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Leftist Coalition Recives Most Votes in Uruguay's Presidential Primary

by LADB Staff

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In Uruguay's general elections Oct. 30, Tabare Vasquez of the opposition leftist coalition Frente Amplio-Encuentro Progresista (FA-EP) won 39% of the votes. Sen. Jorge Batlle of the governing Partido Colorado followed with 31.7%. Former president Luis Lacalle (1990-1995) of the Partido Nacional (Blanco) came in third with 21.5%. Since no candidate won a simple majority, voters will return to the polls Nov. 28 for the runoff.

On election night, Vasquez called the results a turning point for the left, which has never before won a national election. The center-right Colorado and Blanco parties the oldest parties in Latin America have dominated the country's politics since 1836, except during the military dictatorship (1973-1985). "Today this political force has clearly secured its place as the first in the country," Vasquez said. "It is not possible to govern Uruguay without taking us into account."

The FA-EP, which includes socialists, former Tupamaro guerrillas, communists, Christian democrats, and former members of the two traditional parties, remained the strongest force in the department of Montevideo (home to 45% of Uruguay's 3.2 million inhabitants) and took three of the other 18 departments as well.

For the first time, the left will have the largest share of seats in Congress, with 12 an increase of three in the Senate and 40 an increase of nine in the Camara de Diputados. The Colorados will have 10 senators and 32 deputies, while the Blancos will have seven seats in the Senate and 23 in the lower house. The smaller Nuevo Espacio will have four deputies and one senator.

Regardless of the outcome of the presidential runoff, the FA-EP will have considerable power in the new legislature to be installed Feb. 15. The elections saw the expansion of the left's support beyond the capital, its traditional base, as it became the second-strongest party nationally. It overcame the tendency of the traditional parties, especially the Nacional, to compensate in rural areas for their weakness in Montevideo. The poor, who have historically backed the two traditional parties, now may be placing their hopes on the left. With about 92% of registered voters going to the polls, Uruguay has one of the highest voter turnouts in the world.

New electoral system favors traditional parties

An outright victory for the FA-EP would have been almost impossible under the new electoral rules. The 1996 constitutional reform established that each political party could have only one candidate for the presidency. In previous elections, each party could have several candidates whose votes would be totaled to determine the winning party and the distribution of seats in parliament. The winning party's top vote-getter became president.

The electoral reform, which the FA opposed, also determined that presidential elections would be decided by a runoff if no candidate received more than an absolute majority of valid votes in the first round. The reform was strongly supported by the Colorado and Nacional parties to prevent the leftist coalition from winning the presidency with a relative majority of the vote which it obtained in 1996. Under the previous electoral system, Vasquez would already be president-elect.

Vasquez builds campaign on discontent

Luis Eduardo Gonzalez of the polling firm Cifras said the left has grown steadily since the restoration of democracy in 1985 by capitalizing on a "climate of dissatisfaction" and "great social and labor insecurity." A medical doctor and former Montevideo mayor, Vasquez took advantage of the cynicism with which voters view Uruguay's two traditional parties, and he blamed President Julio Maria Sanguinetti's strict fiscal policies for failing to meet health, housing, and educational needs. Uruguay's unemployment has increased to nearly 11%, while 180,000 Uruguayans live in poverty, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

The economy is expected to contract 2% this year because of the regional crisis following Brazil's currency devaluation in January. Vasquez proposed a US\$200 million "emergency" plan to create tens of thousands of jobs, and he promised to make the wealthy pay more income tax while exempting those who earn less than US\$1,200 a month.

Vasquez won the mayoral election in Montevideo in 1989. As mayor, Vasquez enacted a series of measures benefiting the city's low-income population, including a subsidy for public-transportation fares. In 1994, he lost the presidential election to Sanguinetti elected for a second term by just two percentage points.

Vasquez has predicted "a cautious revolution" in Latin America to end extreme poverty and social exclusion. At a press conference the day after the elections, Vasquez said Latin America has the most unequal distribution of wealth and the greatest "gap between the rich who are few and the poor whose number is constantly growing." Vasquez blamed high unemployment and underemployment, low wages, and the loss of hard-won social and labor benefits for the growing poverty.

Campaign for runoff vote will be intense

Polls thus far have indicated nearly equal support for Vasquez and Batlle in the second round. Batlle said the day after the election that he will look for an alliance with other political groups to defeat Vasquez. The leadership of the Blancos met Nov. 2 to discuss whom they will endorse for the runoff. Few doubt that the party will support Batlle, but both traditional parties have several factions that do not always agree with the leadership. "A serious and deep national responsibility rests on the shoulders of the party," said Lacalle on election night. "Much in the coming days and the coming years will depend on the steps the party takes." [Sources: El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 10/30/99; Notimex, 10/31/99; Associated Press, CNN, Inter Press Service, La Jornada (Mexico), Xinhua, 11/01/99; Spanish news service EFE, 10/31/99, 11/01/99, 11/02/99; Financial Times (London), 11/02/99]

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