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THE STABILITY OF CHANGE: STATE AND PUBLIC POLICIES DURING LEFTIST ADMINISTRATIONS IN URUGUAY (2005-2020)

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Martín Freigedo
Cristina Zurbriggen

Bidegain, G., Freigedo, M., & Zurbriggen, C. (2025). The stability of change: State and public policies during leftist administrations in Uruguay (2005-2020). *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(93), 263-283.

This article examines the 15-year trajectory of Uruguay's leftist administrations, focusing on the influence of the Frente Amplio (FA) on public policy and state configuration. It scrutinizes the challenges of and progress in state strengthening and policy shaping through three thematic blocks. The conclusion reflects on the

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enduring impacts of the transformative phase, marked by heightened state influence on public policy, economics, and social affairs. It showcases the feasibility of pursuing a redistributive agenda while upholding stability and resilience in the 21st-century Uruguayan state apparatus.

Keywords: Leftist governments; state transformation; public policy; Uruguay; Frente Amplio.

JEL: H0, H1, I0, O2.

Bidegain, G., Freigedo, M., & Zurbriggen, C. (2025). La estabilidad del cambio: el Estado y las políticas públicas durante los gobiernos de izquierda en Uruguay (2005-2020). *Cuadernos de Economía*, 44(93), 263-283.

Este artículo examina la trayectoria de 15 años de gobiernos de izquierda en Uruguay, centrándose en la influencia del Frente Amplio en las políticas públicas y la configuración del Estado. Analiza los desafíos y avances en el fortalecimiento del Estado y la formulación de las políticas a partir de tres bloques temáticos. La conclusión reflexiona sobre los impactos duraderos de esta fase transformadora, marcada por una mayor influencia del Estado en la política pública, la economía y la sociedad. El caso da cuenta de la posibilidad de impulsar una agenda redistributiva manteniendo la fortaleza del aparato estatal.

Palabras clave: gobiernos de izquierda; transformación estatal; política pública; Uruguay; Frente Amplio.

JEL: H0, H1, I0, O2.

INTRODUCTION¹

On March 1, 2020, a 15-year term ended for the Frente Amplio (FA) in Uruguay, an unprecedented period in the country since it was the first time that a leftist party had been at the helm of national government. This “progressive era” (Garcé & Yaffé, 2014) was inaugurated when Tabaré Vázquez took office in 2005, continued with the administration of José Mujica (2010-2015), and concluded with Vázquez’s second term (2015-2020).

The triumph of the Frente Amplio (FA) in the 2004 elections was the outcome of sustained electoral growth in the wake of the 1989 elections. In 2004, the FA obtained more than 50% of votes in the first round, propelling it to the national government. The vote also allowed it to obtain a majority in both parliamentary chambers. In the 2009 and 2014 elections, the Frente Amplio successfully faced second presidential rounds. Since in the first rounds of both elections the FA held close to 50% of the votes, it retained parliamentary majorities during the 15 years it was in power. This political context coincided with sustained economic growth during the period, which generated a favorable scenario to promote the administration’s program. The end of this cycle invites us to take stock of the different public policy orientations promoted by successive progressive administrations. It is relevant to ask how much change and continuity there was in the transformations of the state, and in this way, to analyze what kind of state was configured. Did the shift to the left in Uruguay mean a substantive change in the historical political configuration of the state?

This article argues that the arrival of the FA to government implied strengthening the state’s role in the political, economic, and social spheres. This change was marked by the growth of the state apparatus, a strong presence in the provision of welfare, changes in the tax system, regulation of the labor market, the importance of public enterprises through planning and public investment, and progress in the human rights agenda through the recognition and promotion of traditionally vulnerable groups. Considering this, it is possible to affirm that the political alternation that took place at the beginning of the 21st century with the arrival of a leftist government to power generated a significant change, representing a new cycle for the Uruguayan state.

Beyond these important changes and the relevance that the state has gained in social and economic life, the reforms undertaken did not re-found the Uruguayan state. These changes align with Uruguay’s political history, marked by cycles of momentum and restraint in its reform processes that, as noted by Real de Azúa (1964), typically avoided abrupt shifts during political project alternations. Consequently, these reforms fortified the historical legacy of the Uruguayan state, which,

¹ This article is based on the introduction to the book *Fin de un ciclo: balance del Estado y las políticas públicas tras 15 años de gobiernos de izquierda en Uruguay*, edited by the authors (Bidegain et al., 2021).

despite experiencing a decline after the 1990s, retained its strengths as compared to peer states in the region during the neoliberal reform period.

