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Party Primaries Held for First Time in Uruguay

by LADB Staff

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For the first time, Uruguayans held party primaries on April 25 to select presidential candidates for the Oct. 31 general elections. A constitutional amendment ratified in a 1996 plebescite introduced party primaries as well as a runoff for presidential elections. It also abolished obligatory voting. Until 1996, each party could run numerous candidates. The winner was the candidate who received the most votes from the party that received the most votes. Under the new system, if no candidate wins an absolute majority on Oct. 31, a runoff will be held Nov. 30. Congressional elections will also be held Oct. 31.

Historically, Uruguayan politics has been dominated by the center-right Partido Colorado and the conservative Partido Nacional (PN) or Blancos. Since 1994, however, power has been divided almost equally among the Colorados, the Blancos, and the leftist Frente Amplio-Encuentro Progresista (FA-EP). After the 1994 elections, the Blancos and Colorados formed a loose coalition to ensure a majority in Congress. Primary brings new system but same players Both the Partido Colorado and the FA-EP were strengthened by the primaries, analysts said. In the open primary, voters could cast ballots for whichever party they chose.

More than 38% voted in the Colorado contest, which was won by Sen. Jorge Batlle. Another 30.5% voted in the FA-EP primary, in which former Montevideo mayor Tabare Vazquez took more than 80% of the vote. The Blancos attracted 29% of voters, who chose former president Luis Lacalle (1990-1995) as their candidate.

Compared to the 1994 elections, the Partido Colorado gained six percentage points, while support for the other two major parties either dropped slightly or stayed the same. Although voting is no longer obligatory, about 53.7% of registered voters participated, according to the Interior Ministry. The high turnout in the Colorado primary is a good sign for the governing party ahead of the election, analysts said.

"They have come out very well, because they attracted the most voters," said political analyst Oscar Botinelli. The way the Colorados conducted their campaign also strengthened their image, said Agustin Canzani, head of the private Equipos consulting firm. "The number of voters they attracted is important, but in political terms it is the image of unity they managed to transmit that will fortify them," he said.

Vazquez is the top vote getter

The FA-EP's Vazquez, who took the most votes of any candidate, has also consolidated his position as the country's leading leftist, Botinelli said. The 59-year-old oncologist is often called a demagogue by his adversaries but is highly regarded by the less advantaged sectors. Vazquez also received the most votes in 1994, but Julio Maria Sanguinetti became president since he was the candidate with the highest number of votes in the PC, which took the most total votes. Vazquez has the support of a

majority of the Frente Amplio. But he also has detractors, especially among moderates who accuses him of making promises he can't deliver and of being authoritarian within the coalition.

Since 1994, Vazquez has toned down his rhetoric and, like his rivals in the other parties, has tried to appeal to the center. Despite his strong showing, Vazquez is unlikely to have enough support to avoid a runoff in October.

Former president nominated despite corruption charges

Lacalle won the Blanco nomination despite widespread denunciations of corruption. Since leaving office in 1995, Lacalle has been tarnished by scandals that have sent some of his former associates to prison. Lacalle defeated former interior minister Juan Andres Ramirez, who charged the ex-president with embezzlement. Lacalle denied the charges, calling them an orchestrated campaign to hurt him politically.

Despite the corruption charges, Lacalle managed, during his campaign, to regain some of his former popularity, thanks to a well-run race that emphasized his experience in office and his success at modernizing the country. In 1981, Lacalle founded the Consejo Nacional Herrerista, one of the PN factions. His election as president in 1989 was the first time the Blancos had held power in 23 years and the third time in the century. He was one of the crafters of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR).

Sen. Rafael Michelini was unopposed to head the ticket for the social democrat Nuevo Espacio (NE). Although the NE took only 5.1% of the total vote, the party could be key in the expected runoff in November. Michelini is the son of Zelmar Michelini, a founder of the FA who was assassinated in 1976 in Buenos Aires. Although the NE only has one senator and five deputies in Congress, it has captured public attention with imaginative proposals regarding youth, employment, and the environment.

Michelini has been involved in the campaign to obtain information about the detained/disappeared during the military regime (1973-1985) and has supported Spanish Judge Baltasar Garzon's efforts to investigate Operation Condor (see NotiSur, 1999-03-19). The main challenge now facing the candidates is healing the wounds opened or aggravated during the campaign.

In their first statements after the elections, Batlle, Lacalle, and Vazquez all called for party unity and tolerance. Batlle's olive branch was well-received by his principal rival, former interior minister Sen. Luis Hierro Lopez. Hierro represented the PC faction led by President Sanguinetti and had been favored to win. Batlle, who took 54% of the PC vote while Hierro took 35%, met with Sanguinetti to go over PC election results and look ahead to the campaign. The following day, the party announced that its ticket in October would be Batlle and Hierro. Wounds will be much harder to heal within the PN. Two of Lacalle's four rivals even refused to congratulate him. [Sources: Reuters, 04/21/99, 04/26/99; CNN, Notimex, 04/26/99; Spanish news service EFE, 04/19/99, 04/23/99, 04/26-28/99; El Pais (Uruguay), 04/28/99]

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