

Issue of Venezuela Haunts Elections in South America - Now It Is Uruguay's Turn

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*This week Uruguayans will be voting for President, and once again one can see a quite familiar script for South American politics, with a leftist candidate, **Yamandú Orsi**, running against a pro-US one, **Alvaro Delgado**.*

While a debate on [pension reform](#) has been a hot topic, foreign policy is also playing an important role in election debates this time, with a focus on Venezuela. The incumbent **President Lacalle Pou** (in line with the [US](#), Peru, Ecuador and Argentina) recognized [Edmundo González Urrutia's](#) alleged victory in the Venezuelan elections - against the official result according to which **Nicolas Maduro**, who was running for reelection, was the winner. Lacalle Pou's stance breaks with a Uruguayan tradition of pragmatic neutrality and marks a shift towards an ideological alignment with other right-wing administrations in the continent. This week's election may decide how Uruguay, a founding member of Mercosur, will position itself, with regional consequences.

It is true that Yamandú Orsi, the presidential candidate for Uruguay's left-wing Broad Front (Frente Amplio), who is leading the polls, has recently described Venezuela as a "dictatorship". Electoral calculation could play a part in that however, since the candidate has been pressured to "condemn" Maduro's regime. Orsi favors focusing on trade agreements within Mercosur alongside extra-regional free trade deals and is believed to be someone who would be willing to engage with the Venezuelan authorities in Caracas. His opponent, Alvaro Delgado (from the ruling National Party) has strongly condemned Orsi for being "soft on Venezuela".

Delgado promises to turn Uruguay into "the first developed country in Latin America" and the recipe for that is the all too familiar neoliberal shock, including, he promises, reducing the number of public employees by 15,000. This has been a common theme for South America right since the nineties - the irony being that while it looks up to the US and Europe for inspiration, Western conservatives are doing quite something else. By bringing back protectionism, [economic nationalism](#), and the role of the State (the phenomenon of trumpism being a clear example of that), the right-wing elsewhere has been reinventing itself. Similarly, a kind of [russophobia](#) with Cold War overtones is often pushed by in the New Cold war, this time by the US Democrats and Western progressives, while rightists in turn often have a more balanced stance. In the Southern Cone, however, the political climate may often remind one of the Cold War era.

Orsi, however, is not the "anti-American" kind of politician one might assume: when he was the mayor of Canelones (Uruguay's second-largest city), he sought to attract investments from the US to fight organized crime, for instance. He is on the record saying that he does not wish to place "all the eggs in one basket". In a lot of ways he is the quintessentially

Uruguayan moderate: a city guy with strong roots in the country, who is a big believer in dialogue - his foreign policy stance in a way mirrors this temperament.

Andrés Ojeda, who is also running for President, is quite different. The traditional Colorado party politician has recently compared himself to Argentina's Javier Milei, albeit acknowledging the state does have some valid role. He appears as third in polls. Ojeda has [said](#) that Orsi's Frente Amplio wants to make Uruguay "look like Venezuela", while he aspires to make his country more like "Europe and the United States".



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All talk about Venezuela is rhetorical to appeal to different ideological profiles among voters, but Uruguay's elections have in fact the potential to change the ideological power balance in South America, so to speak, and thus pave the way for a Venezuelan come-back out of its relative isolation - which in turn would have an impact on South America's geopolitics.

The issue of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, as the country has been known since the adoption of its 1999 Constitution, remains a hot topic in the region.

The country has built a number of transcontinental political partnerships (notably with [Iran](#), [Russia](#), [China](#), and [Turkey](#)) while the United States remains one of its [main trade partners](#), together with China, Brazil, and Spain. However, it remains relatively isolated in the continent: the Venezuela-supported [UNASUL](#) bloc did not really take off and the country has been suspended from the Southern Common Market, commonly known as Mercosur. Despite their trade relations, it has been the target of American sanctions and destabilizing operations, such as the infamous 2020 Operation Gideon (involving paramilitary American [mercenaries](#)), and the CIA is being [accused](#) of plotting to murder Maduro.

Disputing the result of elections in Venezuela is nothing new. One may recall that in 2021, after Juan Guaidó's [imbroglio](#), even the Venezuelan opposition recognized Nicolas Maduro's presidency. For years, the South American country has faced increasingly heavier

Washington sanctions.

Brazil's **President Luis Inacio Lula** has been calling for a return of Venezuela to Mercosur. He has claimed that "normalizing" Venezuela's political life would amount to stability for South America. The Bolivarian Republic was suspended from the Mercosur in December 2016 after Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and also Uruguay (the bloc's founding members) concluded that it had not incorporated legislation on human rights and trade into national law, thereby violating membership rules and treaties. The timing of this suspension coincides with a political change in the region, with right-wing, center-right and (in the case of Brazil, with former President Jair Bolsonaro) radical right-wing leaders replacing leftist ones. Such is a recurring theme in the region.

Going back in time, one may recall that, with Brazilian and Argentinian support, Venezuela joined the trade bloc as a full member in 2013, signing several agreements. This development at the time was controversial and took place amid a regional political crisis involving Paraguay, which at the time was suspended from the block due to the episodes culminating in then President Fernando Lugo (a left-wing laicized Catholic bishop) being removed from office by the Congress of Paraguay. The brief suspension of Paraguay then paved the way to the accession of Venezuela because the Colorado-controlled Senate of Paraguay was vetoing it. Paraguay became a member of the bloc once again in 2013, with the election of Horacio Cartes.

I've written a number of times on the emerging [non-alignment and multi-alignment](#) trends seen in the Global South – in South America, however, a Cold War climate persists. Be it as it may, political instability still hampers Mercosur's development as a robust trade bloc. Such instability has several domestic and regional systemic causes (pertaining to corruption and a coupist political culture). However, the [Westernalism](#) of local political elites and Washington's interference undeniably plays a role in it. And the elections in Uruguay in a lot of ways are also a microcosm of this reality.

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