In support of this argument, this article is structured as follows: First, some general considerations are outlined to contextualize the Uruguayan progressive era. Subsequently, the characteristics of the FA and its role in the Uruguayan party system are examined, along with fundamental aspects of the configuration of the Uruguayan state at the time the Left assumed government. Secondly, the progress and difficulties of the FA governments in strengthening the state and public policy are analyzed on three thematic subsections. These subsections do not exhaust the agenda of the successive administrations. However, they allow us to approach issues of great relevance for the sake of deriving lessons from these administrations in Uruguay. Subsection 1 refers to the organizational structure of the state, focusing on the linchpins of administrative reform, decentralization, and the agendas of citizen participation and transparency. Subsection 2 deals with policies related to the economic development model. Finally, subsection 3 assesses welfare and social protection agenda issues. The article ends with a section of final considerations that synthesizes the balance left by the three Frente Amplio governments, lessons learned that can be drawn from the case, and pending challenges.

THE LEFT, THE PARTY SYSTEM, AND THE URUGUAYAN STATE CYCLE

The Frente Amplio's arrival to power took place in a peculiar continental context, which has been defined as the "Left Turn" or "Pink Tide" (Arditi, 2008; Chodor, 2015; Stoessel, 2014). Since the beginning of the 21st century, different leftist parties gained access to the governments of their countries, tilting the continental political balance. The succession of progressive electoral victories shifted the political axis of the continent, giving rise to novel political processes that have been addressed by academia. A crucial one of these was the manner in which different governments sought to modify the relationship between the economy and politics, vindicating the role of the state as a guiding force.

Different authors have proposed classifications that differentiate between two types of leftists in the continent: radical and moderate, populist and social-democratic, nationalist and internationalist, among others. These dichotomous views have been complemented by other proposals criticizing their reductive nature and proposing more complex typologies to better capture the continent's diversity (Arditi, 2008; Beasley-Murray et al., 2010; Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Stoessel, 2014). Without getting into these different analytical efforts, it is worth noting that Uruguay has been considered in the different comparative analyses to be a case of the moderate/reformist/internationalist ilk.

Beyond the broader continental processes, it is imperative to delve into the specific nuances of the Uruguayan case as concerns its party system and distinctive historical state legacies which set it apart in the regional context.

On the one hand, the Uruguayan party system has been historically characterized as one of the most institutionalized in the region (Mainwaring, 2018; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). For much of the twentieth century, the Blanco and Colorado parties were the main actors in the system. The 1971 creation of the Frente Amplio (Broad Front) brought together different sectors and parties of the Uruguayan Left, challenging the bipartisan logic prevailing up to that time. The subsequent dictatorship between 1973 and 1985 froze the party system, which resumed its previous form during the democratic transition. After the return to democracy, the Frente Amplio grew electorally until it took power in 2005. Beyond the changes brought about by the emergence of this challenger, the party system maintained specific historical characteristics that have led some authors to classify Uruguayan democracy as a “Consensual Partidocracy” (Chasqueti & Buquet, 2004). This concept synthesizes the predominance of parties as central representative actors, with the capacity to generate spaces for co-participation to achieve important levels of cooperation and institutional stability. In any case, their centrality does not mean ignoring that certain social actors, such as business and trade union groups, have historically played an essential role in constructing public policies through their insertion in corporate spaces (Lanzaro, 1992).

On the other hand, when analyzing the evolution of the Uruguayan state during the 20th century, Filgueira *et al.* (2003) identify two stages: a first stage of expansion of state capacities and functions (1904–1958), and a second stage (1959–2000) that the authors call “dampened retrenchment.” In the first stage, some long-standing guidelines were established, many of which are still in place today. In this stage, the Uruguayan state considerably expanded its functions, establishing a professional corps of civil servants that endowed it with essential capacities throughout the country. This process was brought about by the competition and leadership of political parties, which were born and consolidated alongside the nation-state (Lanzaro, 2004).

