1996 constitutional reform, the leading political parties have maintained their respective organizational structures, approved in recent years under their internal rules. The organizational structures of the Frente Amplio, the Partido Nacional and the Partido Colorado are outlined below, with their most significant bodies indicated.

Frente Amplio

In accordance with its current statutes, the Frente Amplio's bodies and their respective components are as follows:

- National committees like the Party Congress (which meets regularly), the National Plenary and the Political Council (which meet on a permanent basis);
- Departmental bodies like the Departmental Plenary, departmental councils and extra-ordinary assemblies;
- Lower-level committees which gather the general membership.

The National Plenary is the top permanent authority of the party. It is formed by:

- The Frente Amplio president, who presides over it, along with the vice-president of the party;
- Eighty-five representatives of the political groups that make up the FA;
- Forty-one representatives from the coordinating commissions of Montevideo;
- Forty-one representatives from the departmental bodies outside Montevideo;
- Three representatives from the coordinating commissions and committees from abroad;
- Up to six citizens who are members of the Frente Amplio and who shall be chosen by the National Plenary from persons involved in a prominent activity in the country.

If the National Plenary considers it necessary, the final decision will be adopted by a special majority. Any mayors and legislators elected on the Frente Amplio ticket shall be entitled to participate in the National Plenary sessions, but without a right to vote.

Among other functions, this body is responsible for the following:

- The political direction of the Frente Amplio on a permanent basis;
- Submitting proposals for programme and government plans to the congress;
- Complying with and enforcing the decisions of the congress;
- Establishing the objectives and devising the strategy for the Frente Amplio party;
- Overseeing the work of the Political Council and other Frente Amplio bodies;
- Determining the disposition or encumbrance of property;
- Deciding on any matters put to it by the Political Council.

The Political Council is the executive body of the National Plenary. As such it is the body responsible for the Frente Amplio's day-to-day political decision-making. Its members include the president and vice-president of the Frente Amplio, as well as delegates from the National Plenary representing the coalition's political organizations (according to basic proportional representation criteria) and delegates representing the zonal and departmental coordinating bodies. The bylaws of the Frente Amplio stipulate that Ordinary Congresses are to be held every 30 months and that Extra-ordinary Congresses may be convened by the National Plenary upon the request of three-fifths of its members or 25 per cent of the FA's membership, and held on the first semester of every election year. Among other powers, the congress is responsible for appointing the Frente Amplio's sole candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency of the republic (upon the proposal of the National Plenary), approving the electoral platform and naming the leaders of the Frente Amplio.

Partido Nacional

Pursuant to its statute, the party's board is its highest governing body. It is formed by a chairman, 3 secretaries and 11 additional members, who serve for five-year terms. Its main functions include serving as the party's official representation and political direction and promoting strict compliance with and enforcement of the party's charter among the party's affiliated organizations.

The National Convention is the Partido Nacional's highest deliberative body. It is formed by 500 delegates, with an equal number of substitutes (*suplentes*), elected by departmental constituencies. Convention delegates are elected for five-year terms. The body holds ordinary meetings once a year, on the second Saturday of the month of March. Its main functions include, among other responsibilities: electing the party's board; nominating the candidates for president and vice-president of the republic, when required; electing the convention's delegate committee; approving the party's political action plan and government programme; and approving the board's annual report.

Partido Colorado

In accordance with its charter, the party's main bodies are:

- The National Convention;
- The executive board with the secretary-general of the party;
- Departmental conventions and departmental executive boards;
- A general departmental secretariat;
- The National Congress;
- Departmental government groupings;
- Women's organizations;
- Youth organizations;
- District clubs and district club groupings;
- The National Electoral Committee, the National Evaluation Committee and the Advisory Committee on Ethics and Political Conduct.

The National Convention is the party's highest governing body. It is formed by 500 delegates, with up to three times as many substitutes. Eighty per cent of the delegates (and their substitutes) are elected in elections of the entire membership and the remaining delegates (and their substitutes) are elected pursuant to specifically established provisions. The former Colorado presidents of the republic who are still members of the party also participate in the convention. The ordinary meetings are held three times a year, while extra-ordinary meetings are convened by the national executive board or upon the request of at least 10 per cent of the convention delegates. Among other functions, the National Convention is responsible for: defining the general political guidelines of action for the party; reviewing the national executive board's actions; approving and amending the statute and the code of ethics and political conduct; and electing the national executive board.

The latter is formed by 15 members, with an equal number of substitutes all elected by the National Convention, with the mandatory inclusion of members elected by young national delegates. The board will be chaired on a fortnightly rotational basis. It is responsible for carrying out nationally the political programme defined by the National Convention, adopting to that effect any resolutions it considers necessary. The board is in charge of electoral organization, managing the party's assets, the party's relationships with other democratic political and social organizations and its international relations, among other functions. The executive board appoints one of its members to serve as secretary-general of the party. The secretary-general is responsible for coordinating the activities of the executive board and for the party's administrative direction.

