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Thesis Prospectus

## **The Rise of the Left: The Frente Amplio and Uruguayan Democracy**

### **Research Question**

Uruguay earned the nickname “The Switzerland of Latin America because it had one of the longest-living democracies in Latin America before the military coup in 1973. The strength of the system depended on its highly stable party system whose main parties – Colorados and Blancos – go back to the 1830s. The Colorado party generally dominated Uruguayan politics until the 1980s, but the Blancos always had a presence. Today, Uruguay still has a strong party system, but with three major players instead of simply the traditional two. In 2005, the Uruguayan left, represented by the coalition party Frente Amplio, succeeded in winning the presidency and a strong majority in Parliament. My thesis will address the shift in party ideologies and the electoral system after the fall of the dictatorship in 1984 to understand how the Frente Amplio came to displace the Colorados as the dominant party in Uruguayan politics. I will focus on the gradual change in party ideologies since the 1980s to provide an explanation for this profound change in modern Uruguayan politics.

### **Background**

#### *Party longevity and batllista philosophy*

The Uruguayan political party system is one with a long history of institutionalization, resulting in a strong democracy and strong party identification within the population. The two traditional parties, Partido Nacional (Blancos) and Partido Colorado, formed in 1836.<sup>1</sup> In 1904, they clashed in a civil war of sorts, when Aparicio Saravia of the Blancos established a caudillo government in the interior of the country and rebelled against the democratically elected Colorado government headed by José Batlle y Ordóñez. After Saravia’s death, Batlle consolidated the

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<sup>1</sup> Cason, 89.

central authority of the democratic government and governed Uruguay with a progressive platform. He introduced his new plan for Uruguay during his presidential terms, from 1903 to 1907 and again from 1911 to 1915.<sup>2</sup> Uruguayans still revere José Batlle y Ordóñez as an important figure, making *batllista* thought something to be considered in a study of today's political parties.

*Batllismo*'s basic tenets were the defense of a capitalist model and private property, government intervention in the economy through the creation of state monopolies and moderate protectionism, total separation between the Catholic Church and the state, a progressive approach to social rights, and the reform of the electoral system to ensure democratic rights and to guarantee clean elections.<sup>3</sup> Finch describes *batllismo* as “the deployment of redistributive techniques, the prominence of the political process and of politics as a full-time career and the high social value placed on compromise as the proper solution to conflict” and characterizes it as “a national style or ideology, rather than...the political programme of the *batllista* wing of the Colorado Party.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Shifting of the party system*

In 1973, Uruguay was in the midst of a three-fold crisis - economic, social, and political - that would lead to a major change in the party system. The military had also begun to play an increasingly larger role in the government, which led to the June 27 coup in which Parliament was dissolved and the “Consejo del Estado” was established as an organ through which the military governed the country. Leftist parties were completely suspended on November 28; the remaining parties were forced to support the new regime. Those within the parties who did not support the regime operated clandestinely or risked exile or imprisonment.<sup>5</sup> In 1980, a gradual re-opening began after the narrow defeat of the referendum initiated by the regime to write a constitution favorable to continued military authoritarianism.<sup>6</sup> The two traditional political parties, Colorados and Blancos, along with a tiny military-sponsored party, Unión Cívica, were

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<sup>2</sup> Bethell, 196.

<sup>3</sup> Peirano.

<sup>4</sup> Bethell, 197.

<sup>5</sup> Caetano & Rilla, 23-29.

<sup>6</sup> Caetano & Rilla, 75.

allowed to choose new leaders to enter negotiations with the Armed Forces. Eventually, the Blancos were unwilling to make the compromises inherent in the negotiations, and withdrew from both negotiations as well as the Multipartidaria, a structure set up to help the political parties cooperate in the transition period. The Frente Amplio, a leftist coalition set up in 1971 by Líber Seregni, was invited to negotiations. This act effectively inaugurated the FA's official entry to the political realm, since before the FA had been regarded as somewhat of an unrespectable party that could not be expected to participate within the boundaries of the system.<sup>7</sup> In 1984, the Colorados, with candidate Julio María Sanguinetti, won the presidency and negotiated the transition out of the military regime to a democracy, presumably with the aid of a "informal gentlemen's agreement" between General Medina of the regime and Sanguinetti.<sup>8</sup>

Since then, the landscape of political parties has seen major reshuffling, and a weakening of the long-dominant Colorado Party. Still the most-elected party in Uruguayan history, it began to see a drop in its plurality of votes, beginning with the 1989 elections. The Blancos also garnered a decreased number of votes from the 1994 elections onward. The Frente Amplio rose from holding 18.3% of the vote in 1971 to holding 40.1% of the vote in 1999, more than each of the traditional parties.<sup>9</sup> This trend continued into the 2004/2005 elections, when the Frente Amplio gained a majority in both houses of Parliament, took 8 of the 19 *intendencias*, and won the presidency with candidate Tabaré Vázquez. The 2004/2005 elections also saw an upset of the Colorado dominance over the Blancos: In the Senate, 11 seats are held by Blancos, 3 by Colorados; of the 99 *diputados*, 36 are Blancos and 11 are Colorados.<sup>10</sup>

### *The basic electoral system*

The parties' ideologies up until 1996 were varied within the parties due to certain elements of the Uruguayan electoral system. Until 1996, the electoral system functioned on a double-simultaneous vote system. Voters selected a party and within that party list chose a presidential candidate and Parliamentary candidates, all in one day of elections rather than a multi-round

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<sup>7</sup> De Brito, 69, 70, 73-75.

<sup>8</sup> De Brito, 78, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Cason, 93.