As a result, unlike other countries, the Uruguayan state achieved significant autonomy from private interests (Caetano, 1992). This autonomy did not imply isolation from political and social dynamics. Although the parties acted as the central driving force of interests, the state incorporated actors and demands early on, with a rapid expansion of political and social citizenship and processes to incorporate collective actors in relevant institutional spaces (such as the Wage Councils recognized by law in 1943). The inclusive representation of interests led to the establishment of a highly developed social protection matrix in comparative terms in the region. By the 1940s, the country had consolidated a scheme of “stratified universalism” (Filgueira, 2007) with corporative features that brought it closer to continental welfare provision schemes. Nonetheless, said scheme had much higher

levels of employment informality and, therefore, lower coverage of social benefits (Midaglia et al., 2017).

The “expansion” stage of the Uruguayan state took place within the framework of an economic development scheme of industrialization by import substitution based on international insertion through exporting raw agricultural materials. The deterioration of the terms of trade and some issues inherent in a political system that fostered uncontrolled practices of resource distribution, often based on clientelist and discretionary logic (Zurbriggen, 2011), generated severe tensions and paved the way for the second cycle of the Uruguayan state: The “dampened retrenchment” was a process that sought to limit the intervention of the state in different areas, affording the market a more significant role. First in its regulatory functions and then, in a less powerful way, in its functions as a social and entrepreneurial state (Filgueira et al., 2003). However, true to its history of moderate changes, the country did not undergo radical shifts, despite agendas that were, at times, ambitious. For example, in the framework of reforms aligned with the Washington Consensus agenda of the 1990s, social movements allied with the Frente Amplio promoted mechanisms of direct democracy to oppose liberalizing reformist impulses. Through referendums and plebiscites, citizens blocked different reforms proposed by governments, thus moderating their promotion of state retraction (Bidegain & Tricot, 2017; Monestier, 2010; Moreira, 2004).

During the 2002 economic and social crisis outbreak, the worst in the country’s history, socioeconomic development indicators reached record figures. In 2004, 41% of the population experienced poverty, and extreme poverty climbed to almost 6% the same year (Amarante & Vigorito, 2007), figures that were unprecedented in the country’s history. The FA blamed the orientation of state retrenchment as a significant cause of the crisis (e.g., lack of financial sector regulations). State weakness was also presented as problematic for dealing with the consequences of the crisis, both economic and social.

Reclaiming banners of the first state cycle, the leftist party won the 2004 elections with an agenda of state strengthening. The economic, social, and political context in which the FA came to power and the development of an ambitious programmatic offering generated strong expectations for a change to the country’s direction. Regarding public policy and state reform, the leftist program proposed significant transformations to the administration of the traditional parties.

ADVANCES IN AND SETBACKS TO THE FRENTE AMPLIO AGENDA: EXAMINING KEY REFORM INITIATIVES

This section analyzes different public policy reforms driven by successive left-wing governments in several policy arenas. It assesses the extent of change and continuity in the role and shape of the state with regard to its historical evolution.

For this purpose, these reform initiatives are structured in three thematic subsections, highlighting the advancements and challenges encountered by the FA in each area.

State structure, public administration, and societal interaction channels

When the FA first assumed national governance, one of the first issues prioritized on its agenda was to plan and implement reforms aimed at modifying the organizational structure of the state, as well as its relationship to the citizenry. President Vázquez called it “The mother of all reforms” since it was crucial for generating a more active and functional state for the productive and developmental model of the country as proposed by the Left. For its planning, the presidency prepared a document called *The Democratic Transformation of the State* (OPP, 2008). This document proposes two fundamental pillars. First, to advance the decentralization agenda and, at the same time, strengthen citizen participation. Second, to carry out reforms aimed at modernizing state administration (OPP, 2008, p. 5).

A retrospective analysis of the three administrations shows disparate progress on this agenda. On some key issues, reforms were carried out that have significantly modified state structures, while on others, the changes made have yet to achieve the expected results. On the one hand, among the most essential innovative reforms was the decentralization agenda, which was fundamentally expressed in the creation of municipalities as a level of government with the approval of the *Law on Decentralization and Citizen Participation* (Freigedo *et al.*, 2017). However, decentralization generated changes mainly in the political dimension of the state, without significantly modifying its functional and fiscal structure.

This regulatory framework was partially oriented by the promotion of citizen participation, another relevant linchpin of the programmatic discourse of the Left, which raised the importance of incorporating new actors into decision-making through novel spaces for government and society to interface. In any case, this linchpin’s departure from the past was insignificant in spite of its generation of innovative participation formats because these were mainly consultative, informative, advisory, or dialogue-focused, without generating binding decisions on public policies (Lizbona Cohen, 2021).