Societal entrenchment In general, parties have changed their formal relationship with civil society organizations. None of them has maintained direct, dependent relations with church entities, not even those parties like the Union Cívica or the Partido Demócrata Cristiano, which in its origin claimed strong links with the Catholic church and social-Christian values.

Likewise, different parties have maintained and continue to maintain privileged links with close social organizations in terms of ideas, but always within a framework of regulatory and formal independence. For example, the leftist parties and the Frente Amplio have traditionally had a privileged relationship with the Uruguayan central union confederation, the Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores–Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (PIT-CNT), even when this union organization stated its “class independence” in its rules in relation to all parties and that it would not accept (at least formally) a dependent or subordinate relationship with any entity whatsoever.

Meanwhile, the Partido Nacional and the Partido Blanco, in turn and with their own ups and downs, have also maintained privileged relationships with the steering groups and members of corporate chambers, even when there is an attempt to avoid the public formalization of such arrangements and when direct links or any subordinate or dependent claim are rejected. Beyond these “privileged links”, both the central union confederation and the corporate chambers maintain permanent and regular contacts with all parties, both in government and in opposition. It could be stated that parties’ relations with other civil society organizations (such as social movements, non-governmental organizations and others) are similar.

Significant political and leadership decisions are often taken outside of party organizational structures, which tends to blur the limits and actual influence of such structures. Without denying the influence of party leadership, it can also be stated that such influence has always been limited to a degree and has usually had to compromise in decisions and preferences with the collective decisions taken by parties and their formal decision-making bodies. One example is the recurring failure of acting presidents – and also the strong leaders of the government parties – to act as the main electors of their successors. In every party, at different moments in history, the so-called president’s “leading influence” to select candidates as successors has virtually always come to nothing. This shows, without denying the strong influence of leaders in internal decision-making, that a material counterweight in the parties is working. Often, when parties reach government, this has provoked frequent “divorces” between presidents and the governing force. In general, once in government, presidents often try to distance themselves from the decision-making bodies of the party of government, which has frequently provoked many a problem, mainly at the final stage of an administration.

*Internal
decision-making*

Given this tendency it is difficult for parties to enforce their formal decisions within the overall political decision-making process. Thus they tend to avoid regular compulsory pronouncements. These are issued only under very special circumstances, namely if party decisions are considered as mandatory, given the political significance of the issue. In general, party authorities are very cautious when using this type of pronouncement because they fear that legislators or other party groups might not abide by these necessarily binding decisions. Therefore, even though party decision-making bodies are formally settled and institutionalized at present, in daily life a balance is sought among decision-making bodies, the opinion of legislators and party sector leaders.

As stated above, the internal factionalization of parties frequently gives rise to ideological and programmatic contradictions. Each sector has its own programme and ideological group, which, among other things, are factors in internal competition. Once the single presidential candidate is determined, the winner leads the final party programme, revealing some of their hegemonic bias but also safeguarding balances with the defeated sectors, both in order to avoid voters’ distancing themselves from the party and to try to express a common policy vision.

*Stability of
party ideology/
programmes*

The creation of commissions and programme work is more formal and intense within the Frente Amplio than within the two traditional parties. For the Frente Amplio, the final approval of the party programme is put to its congress. In the other parties, the national conventions are in charge of approving the party programme before the national elections. Although throughout history there have been critical party divisions for this reason, it could be stated that, beyond the level of discourse, in the last few decades there has been a relative ideological and programmatic stability within parties. As has been stated, this new experience of re-exercising national government for

the first time has required the Frente Amplio to adopt a more pragmatic and mild tone for internal discussion, even when internal discussion is as intense as it is for internal elections, as witnessed by this 2009 campaign. These differences between parties notwithstanding, discussion around programmes within each party tends to be predominantly concerned with strict ideological confrontation.

Communication During the past few years, although with ups and downs, all parties have paid deeper attention to communication issues. This has led to several initiatives: the creation of websites and different types of blogs for parties, sectors and candidates; the increased use of new information and communication technologies in order to promote greater communication between parties and their followers and voters; and greater use of professional agencies for party communication strategy design, albeit with a particular emphasis on electoral periods and rather neglected during other times. However, as discussed above, while all parties are giving increasing importance to their media communication strategies, the recent Political Parties Act tends to limit the time available for media campaigns, due mainly to their high cost, and to establish more balanced competition between the different parties.

In this regard, beyond the restrictions provided by the rules established by the constitution and its respective laws, the government does not interfere or limit the media activities of the country's parties. Nevertheless, this does not mean that informally or through indirect means (such as official advertising or using state resources to defend government accomplishments to the benefit of the government party) there have not been episodes of informal government or state interference during recent decades, a fact that has been reported more than once by the press association of Uruguay in its annual reports. It is also true that private media often has biased opinions and differing levels of availability for different parties through informal, opaque yet nonetheless relevant privileges. Still, it could be stated that the situation is in general correct, particularly in comparison with the reality of other countries.

