

# **Uruguay:**

*A Political and Developmental History Analysis*

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**State:** Uruguay

**Government:** Constitutional Republic

**President:** Jose "Pepe" Mujica

**Population:** 3,332,972

**Area:** 176,215 sq km

## **Brief History**

Uruguay has had a long history of conflict, and revolution. Before Uruguay was overtaken by Europeans, indigenous people populated the area. The indigenous, or Charruas were taken over by the Portuguese in late seventeenth century. Within a century, the Spanish took Uruguay from the Portuguese. At this time, most of the Charruas had already been distinguished by the Portuguese. Shortly after the Spanish conquered the region, Uruguay revolted, and Portugal took control again. These problems continued to escalate, and Uruguay suffered regularly for many years. Civil war, and a war with Paraguay would only stagnate Uruguay's development for years to come.

The Paraguayan War caused significant problems for Uruguayans, as well as many other South American states. Although Paraguay suffered the worst of the damage during the war, Uruguay (which was part of the "Triple Alliance with Argentina and Brazil) lost the vast majority of those who fought. Disease was the main culprit of death during the war due to the lack of medicine.

Post-Paraguayan War proved to benefit Uruguay. The Secret Treaty of the Triple Alliance was sufficient in sustaining peace amongst all four players. It opened up trade, established navigational routes, ordered retribution, and ensured all prisoners of war were set free. The aftermath of the Paraguayan War was tragic, but it also paved the way for Uruguay's future as a sovereign state in South America. The treaty benefited Uruguay by reconciliation with Paraguay, and strengthened its economical ties with Argentina, and Brazil.

Today Uruguay enjoys a free market economy. They are economically sentimental towards their larger neighboring states of Brazil, and Argentina. Although they relied heavily upon their neighbors up until the Paraguayan War, and during the war, Uruguay has slowly begun to modernize, and shape a political culture unlike any other Latin American state.

In large, Uruguay is often compared to the United States. In contrast to the United States, Uruguay has passed laws that are far more progressive. Their dependency on Argentina has decreased, as other foreign investors have become confident in Uruguay's economy, and Uruguay has quickly developed into a state that stands out from the crowd in only a few decades of political reformation

## **Political Culture**

*"My definition of poor are those who need too much. Because those who need too much are never satisfied." ~ **President Jose Mujica***

Uruguay is recognized as an constitutional republic, and the Policy of the Republic of Uruguay Constitution of 1967 (updated to reform in 2004) follows in accordance. Uruguay's political culture is unique to that of the rest of Latin America. The alteration is clear by the structure of governance in the state, and recent implementations of new laws. The distinctions are modernistic, and assert a ideology of liberalism, not only economically, but politically.

As Carolina De Robertis wrote in the World Post, "Uruguay has been receiving an avalanche of worldwide recognition. London's *The Guardian* called the entire country "heroic"

and said that it deserved a Nobel Peace Prize, *Foreign Policy* named President José Mujica among its "100 Leading Global Thinkers" for "redefining the Latin American left," and *The Economist* just named Uruguay its first-ever "Country of the Year." As a festive top-off, BuzzFeed published 21 reasons that everyone should move to Uruguay in 2014(1)." Key aspects of the political culture of Uruguay include the focus on public education, passing of laws regarding equality and freedom, radical legislation passed to fight crime, and various social programs. All of these are unique to Uruguay, in comparison with the majority of Latin American states. With the exception of Argentina, Uruguay was the first state in Latin America to pass legislation that recognizes same-sex marriage. In addition, in 2009, Uruguay became the first Latin American state to allow same-sex couples to adopt. As Eric Cameron wrote for the Human Rights Campaign website on August 5, 2013:

- Marriage equality takes effect in Uruguay today. Following Argentina, Uruguay is the second country in Latin America to have passed nationwide same-sex marriage legislation. The legislation passed with strong majorities in the Uruguay House and Senate in April. President Jose Mujica signed the bill into law on May 3. Uruguay joins the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Iceland, Argentina, Denmark and France in recognizing marriage equality nationwide. Marriage equality takes effect in New Zealand later this month and is expected to take force in England and Wales in 2014(1).

Recognizing same-sex marriage is one aspect of the political culture of Uruguay that illustrates the political culture as liberal, and that it holds deep regard for society's desires.