On the other hand, in terms of administrative modernization, the country has made progress in implementing critical tools for the publication of information and the incorporation of public administration technologies. In this sense, the improved application of technology to release data and make information available, and the collaboration between civil society and the middle and upper structures of bureaucracy to achieve results on the open government agenda, stand out (Álvarez & Scrollini, 2021).

Finally, the administrative apparatus’s transformation, particularly that of the central administration, was a neuralgic issue for carrying out changes to the state

model. On the one hand, the period saw a sustained increase in civil servants, especially in social welfare and security. However, this increase did not necessarily imply greater administrative efficiency (Ruiz Díaz et al., 2021). On the other hand, the administrative apparatus was strengthened, especially in the incorporation of the public administration tools associated with building information systems, budgeting for outcomes, strategic planning, and evaluation. Progress was also made regarding equal access to public service and ethics in public service. However, attempts at reform were less successful when it came to modifying the civil service career, for which the initiatives carried forward fell by the wayside.

The civil service development index prepared by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) shows that the changes implemented failed to promote a qualitative leap in the capabilities of Uruguayan bureaucracy (Iacoviello & Strazza, 2014). In general terms, the FA administrations promoted transformations, but these were far from the complex reforms required by the bureaucratic apparatus (Narbondó, 2012).

Economic policy, the economic structure, and development model

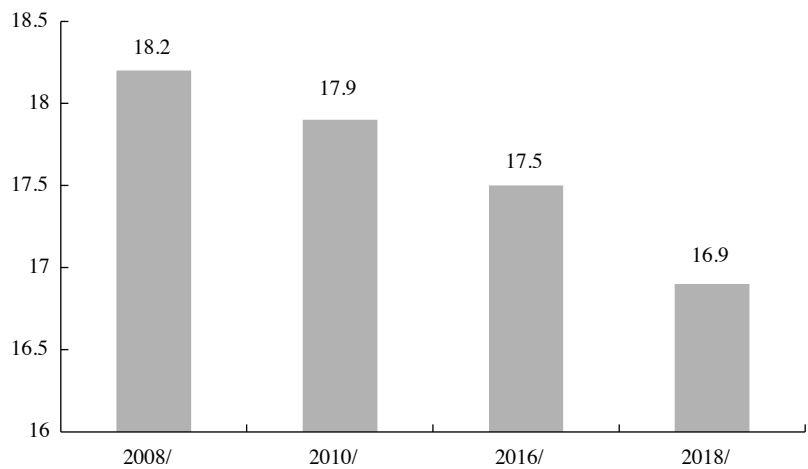
During its 15 years in power, the FA governments maintained a policy of guaranteeing macroeconomic order and compliance with international commitments. However, without neglecting these concerns, various reforms promoted more significant redistribution and a more active role for the state in the economic sphere. A fundamental reform in this sense was the tax reform carried out during the first period of FA government. This reform established the Personal Income Tax as a central tool for increasing progressivity in the system. In addition, it strengthened tax administration and simplified the tax structure, aiming to streamline the system, to make it more transparent, and to improve collection rates (Antía, 2016). The strong progressivity in the Personal Income Tax reform had an impact on redistribution. However, as shown in Vigorito's analysis of the impact of this reform on redistribution, there is a disconnect between the high progressivity of the tax reform and the strength of its effect on redistribution, which was benign (Vigorito, 2021).

In tandem with this initiative, a cycle of structural reforms was initiated that revitalized the role of the state in economic development. The agenda focused on transforming the economic structure and promoting the weight of science, technology, and innovation from three flanks: competitiveness, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Within this framework, public companies became fundamental actors in providing good quality services with a sense of public responsibility. However, the outcomes of the productive and developmental agendas varied among the three governments.

