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The triumph of unity

Uruguay's centre-left coalition has won the run-off election. Their success shows how unity and strategy can lead to victory

In Uruguay, the centre-left *Frente Amplio* (FA) coalition won the presidential election in the run-off on Sunday with 49.8 per cent to 45.9 per cent. In the super-election year of 2024, this is rare positive news. But why should elections in a small country in the deep south of Latin America, which has just as many inhabitants as Berlin, be of wider interest?

In the face of the much-cited crisis of democracy and the global rise of the far right, a look at Uruguay's political landscape can offer valuable lessons. In an extremely polarised region, Uruguay has long been a democratic role model — a country where the rule of law functions and political debates are conducted without descending into hatred.

The *Frente Amplio* is one of the last remaining left-wing people's parties on the subcontinent. Although 'party' is not the right term: it is an alliance of 30 parties and movements that ranges from the Communist Party to the Christian Socialists in terms of ideology. For 53 years, this broad permanent coalition has managed to maintain political consensus and the ability to act on the basis of a common programme ('diversity in ideology, unity in programme'). Long before the worldwide fragmentation of party spectrums, left-wing forces in Uruguay recognised that it was better not to wait until *after* the elections to start looking for programmatic alliances.

There needs to be a dialogue with the people at grassroots level.

In 2004, the FA succeeded for the first time in breaking up the interplay between conservatives and liberals with a left-wing alternative and then governed for 15 years (from 2005 to 2020). During this time, not only were abortion, cannabis and same-sex marriage legalised, but precarious employment was significantly reduced, and public welfare in the areas of health and education was expanded. The energy

matrix was completely converted to renewables, and a progressive tax reform was implemented. Innovative concepts for a public care system became a reference in the region. In the third term of government, when fundamental reforms were due, and money became scarcer, things began to run out of steam. In 2019, the left-wing alliance narrowly lost the elections. How has its 'rebirth' now been achieved? Here are four lessons we can learn from the FA's success:

Firstly, there needs to be a party and a dialogue with the people at grassroots level. When the FA went into opposition, it licked its wounds for a while and then turned to its members, who are active and well organised at grassroots level in their original parties, but also as FA local groups. Under the motto *FA Te Escucha* ('The FA listens to you'), the party leadership held discussions with supporters, but also with opponents, associations and movements across the country about assessments and priorities, which were fed back into another round of debates and then incorporated into the 2024 election programme. In the parliamentary elections, the FA won a majority in the Senate, rising from 13 to 16 seats (out of 30). There was a stalemate in the Chamber of Representatives: the tipping point between the FA and the conservative wing will be the *Identidad Soberana* party, an identitarian party newcomer, with two MPs. Nevertheless, the FA was able to increase its number of seats by six, mainly thanks to candidates from rural provinces who won seats there for the first time.

Coalitions were negotiated in advance — and decisions were honoured.

Secondly, coalitions were negotiated in advance — and decisions were honoured. In the internal party primaries, the two strongest representatives of the FA parties competed against each other (alongside minor candidates): Carolina Cosse, intendant of the capital Montevideo and candidate of the Communist Party, and Yamandú Orsi, intendant of the Canelones Department and representative of the *Movimiento de Participación Popular*, which emerged from the former guerrilla movement *Tupamaros* and provided the former president José Mujica. The rules were clear: the runner-up would become vice-president and the election campaign would be united and based on a joint programme. The result was a strong

complementary duo with equal representation, uniting the two largest parties in the alliance.

In contrast, the conservative coalition of the *Partido Nacional*, which is made up of five parties ranging from neoliberal to ultra-right, failed due to a lack of experience and discipline. Despite the obvious need for a common strategy – the *Partido Nacional* only achieved 27 per cent – the coalition members were hopelessly at odds both in government and in the election campaign.

A clear line is needed.

Thirdly, a clear line is needed. According to polls, a decisive victory for the FA in the first round of voting was expected, which is why the actual results were a hard blow: the coalition parties were unable to achieve an absolute majority and a run-off election was held. In the internal primaries, Orsi, who stands for a more centrist interpretation of the joint FA programme and has good contacts with farmers and agribusinesses, was well ahead of the more left-wing Cosse. The FA concluded from this that centrist catch-all positions would lead to victory in the elections. The candidate should not settle and appear less frequently in the media. This and the simultaneous referendum on the government's pension reform, which led to divisions within the coalition and with the trade union umbrella organisation PIT-CNT, explain the disappointing result.

Fourthly, elections mean offering real choices. The FA went into the elections with a comprehensive programme representing values such as participation, inclusion and social justice. How these goals were to be achieved in concrete terms, however, remained a matter of interpretation and was often only vaguely communicated during the election campaign. The FA presidential candidate remained vague, particularly in key areas such as the economic model and public safety. The alliance only changed its strategy after the unexpectedly weak performance in the first round of elections: Orsi took centre stage in numerous media appearances and gave the campaign more programmatic clarity.

Elections mean offering real choices.

However, enthusiasm for the FA played less of a decisive role in the run-off than the rejection of the alternative. The ruling coalition lacked a convincing candidate in cabinet chief Álvaro

Delgado. Incumbent Luis Lacalle Pou, whose popularity remained largely unaffected by the conflicts and corruption scandals of his government, would probably have been re-elected if the Uruguayan constitution had allowed direct re-election. The 51-year-old scion of a prominent presidential family is likely to use the next five years in opposition to prepare his return to the country's top office.

There are no ideological ricochets in Uruguay (yet). People are in favour (with nuances) of democratic institutions, state responsibility for existence and multilateralism. Catch-all positions may be helpful in winning elections. However, in order to govern in party alliances, clear statements and agreements, as well as a recognisable profile are needed. The stalemate in the Chamber of Representatives will require both negotiating skills and a *cordon sanitaire*. Whether and how Orsi will be able to lead his government to this profile, to results with a progressive signature, will become clear when the cabinet is formed and the first steps are taken. However, it is already to be hoped that the *Frente Amplio* coalition will not put government work above party work and that the dialogue with the grassroots that was successfully regained in opposition will not be lost.



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