<sup>10</sup> Corte Electoral del Uruguay: Tables "Elecciones Nacionales 2004" and "Elecciones Departamentales 2005."

style of elections. Each party could run multiple candidates – choosing the Colorados or the Blancos did not restrain the voter from still having a wide variety of ideologies available among the respective “lists” of candidates. The candidate who had a plurality of votes within the party that had the most total votes won the election. As a result, Uruguayan political parties tended to be highly factionalized, since a successful candidate must distinguish himself from fellow party members as well as opposition party candidates.<sup>11</sup> Electoral law was reformed in 1996, and the current electoral process involves four elections per cycle, spread over multiple days – a presidential candidacy election, legislative and first-round presidency elections, a presidential run-off if necessary, and finally municipal elections. Only one presidential candidate per party is allowed now, although parliamentary and municipal elections still use the system of multiple lists of candidates for each party.<sup>12</sup>

### **Preliminary hypothesis**

The ideologies of the Colorados and Blancos, the two traditional parties, appear to have converged with the advent of the Frente Amplio. Cooperation began in earnest in the post-dictatorial era, from 1984 to 1989, as the traditional parties united to bring Uruguay into civil government as quickly as possible. The “blanquicolorado” agreements ranged from decisions to give amnesty to the military, a position that the Frente Amplio opposed, to decisions on how much power Sanguinetti would have as president.<sup>13</sup> The 1996 reform of the electoral law took place after the two traditional parties decided a reform was necessary to keep the fast-growing Frente Amplio in check.<sup>14</sup> What’s more, the actual referendum approving this reform required more cooperation between the Blancos and Colorados than had been seen ever before, and the continuing popularity and importance of the Frente Amplio fosters this cooperation between the former rivals.

In the most basic terms, the ideologies of the parties appear to have polarized, with the two traditional parties at one end advocating neoliberal reforms and the Frente Amplio at the other

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<sup>11</sup> Cason, 95-97.

<sup>12</sup> Cason, 97, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Dutrénit, 73-81.

<sup>14</sup> Cason, 97, 98.

end acting as a “veto coalition” to protect the *batllista* social welfare state. If true, this is a drastic change for the Blancos, since traditionally they oppose the neoliberal economic plans advocated by the Colorados. An ideological change such as this one would show that the Blancos register the Frente Amplio as a serious threat to their continued importance in the political system. It also appears that the Frente Amplio’s policies and ideologies are largely in response to positions taken by the Blancos and Colorados.<sup>15</sup>

*Batllismo*, the philosophy that shaped Uruguayan politics in the early 1900s, still affects the ideologies of the parties at large, but does not affect the Colorados, Batlle’s former party, as much as expected. It would appear that the Frente Amplio has taken over as the *batllista* vanguard, even though the Colorados still proudly display Batlle’s image on political signs, websites, and literature. The Frente Amplio government displays more participatory politics than previous governments, and possibly a break in traditional function of inter-party relations. This leads me to believe that the election of a Frente Amplio president could be characterized as a rupture in Uruguayan political system.

## **Methodology**

To study this topic, I will use both primary and secondary sources. *El País*, a popular countrywide newspaper, will be one of my primary sources, and I will use it to garner data about the public opinion concerning the parties. Editorials written in the papers, especially during the transitional period following the dictatorship and in 1996, during the referendum to change the electoral law, will allow me to see which groups of Uruguayans supported which party, for what reasons, and whether the population in general was in favor of the electoral law or largely against it. Through articles written about party actions and statements, as well as the interviews of key figures included in these articles, I will be able to track ideological realignment more successfully than through secondary sources.

Data from the Corte Electoral Uruguayo (Uruguayan Electoral Court) will offer details concerning election results and legislation. Through the Corte Electoral, I will be able to access information concerning the elections directly from the government’s statistical division.

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<sup>15</sup> Alcántara and Luna.

Documents from the political parties themselves concerning their plans for the country will offer a clear view of the ideology of each party in their own words. Finally, the results of a 2004 survey of legislators done on party ideology by Alcántara and Luna will help me get a better view of what the people who are actually working in politics believe and how their beliefs tie into their party's general beliefs. These sources will be some of the most valuable for assessing party ideology and public opinion.

My research on the historical background will rely on secondary sources. To understand *batllismo* and the origins of Uruguay's political culture and party ideologies since the early 1900s, I will rely on "Los uruguayos del Centenario" by Gerardo Caetano and Göran Lindahl's "Uruguay's New Path." For the dictatorship period, I will use "Breve historia de la dictadura" by Gerardo Caetano and José Rilla, two well-respected Uruguayan historians. This book offers a step by step account of the dictatorship years and goes into detail about the actions of the social organizations and political parties in response to the military dictatorship.

The Uruguayan party system has attracted scholarly interest because it is one of the most institutionalized in Latin America. To study the period from 1984 until the present, "Electoral Reform, Institutional Change, and Party Adaptation in Uruguay" by Jeffrey Cason has proved very helpful in explaining the role played by the parties in the process of electoral law reform. Other papers, like "The Politics of Deepening Local Democracy" by Benjamin Goldfrank, "Party Systems, Political Alternation and Ideology in the Southern Cone" by Constanza Moreira, and many others, will add more detail about the ideologies, interaction, and actions of the parties since 1984. Other papers, such as "Del consenso transpartidario al acuerdo blanquicolorado" by Silvia Dutrénit Bielous and "Intraparty and Interparty Politics: Factions, Fractions, Parties, and Coalitions in Uruguay" by David Altman, deal directly with the relationship between the parties, the ideological roles played by each in the society, and how those ideological roles are changing in response to actions on the part of others. Many of the books I have looked at as secondary sources are books dealing with Latin America or a group of countries, but contain useful chapters on Uruguay.

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