The agricultural/agro-industrial sector is a pivotal driver of the country's economy. Under the governance of the FA, this sector exhibited a notably positive trajectory,

marked by robust GDP expansion, a consistent upswing in overall investment, and a pronounced influx of foreign direct investment. Additionally, a notable influx of critical transnational corporations in the domain of agribusiness exports resulted in increased exports and heightened total factor productivity within the agricultural sector (Paolino, 2021). Nevertheless, despite concerted efforts on science, politics, and innovation, a deepened reliance on agricultural commodity exports failed to translate into an expanded exportable portfolio of greater economic complexity for Uruguay (see Figure 1). This posed challenges to the attainment of environmental and social inclusion objectives. Concerning the latter dimension, despite diverse support extended to family farming, this sector still needed help to secure a substantial foothold in agricultural chains (Zeballos & Bianco, 2021). Simultaneously, the intensification of agricultural practices exerted heightened pressure on the utilization of natural resources.

Figure 1.
Share estimation of differentiated products in the agro-export basket (% of the exports value)



Source: Paolino (2021, p. 484).

Additional strides were taken in institutional terms to foster advancements in science, technology, and innovation. A major institutional reform occurred in the scientific-technological field, accompanied by a considerable budget increase that strengthened institutional capacities and human resources. The National Agency for Research and Innovation (ANII) was created, and investment in R&D concerning GDP increased from 0.24% (2002) to 0.49% (2017). Another pivotal dimension was formulating the National Strategic Plan for Science, Technology, and Innovation (Zeballos & Bianco, 2021). However, over the years, criticism mounted

concerning the scientific and innovation system's insufficient economic backing and planning capabilities.

Concerning state-owned enterprises, over 15 years, the progressive governments not only repositioned these at the core of the development model, but also gave them a significant role in driving infrastructure initiatives (Dorrego, 2021). Among the most innovative reforms was the transformation of the national energy sector, positioning Uruguay as a global reference in the fight against climate change through the substantial integration of renewable sources (Méndez, 2021). In this process, UTE played a pivotal role in infrastructure development investment. The contribution of renewable energies to the electric grid reached 97% of the total in 2018, occupying a transcendental position on a global scale. The magnitude of these achievements on the international stage is underscored by the "Renewables 2016: Global Status Report" (REN21, 2016), in which Uruguay ranked third globally in investment per unit of GDP in renewable energies for 2015.

On the other hand, the Frente Amplio implemented several measures to strengthen and modernize some public companies, especially in sectors such as telecommunications and energy. State telecommunications company ANTEL made significant technological investments, especially in deploying fiber optics. In the energy sector, the National Administration of Electric Power Plants and Transmissions (UTE) also made investments to strengthen electricity generation capacity and expand renewable energy sources. ANTEL, the state-owned telecommunications company, stands out for its investment in fiber optics. This underscores the developmental character of infrastructure acquired by the leading state-owned enterprises (Dorrego, 2021). These substantial advancements in development investment are somewhat overshadowed by state participation in controversial projects, such as the deep-water port project, the Puntas de Sayago regasification plant, or AFE, the state-owned railway company, which have traditionally run at a deficit, and in PLUNA, the national airline carrier, which filed for bankruptcy and closed its operations in 2012.

Welfare policies and social security

The FA came to the government with the slogan, in the words of President Vázquez, that "the State must be recognized as the articulator of society as a whole and the shield of the weak." Social assistance, the labor market, healthcare, and education became vital for the FA governments to consolidate the social protection system. These reforms were closely aligned with tax reforms designed to further enhance the redistribution of resources.

The economic and social crisis of 2002 resulted in high unemployment and a significant increase families experiencing poverty and extreme poverty. This situation challenged the FA governments, which sought to develop policies to rapidly assist the most vulnerable population. Therefore, one of the first reforms carried out was the creation of a new institutional framework to address the social emergency, the

Ministry of Social Development (MIDES). This new welfare institution meant a notorious change to the traditional social protection system in terms of social assistance policies and the fight against poverty. However, the changes in the design of the social security system were not as significant as those in the social assistance system. Although social security policies facilitated access to benefits for previously excluded sectors and progress was made in reducing gender gaps in pension access, these changes were not structural in nature, and relevant reforms, such as to the system's sustainability, are still pending (Antía & Rossel, 2021).

