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Uruguayans Living Abroad Still Unable to Vote in National Elections

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Even though between 18% and 20% of its population lives abroad—political or economic exiles—Uruguay does not allow those in the diaspora to vote (NotiSur, April 24, 2009). Uruguayans, along with Chileans, are the only South Americans who lose the right to vote when they emigrate.

When the progressive Frente Amplio (FA) was first elected in 2005, point 18 of its platform advocated, as "an act of basic justice, the restitution of all civic rights to compatriots who were forced to move to other countries."

Five years later, the first FA President Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) turned over the government to the second elected FA president. In March 2010, President José Mujica assumed the platform with point 18 that spoke of "an act of basic justice." Nearly halfway into his term, it is now clear that Mujica will not be able to send Congress the reparatory bill for one weighty reason: Convinced that the vote of citizens living abroad favors the FA, opposition parties will not approve it. Passage requires a special two-thirds majority of both houses, and the FA has only—and not insignificantly—a majority of 50% plus one.

In October 2009, when Mujica was elected, the presidential contest was accompanied by a referendum on a constitutional amendment to allow residents living abroad to vote. Approval required 50% plus one "yes" votes, but the measure received only 37.42% (NotiSur, Nov. 6, 2009). Many commentaries, from domestic analysts to a report from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a UN consultative agency, said a presidential election should not be mixed with an issue of deep conceptual significance that goes beyond what is basically political.

Although the FA also has a majority in this, its second, administration, that majority does not reach the two-thirds special majority required to amend the Constitution; therefore, restoring emigrants' rights will not come through a law and will again have to go to a plebiscite.

Hope lies in separating referendum from presidential elections

Supporters of the vote for Uruguayans living abroad are convinced that, if the issue is not linked to a presidential election, voters will end up restoring the rights of compatriots who had to emigrate. This confidence is based on polls, which again say that between 54% and 56% of Uruguayans will support the amendment. How is that figure understood when, in 2009, with similar poll numbers, only 37.42% of the vote went in that direction? It is very clear. Until two weeks before that election, the polls showed precisely that between 54% and 56% would vote "yes," but the percentage was dropping as the content became polarized and everything came down to the presidential election.

La Comisión Nacional para el Voto Exterior (CNVE), which ran the 2009 campaign, has resumed its activities. To ensure a new referendum, it will have to gather at least 260,000 signatures, 10% of eligible voters. Meanwhile, demands are coming from Uruguayans abroad, especially those who
live in countries far away, for whom a trip home to vote would prove too costly. (If, on election day, a person who emigrated appears at the site where he/she is registered, the person can vote.)

Demands not channeled through the CNVE are made known on the Departamento 20 (D-20) page of the Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores Web site. What is D-20? Uruguay is divided administratively into 19 departments. During the first FA administration, the government designated citizens living abroad an imaginary department—number 20—and created D-20 to give the diaspora a certain institutional recognition.

CNVE branches have been set up in major countries around the world. Other Uruguayans have acted on their own to demand the right to vote, including lawyer Sebastián da Silva Rodríguez, living in Miami, Florida, who on April 25 appeared for the second time before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), asking the agency to intervene.

**IOM calls vote for emigrants "justice issue"**

During the first week of March, the IOM released its "2011 Migratory Profile of Uruguay," in which, lacking reliable statistics, it estimates that between 500,000 and 600,000 Uruguayans live outside the country. The organization recommended "promoting the discussion on these persons' right to vote" and said that "approving a proposal for consular voting would be an act of justice to facilitate fully reestablishing the link between emigrants and the country."

The IOM's suggestion did not include criticisms or observations regarding the two last administrations’ actions on the matter. On the contrary, it said that "it values positively the public policies that the state is developing," and as an example mentioned the 2005 creation of the Dirección General para Asuntos Consulares y Vinculación (the exact name of D-20). The report quotes demographer Adela Pellegrino, who said, "In Uruguay, to vote has always been a democratic demand and a source of civic pride." Voting has been compulsory since 1972, but turnout has stood at about 90% since the beginning of the 20th century—among the highest in the world.

**Opposition fears emigrants will back FA**

The opposition rejects any possibility of giving emigrants the right to vote. The conservative Partido Blanco (PB) and Partido Colorado (PC)—which alternated in political power from the mid-19th century until 2005—and the tiny Partido Independiente (PI) fear that Uruguayans in the diaspora will vote massively for the FA and strengthen the legislative power of the progressive government. Their only argument is that, as Blanco Deputy Jaime Trobo says, "It is not possible that those who live abroad elect a president whose actions will not affect them."

The most that the opposition concedes, and proposes, is the possibility of emigrants electing two deputies to represent the D-20. Deputy Iván Posada (PI) justifies this, saying, "Steps need to be taken to achieve the integration of the diaspora, but without going overboard."

On March 27, an editorial in the Blanco daily El País eloquently illustrated the right's fear of even the possibility of the diaspora voting. "As if it were a ghost that every so often were freed from its cage and left to wander, the idea reappeared of convoking a plebiscite to make it possible for those living abroad to vote. The FA promotes it for clearly electoral ends, confident that our emigrants sympathize with their ideas."

When former PB Sen. Juan Raúl Ferreira, who is a member of the CNVE, was asked to comment on the editorial, he merely said, "Some things speak for themselves."
The only South American countries that deny citizenship rights to emigrants are Uruguay and Chile, precisely two countries that in the last quarter of the 20th century suffered lengthy dictatorships and sharp economic crises. At the base of the demand for the right for those living abroad to vote is not only the concept of facilitating emigrants' reinsertion into the country. "They were punished when they were forced to leave for political or economic reasons; let's not condemn them a second time now," said Brenda Falero, a CNVE activist.

Those who recognize the rights of compatriots who left say that the country "needs to address the issue of emigration as a state policy because of the undeniable social importance that it has, based on the notion of inclusiveness and from a perspective of rights." Although the demand is not centered on the economic support that those living abroad give to the country, supporters also point out that "our compatriots living abroad participate actively in the life of the country and are a relevant part of our economy. Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) statistics show the persistent growth in the total amount of remittances that emigrants send their families inside the country." Emigrants also contribute on another level to the development of the domestic market: 300,000 Uruguayans come home every year as tourists.

In October 2011, when Paraguayans were preparing to vote to grant the diaspora the right to vote, Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo was consulted by the Uruguayan daily La República. "What we're experiencing in the country," said Lugo, "is that we enjoy all the rights, but we have a historic debt with our brothers and sisters living abroad. In the years of the dictatorship, hundreds of thousands had to escape from persecution and hundreds of thousands more were looking for better economic horizons. Those hundreds of thousands and their descendants, and this goes for Paraguayans and Uruguayans alike, must recover the right to vote that they lost just because they were forced to emigrate."

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