In addition, education in Uruguay is held in high regard to society, and the government of Uruguay has worked diligently, in order to ensure the system is efficient, and that everyone receives a quality education. Uruguay developed the three branches of schools system from the French model - primary, secondary and university. All branches of education are free. Primary

education is mandatory. Teachers are well respected in society, and go to school to develop the skills necessary to instruct, and be knowledgeable of the content area.

The male to female ratio of students has been predominantly equal in all three branches of education with the exception of some instances in which females outranked males, and males outranked females in university preparatory cycles. Primary and secondary education gears students towards the university level, and prepares students for life after school. They develop skills to obtain careers.

There is only one university in Uruguay, located in Montevideo, but the number of students at the university level is relatively high for both males and females. There are also four private universities located in Uruguay. As *Classbase* explains the education system in Uruguay, "Education continues to be free at tertiary (third branch of education) levels. Advanced vocational training is provided by the Labor University of Uruguay through industrial and night schools. The Catholic University is also well renowned. However the oldest and most venerable of all of these is the University of the Republic, founded in 1849 and depicted here. This institution benefits from a distinguished medical school serving students from throughout the entire region. It has 14 other faculties too(1)."

The literacy rate is also one of the highest in Latin America. There are several projects, and various programs that are funded by the Uruguayan government, and by international groups. Plan Ceibal (Conectividad Educativa de Informatica Basica para el Aprendizaje en Linea) was implemented into primary public schools, and expanded into secondary schools. The idea behind Plan Ceibal was to ensure that each student had access to technology through the usage of a laptop. The laptops were developed by a non-governmental organization named "One

Laptop Per Child". This initiative illustrates how the Uruguayan government desires social equality within the state.

Additionally, social programs have also been created to provide assistance for pregnant woman and babies. As Esteban Zunin explains, "In 2006 and 2007, a UNDP study of Canelones revealed that children in its poorest areas suffered from severe malnutrition and lower size and weight than the national average. Furthermore, physical and cognitive development among children aged 0 to 4 years was 11 percent less than the rest of the country(Zunin,1)." This research led to the implementation of "Canelones Grows with You" which provides food, regular check-ups, and pediatric visits for babies after birth for poorer families. Zunin states that the program decreased rates of malnutrition, and other problems that can occur early in life. The program has developed into an official government policy for Uruguay, called "Uruguay Grows with You".

The Senate also recently passed an affirmative action law regarding education, and employment for citizens of African descent. Robertis explains, " the measure passed by a *unanimous vote*, an unimaginable feat in the U.S. The law will reserve 8 percent of government jobs for people of African descent, who make up 8 percent of the population, and it will fill the terrible void in school textbooks on the history of *afrodescendientes*. Racial discrimination is still a deeply entrenched, serious problem in Uruguay and this bold, needed measure brings some crucial tools to bear in addressing it(1)."

President Mujica has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for Uruguay's legalization of marijuana. Uruguay is the first state to fully legalize the production and sale of the drug. It has been a big topic of debate, domestically and internationally. President Mujica

states that the reason for its legalization is to lower crime and corruption in Uruguay. The Drugs Peace Institute has supported Mujica's belief that the consumption of marijuana is a human right, as well as other activists for the legalization. The Dutch NGO stated on its website, "It is a promise to bridge the gap between defiant marijuana consumers and the prohibiting society. Hopefully, the start of the acceptance of this consumption by society and the concomitant development of understanding of its use as a natural medicine, historically used for spiritual liberation, might initiate a process of healing in a world, very confused and deeply divided, over its religious legacy(1)."

In addition, Uruguay prohibits the death penalty. The constitution strictly forbids the sentencing of death for any crimes committed within its borders. This law is not only significant in the political culture of Uruguay, but, "Uruguay (and Venezuela) played a pivotal role within the United Nations in promoting abolition of the death penalty, " and, according to Roger Hood's study, "[t]he hundred year tradition of abolition in South America now holds sway over almost all of the region(Schabas, 311)."