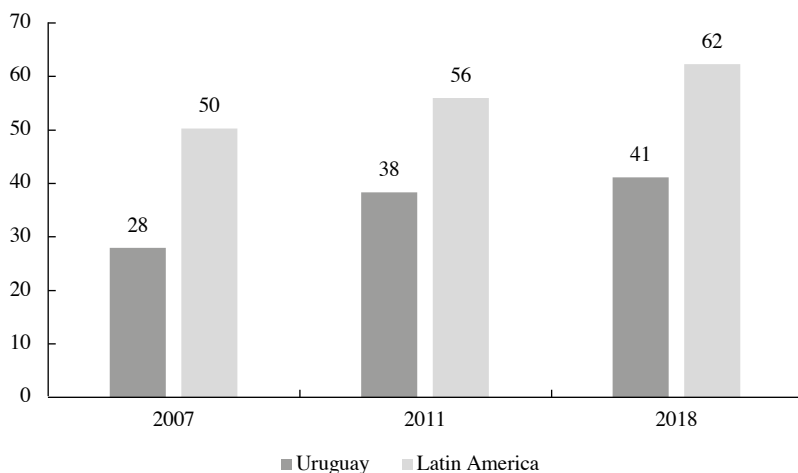
One of the most important policies of the social protection system referred to regulation of the world of work. In this sense, the FA governments managed to carry out changes that made it possible to leave behind the liberalizing and deregulating model developed in the 1990s (Senatore, 2010). These changes were based on active labor legislation that increased the state's presence in regulatory matters, institutionalized collective bargaining, and provided more protection for union activity. In turn, the historical alliance between the Left and the collective union actors modified the power relations between the main actors in the world of labor, resulting in an essential revitalization of the union movement (Méndez, 2021).

Regarding the reform of the healthcare system that created the Integrated Health System with a centralized fund as a base, the National Health Fund (FONASA) was undoubtedly a flagship of the Frente Amplio governments. This reform sought to modify the ways of managing, providing, and financing healthcare in Uruguay. In this sense, the reform has massively incorporated a significant part of the population under the same financing scheme, without questioning a mixed provision structure. This reform has strengthened adequate access to healthcare services for a significant population. For a country that already had a high coverage rate, the reform brought about changes of a more qualitative than quantitative nature in terms of improved access to benefits (Fuentes & Rodríguez Araújo, 2021).

Finally, another area that has historically been a priority for the FA is education. In this policy sector, some innovations can be highlighted in areas such as the modernization of evaluation, decentralization, internal coordination within the system, and intersectoral articulation (Bentancur, 2012). Arguably, the most noteworthy innovation was linked to advancing emerging technologies, as primarily exemplified by the CEIBAL Plan (Pittaluga & Rivoir, 2012). In any case, these changes were incremental and preserved the historical Teaching State, constituting the continuation of its historical role in this policy arena. The peculiarities of the institutional framework of the Uruguayan educational arena make it challenging to generate substantial public policy changes (Bidegain & Milanese, 2020). Concerning the quality and equity of primary and secondary education, the worrisome indicators prior to 2005 were maintained (Mancebo & Mandressi, 2021). For example, despite an increase in secondary education levels from 32.2% in 2006 to 42.7% in 2019, the graduation rate remained well below the Latin American average (62% in 2018) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Evolution of secondary education rate in Uruguay and Latin America (%)



Source: INEEd (2020) with data from CEPALSTAT.

STATE AND PUBLIC POLICIES ACROSS THREE FRENTE AMPLIO ADMINISTRATIONS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS

This concluding section provides a series of reflections on the implemented reforms from two different perspectives. To begin, we review the Uruguayan experience to assess some of the concerns raised about the Latin American Left Turn in the region. Secondly, we delve into some tensions reformers faced when advancing their agendas, emphasizing internal discrepancies within the FA and in its interactions with social actors. We also unpack the dynamics of the reforms and the varying degrees of depth achieved across different policy domains during different governmental periods. Lastly, the section concludes by reaffirming its argument about the pivotal role of the state in the examined reforms.

Lessons learned from the case in regional terms

A first important lesson from the Uruguayan leftist governments refers to their capacity to carry out a reformist program while respecting democratic institutions. Although the experiences of the different countries differ significantly, Uruguay undoubtedly maintained the country's historically democratic tone. In fact, during the entire period, the country was one of the most solid democracies on the continent, even improving its ranking in different global indexes. According to Freedom House, between 2005 and 2020, Uruguay maintained its character as a free country, obtaining the highest possible ranking in the two components analyzed

by the organization—political rights and civil liberties—during the entire period. On a comparative level, Uruguay went from 27th place globally (second in Latin America and the Caribbean, behind Costa Rica) in The Economist's 2006 Democracy Index ranking, to 21st in 2020 (first in Latin America and the Caribbean).²

Moreover, the reforms carried out bolstered the capacities of the state. On the one hand, the impulse to decentralize led to advancements and new channels of democratic representation. On the other hand, progress was also made on transparency, with the modernization of administration associated with open government plans. In this regard, Uruguay also improved its position in the Transparency International ranking, going from 32nd place globally (third in Latin America and the Caribbean, behind Chile and Barbados) to 21st place globally in 2020 (first in Latin America and the Caribbean).

