3-6-2015

Right’s "Pink Party” Experiment Unlikely To Unseat FA In Montevideo

Andrés Gaudán

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14312

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB). It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Right’s "Pink Party" Experiment Unlikely To Unseat FA In Montevideo

by Andrés Gaudín
Category/Department: Uruguay
Published: 2015-03-06

Five months after losing Uruguay’s presidential contest to the progressive Frente Amplio (FA), which earned a third-consecutive term in power, the conservative Partido Nacional (PN or Blanco) and Partido Colorado (PC), historically the most dominant political forces in the small country, are faring worse than at any time since their founding 178 years ago.

Things could get harder still come May 10, when Uruguay holds nationwide municipal elections. The conservative parties are widely expected to lose the most important prize, Montevideo—the capital city and home to nearly half the country’s 3.3 million inhabitants—for a sixth-consecutive time.

The second and final round of last year’s presidential election, held Nov. 30, pitted PN candidate Luis Lacalle Pou against Tabaré Vázquez of the FA (NotiSur, Dec. 12, 2014). The Colorados ended up backing Lacalle Pou, who lost by more than 12 percentage points. In May, this alliance will once again be put to the test, only this time the two parties are joining forces not just because of circumstances but by careful design and under the banner of a new tailor-made party, the Partido de la Concertación, which will only compete in the Montevideo contest. The PN and PC admit that their sole motivation in forming the Concertación is to regain control of the country’s largest and most politically important district.

The November runoff proved to be disastrous for the Blancos and Colorados, not only because Lacalle Pou lost soundly (41.1% versus 53.6% for Vázquez) but also because they fared even worse than in the first round, on Oct. 26, when the two parties ran separate candidates (Lacalle Pou for the PN, Pedro Bordaberry for the PC) who together won nearly 1 million votes (NotiSur, Nov. 14, 2014). Lacalle Pou received 8% fewer than that in the runoff.

The PN candidate also failed to match the right’s first-round district-by-district departmental results. In October, the Blancos and Colorados together beat the FA in 15 of the country’s 19 departments. In November, Lacalle Pou won just seven. From an economic standpoint, those seven departments also happen to be Uruguay’s least relevant. The departmental results are a particularly bad sign for the right in light of the upcoming municipal elections.

Multiple candidates

In 1996, in a plebiscite, Uruguay approved an electoral reform that partially did away with a curious mechanism called the Ley de Lemas, which had been in place since 1910 and allowed each party to present multiple candidates. Under the system, the top vote-getter among all the various contenders would add to his or her own total the votes won by other candidates from the same party.

Thanks to the plebiscite, the Ley de Lemas no longer applies to national elections. But it does remain in effect for municipal contests. As such, the FA and Partido de la Concertación plan to run three
candidates each. The latter will be represented by one Blanco, one Colorado, and one candidate from the Partido Independiente (PI), a small group that only has three deputies and one senator in the legislature.

The Ley de Lemas benefited the traditional PN and PC parties. But so did the 1996 reform—at least initially. "It was a tricky [reform] designed to continue benefiting the traditional parties," said sociologist Álvaro Rico. How so? Because while it eliminated the politically untenable practice of same-party vote sharing on the national level, it also separated national and departmental elections as a way to prevent the FA’s rise in national politics from having a "coattails effect" on the country’s municipal districts. The contests were staggered so as to decrease the likelihood that a single party would use its momentum to steamroll both national and local elections.

And yet now, nearly 20 years after the changes went into effect, the PN and PC continue to lose ground. Even the "tricky reform," it would seem, isn't enough any more to prop up the right's political ambitions.

**Birth of the "pink party"**

In the second round of the 2009 elections, the Colorados "loaned" their votes to the Blancos in exchange for support in certain 2010 district contests in which PC candidates had better chances of winning. The arrangement worked. The FA lost several of the governorships (intendencias) it had won, for the first time, in 2005. The Colorados regained control, for example, of Salto and Paysandú, two of the top-five departments in electoral volume and economic importance.