Relationship between party and parliamentary groups Keeping in mind the existing significant factionalization of the Uruguayan party landscape, the relationship between extra-parliamentary party organizations and the different parliamentary groups are – by and large – neither excessively disciplined nor irresponsibly independent. In general, despite the fact that this relationship is focused on sectors and parliament members, party discipline has been high in the past few years with no need to use imperative mandates on members of parliament or the strict constraints from party authorities, with both generally avoided by most parties.

While until recently regarded as possessing a rather high level of factionalization, the so-called traditional parties have seen their differences erode and their behaviour in parliament grow reasonably homogeneous. In turn, the more ideologically heterogeneous Frente Amplio has managed to achieve considerable discipline in its parliamentary votes. This has been particularly visible in the last period, when in almost all discussions, all parliamentary votes of the government party were associated. Although with a reduced legislative majority (52 seats out of 99 in the lower chamber and 17 out of 31 in the Senate), the Frente Amplio government has from 2005 to date virtually never needed the opposition vote to reach a legislative majority for its initiatives. This reveals a significant turn in recent history in the relationship between party and parliamentary groups.

III. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Compared with other Latin American countries, the major Uruguayan parties perform relatively well. They have been successful in the political integration of voters, in the citizens' political socialization and in introducing programmes and ideological and personnel alternatives. They participate in democratic elections and compete peacefully for public positions. Some of them are among the oldest parties of the world, but – without any doubt – there is room for further development. Particularly with the constitutional amendment of 1996, parties have improved, as evidenced by the recent attempts at more democratic and more efficient self-organization, which have resulted in an increased strength of internal organization.

In spite of detailed progress, Uruguayan parties need to take up the immediate challenge of modernizing several aspects of their operations. Among the most important are attempts to improve their activities in inter-election periods. The planned Political Parties Act may contribute to this end when enacted.

When party representatives win public office, they must sustain their commitment to tasks like the ongoing political socialization of voters and inner-party work, and must avoid becoming completely consumed by the day-to-day demands and temptations of government. Parties in government must look in the unrelenting "mirror" – which will sometimes return distorted images – of what they actually did and what they had promised to do. The contrasting evaluation of responsible and viable proposals shall most assuredly be sieved through "conceptual filters" of a finer mesh than in the recent past.

The external context of the last five-year period – an undoubtedly favourable influence on the Uruguayan economy which was certainly a help but is not by itself sufficient to explain the positive direction of most of the country's macroeconomic trends – together with the international financial crisis, of uncertain development, preclude both the easy resorting to "external factors" to justify everything that happens or does not happen within the country and the contrary sophism of supposing that everything has been played out and will play out by and around whoever sits at the wheel of the state and the national government in the next term. All of this, which under any scenario would augur well for the institutions and for democracy in Uruguay, does not predict an easy contest, neither for the party in power or for its contenders. Parties should establish and maintain a dialogue with civil society, along with the need to formalize permanent programme foundations and perhaps also by consolidating their international links. In doing so, party democracy – understood as a free and fair competition of internally democratic parties with (organized) linkages to their supporters and civil society – can be further institutionalized in Uruguay.

- 1| *"Batllismo" is the name given to the political movement created within the Partido Colorado at the beginning of the 20th century by José Batlle y Ordóñez, who was twice president of the republic (1903–07 and 1911–1915). He led the government with an ambitious social-democratic-style reform plan in a number of diverse areas, which significantly contributed to consolidate a process of modernization, for which the Uruguay of the time was a showcase.*
- 2| *"Herrerismo" was the name given to the sector or group founded within the Partido Nacional in the second decade of the 20th century by Luis Alberto de Herrera, the main party leader from that time until his death in April 1959. Of a decidedly liberal economic ideology and with a nationalist outlook on foreign policy, he represented the "dialectic alternative" vis-à-vis the "Batllismo" of the Partido Nacional.*
- 3| *The percentages obtained in the election by the three largest parties were: 41.2 per cent for the Partido Colorado; 35.0 per cent for the Partido Nacional; and 21.3 per cent for the Frente Amplio coalition, which was still forced to use the denomination of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (one of the parties that had formed the coalition), as it had been in 1971. The "revived" Unión Cívica obtained 2.4 per cent of the vote (Caetano and Rilla 2004, p. 546).*
- 4| *Special majorities are required, for example, to pass constitutional reform laws or for the Senate to endorse the authorizations necessary for appointments to certain government positions.*
- 5| *In the 1989 elections, the Partido Nacional obtained 38.9 per cent of the vote, the Partido Colorado 30.3 per cent, Frente Amplio 21.3 per cent and the Nuevo Espacio 9.0 per cent (Caetano and Rilla 2004, p. 547).*
- 6| *In the 1994 elections, the Partido Colorado obtained 32.3 per cent of the vote, the Partido Nacional 31.2 per cent, Frente Amplio 30.6 per cent and the Nuevo Espacio 5.2 per cent (Caetano and Rilla 2004, p. 548).*

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