A second lesson learned pertains to government economic policy. The leftward shift raised doubts among conservative sectors about the macroeconomic management that could be undertaken by progressive governments within 21st-century global capitalism. However, in Uruguay, the progressive cycle dispelled such concerns given its adherence to international commitments, effective inflation control, the promotion of investments through diverse institutional and political tools, and a continual commitment to ensuring economic stability, thus creating conditions conducive to historically high investment rates.

Parallel to the macroeconomic lines outlined above, capacity-building efforts were also associated with promoting a more active role for the state in the economy. The FA's political project promoted economic growth and the redistribution of resources through a centralized role of the state in various spheres of economic activity. In this sense, the investment in infrastructure and active promotion of strategic objectives by public enterprises were fundamental elements for fulfilling this role. Other institutional advances were also made to promote the development of science, technology, and innovation.

In reflecting on the balance of these 15 years of government, they stood out for having the highest GDP growth cycle in the country's history (the cycle began in 2003). By 2020, with the advent of a right-wing administration, the country had undergone 17 uninterrupted years of economic growth, with an annual average of 4% growth between 2005 and 2019 (though this slowed towards the end of the period with the growth of the fiscal deficit, which in 2019 represented 4.7% of GDP).³ Indeed, the growth of the fiscal deficit was one of the most sustained criticisms from opposition parties and different private sector associations.

A third lesson from this case refers to social policies. The rise of the Left in the region implied a search for more significant state involvement in providing welfare

² Data available at www.freedomhouse.org and www.economist.com

³ Data available at <https://www.gub.uy/ministerio-economia-finanzas/comunicacion/publicaciones/exposicion-motivos-2019/exposicion-motivos-2019/desempeno-fiscal>

and social policies, and the Uruguayan case followed this trend. The reform of the healthcare system, the creation of a new institutional framework in terms of social assistance, and the modification of the institutional framework for the regulation of the labor market are undoubtedly changes that imply a substantial strengthening of the state in the provision of welfare. The relevance of this issue for the Frente Amplio governments was expressed in the substantial income of public officials associated with welfare issues, or in the sustained increase in social public spending, with an increase of 136% in real terms between 2005 and 2018.⁴

A substantive improvement can be seen in the country's reality in terms of social indicators. Between 2005 and 2019, poverty dropped from 32.5% to 8.8% and extreme poverty from 2.5% to 0.2%. The evolution of these indicators occurred in parallel to the reduction of inequality, which is expressed in the decrease of the Gini index from 0.455 in 2006 to 0.383 in 2019.⁵ At the labor level, unemployment went from 10.8% in 2006 to 8.9% in 2019, and real wages increased by 55.5% between 2005 and 2018.⁶

Finally, it is worth highlighting the importance of labor reforms, especially collective bargaining through the convening of Wage Councils. Collective bargaining saw fundamental results not only in terms of the expansion of labor rights and improvement of real wages, but also in the strengthening of the PIT-CNT (the federated workers' center), which went from having approximately 100,000 members when the Frente Amplio took over, to more than 400,000 ten years later.

Tensions faced by reformers and differences among the three administrations

An overview of the progressive cycle must consider the tensions that the reformist agents faced in pushing forward their agendas. Bearing in mind that the Frente Amplio had a parliamentary majority during its three terms, which allowed it to carry out reforms independently of the positions of opposition parties, the tensions among civil society actors close to the party, as well as between sectors within the FA, are of particular interest.