The experience motivated leaders in both the Blanco and Colorado parties to consider forming a new party to challenge the FA in Montevideo in the 2015 elections. The parties held talks that finally resulted, in January 2014, in the birth of the Partido de la Concertación, or "Partido Rosado" (pink party), as some in the FA, in reference to the color that comes from mixing colorado (red) and blanco (white), have joked ([NotiSur, Feb. 7, 2014](#)).

Ideologically, there were never huge differences between the Blancos and Colorados even though they were formed in 1836 in the midst of a civil war between groups defending the interests of the rural sector, in the country’s interior (Blancos), and groups defending the interests of the port city, Montevideo (Colorados).

The two parties were born together, on the same day, Sept. 19, 1836, when their fighters, poorly armed civilians without uniforms, fought each other along the banks of the Carpintería stream. The event came to be known as the Battle of Carpintería. To tell each other apart in combat, the fighters wore insignias featuring the colors—red for one group, white for the other—with which they would be henceforth and forever identified. "They’re twins, born from the same placenta," said outgoing President José Mujica (2010-2015), who got his start in politics as a member of a progressive wing of the Blanco party. Mujica (FA) left office this past Sunday, March 1.

Prior to 1990, when the FA won the Montevideo governorship for the first time, control of the capital had been the almost exclusive domain of the PC. The only exception was from 1959-1963, when a Blanco was in power. The rest of the time, starting in 1836, the Colorados dominated Montevideo politics, including during the last and bloody dictatorship (1973-1985), when party leaders cooperated closely with the governing regime.
"Don't count me in"

Bringing the Partido de la Concertación to life was no easy affair. The PC’s top leaders stepped down from their positions and announced that they would not campaign on behalf of the new party’s candidates. It wasn’t until last month, on Feb. 7, that the old party finally designated a candidate to wear the Concertación banner in the May 10 contest. There has been resistance within the PN as well—not so much from its main leaders but from voters and party activists, particularly young people, according to the Blanco-affiliated newspaper El País, the country’s leading daily.

In an article published Dec. 21, El País recalls an open letter that a Blanco activist from the interior of the country directed several years ago to party leaders. The title of the letter, in which the author warned against collaborating with the Colorados, was "Conmigo no Cuenten" (don’t count me in). "Now that the bipartisan agreement is taking shape, there’s been a resurgence of that kind of criticism within the Blanco party. And on Twitter, people are even using that expression (conmigo no cuenten) as a hashtag," El País reported.

The article then cited several examples. "White doesn’t fade or get stained by other colors. White is white," a party activist in the western department of Paysandú wrote. "We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again, this isn’t an issue about a name but about principles. My party is the Partido Blanco," a young man in Montevideo wrote. "Nobody wants to judge between good and bad Blancos. ... Either you’re Blanco or you’re with the Concertación. We’re Blancos," said a third Twitter user, a party activist in Durazno, the department where the Battle of Carpintería took place.

El País went on to say, nevertheless, that a good number of the people who are saying "conmigo no cuenten" will end up annulling their votes. "They won’t vote for the Concertación, but they won’t vote for the FA either," the Blanco paper insisted.

A survey published Feb. 14 by the polling firm Opción Consultores predicts that the FA will win Montevideo with approximately 57% of the votes. If that proves to be true, it would be the FA’s biggest victory in the capital to date. The Colorados, in the meantime, refuse to campaign, leaving the Concertación mostly in the hands of the Blancos.

The Concertación’s three candidates appeared together on Feb. 18 in an event that earned a less-than-flattering review from El País. The paper complained that "the spectators, mostly elderly people, had to wait in the sweltering heat for the start of the event, which was delayed because, for some inexplicable and irresponsible reason, the people in charge of operating the audio equipment and playing the national anthem, the sublime music that identifies us and is traditionally played at Blanco events, hadn’t arrived yet."

Afterward, the three candidates were finally presented, along with an outline of procedures they promised to respect. "The party’s ready. The candidates are ready. Now they just need the votes," one Concertación official told El País.

-- End --