As in the rest of the continent, the Left's triumph posed a challenge for the government in terms of its relationship with its allies in the social world. In general terms, it is possible to affirm that the Frente Amplio managed to maintain good relations with the collective social actors with which it has traditionally been linked (the workers' movement, cooperatives, students, feminists, among others), aside from particular conflicts. In this sense, the emergence of an environmental movement opposed to the Aratirí open-pit mining project during the government of José Mujica represented a relevant departure. This movement brought together

⁴ Data available at <https://www.gub.uy/presidencia/comunicacion/noticias/gasto-publico-social-uruguay-aumento-136-terminos-reales-entre-2005-2018>

⁵ Data available at <http://observatoriosocial.mides.gub.uy/>

⁶ Data available at www.ine.gub.uy

diverse actors and developed a strong criticism of the Frente Amplio for promoting an economic export development model based on the exploitation of natural resources with environmental impacts, and for failing to differentiate itself in this regard from right-wing parties (Bidegain & Freigedo, 2021).

On the other hand, examining the three Frente Amplio (FA) terms unveils internal tensions within the party regarding specific political orientations, influencing its efficacy in implementing various policies. In domains such as education, international relations, environmental issues, or attempts to reform centralized administration, divergent perspectives within the FA necessitated ongoing negotiations on reform agendas. For example, in the case of education, internal tensions were evident in various institutions where differing perspectives on policy led to insufficient progress in the necessary reforms.

These negotiations, in turn, constrained the capacity to effect substantial directional changes, hindering the formation of cohesive coalitions capable of driving significant transformations in these areas. Conversely, in sectors like healthcare, a successful reform of the central system was realized by strategically sidestepping contentious issues. Although this approach facilitated the implementation of institutional reforms, it simultaneously curtailed the pursuit of more ambitious objectives by reform advocates (Freigedo et al., 2015). Such tensions were present among social actors as much as within the Frente Amplio. The tensions among social actors were primarily related to differing views on the development model that should be adopted by the country. The internal tensions were mainly associated with traditional political arenas, and reflected long-standing conflicts between diverse perspectives within the country's leftist coalition. In some cases, as mentioned, these tensions led to gradual and superficial reforms.

Concerning the dynamics of each administration, as noted by Mancebo and Narbondo (2010), the Frente Amplio (FA) assumed power with a comprehensive agenda and high expectations for change, marking the inception of Uruguay's first leftist government. The initial period witnessed the implementation of significant structural changes, including tax reform, healthcare reform, the establishment of MIDES, progress on labor matters, decentralization, and the enactment of the Law of Territorial Planning and Sustainable Development, alongside energy reform, among other notable initiatives. The subsequent period, as highlighted by Bentancur and Busquets (2016, p. 389), was characterized by the consolidation of reforms initiated in the preceding term, often described metaphorically as the construction of "second floors." Nevertheless, substantial changes were effected, particularly in critical areas such as advancing a new rights agenda, energy reform, and revisions to security policies. A discernible fatigue in the FA's reform agenda became evident during the third governmental period. In his second term, the Vázquez administration led less pronounced changes, failing to construct additional "floors" atop the existing reforms. Notably, this government confronted a less favorable international market scenario than its predecessors, a crucial factor to consider when evaluating the feasibility of advancing its agenda.

A new cycle of the Uruguayan state?

In the course of this article, it has been demonstrated that the administrations led by the Frente Amplio (FA) in Uruguay have been driven by a central objective: the strengthening of the state, evident in an expanded presence across various realms of public policy, as well as in economic and social affairs within the country. These transformative shifts allow us to assert the inauguration of a distinct phase in the trajectory of the Uruguayan state.

Crucially, this new phase did not necessitate a complete overhaul or re-founding of the state. Instead, it was constructed upon the pre-existing foundations of institutions long characterized by their inherent stability. The leftist governments in Uruguay during this period of the 21st-century underscore the feasibility of pursuing transformative agendas, and illuminate the twin objectives of redistribution and state reinforcement. Significantly, these endeavors are undertaken without compromising the enduring economic, political, and social stability that defines the country.

The emergence of this new state cycle, underpinned by the progressive policies of the FA, showcases the potential for advancing substantial and positive changes within the established framework of a stable and resilient state apparatus. It stands as a compelling illustration of the harmonious coexistence of transformative aspirations with the foundational stability of the Uruguayan state.

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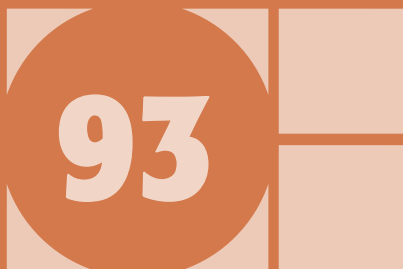
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