## Modernization & Dependency

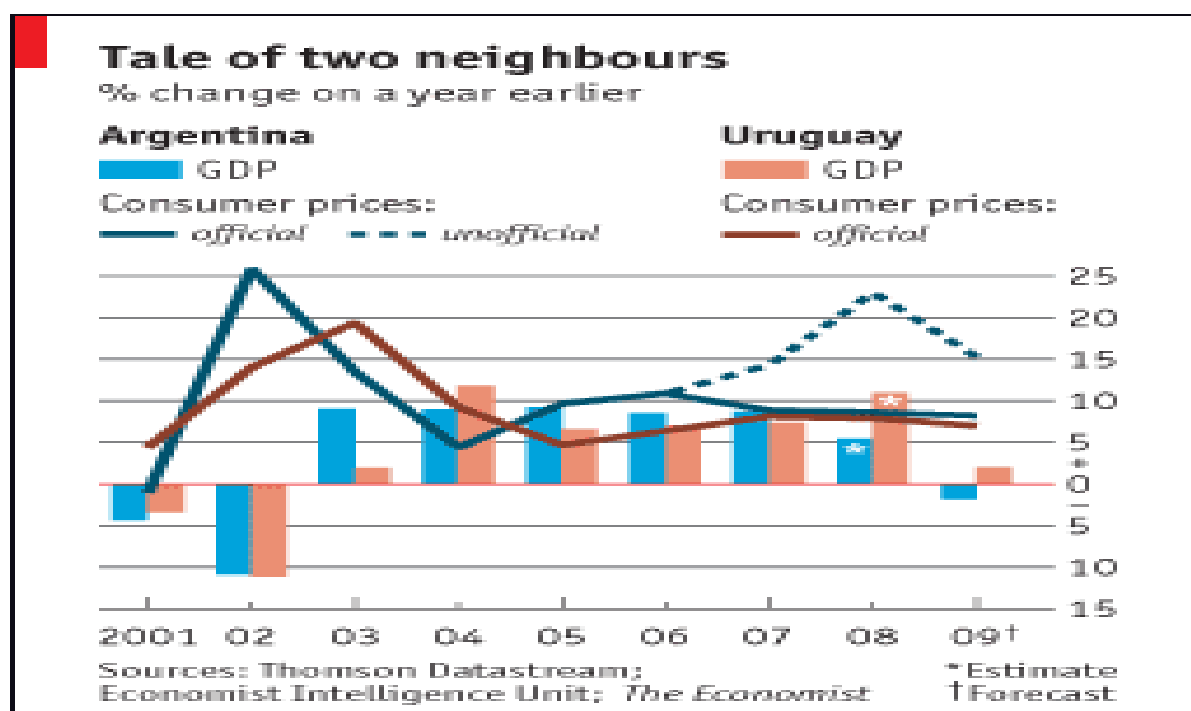
Uruguay's economy is predominantly based on exports such as wool, beef, milk, and rice.

According to the 2014 Index of Economic Freedom:

- Uruguay's economic freedom score is 69.3, making its economy the 38th freest in the 2014 Index. Its score is 0.4 point lower than last year, with declines in fiscal freedom, labor freedom, monetary freedom, and trade freedom outweighing improvements in freedom from corruption, business freedom, and investment freedom. Uruguay is ranked 5th out of 29 countries in the South and Central America/Caribbean region, and its overall score is above the world average.

Uruguay's desire to modernize relies heavily on Argentina. The majority of the property, banking, and tourism sectors are dominated by Argentina's buyers, capital and vacationers which makes Uruguay highly dependent on Argentina. Consequently, if Argentina suffers any sort of crisis, the economy of Uruguay will also have problems. As Simon Black explains, " One of the chief consequences is inflation. As Uruguay imports inflation from both Argentina and United States simultaneously, retail prices from food to fuel to electricity have soared(1)." Uruguay is also highly dependent on their agricultural exports. This weakness poses a threat to the economy, similarly to all of Latin America, which relies highly on exports (specifically to China). The economy of Uruguay is also close to full capacity, which could cause inflation in the near future. Their ability to continue to modernize rests in the hands of foreign investors. As The Economist describes, " Uruguay, lying just across the muddy waters of the River Plate from Argentina, has been fated in recent decades both to be buffeted by, and to benefit from, its big neighbor's secular instability. Argentina's economic collapse of 2001-2 duly prompted a bank run and recession in Uruguay. While Argentina defaulted on its debt, nationalised foreign businesses

and imposed price controls, Uruguay quietly reached an amicable rescheduling agreement with its creditors(1)."



As illustrated in the chart above, Uruguay's economy has a tendency to be highly dependent on Argentina. Recently, the Argentine government nationalized the private pension system, which made investors take money out of Argentina, and putting it into Uruguayan banks. The Economist continues, " Uruguay ought to be more exposed to the world recession than Argentina, with its large domestic market. Both economies have slowed sharply after years of rapid growth. But Uruguay looks set to fare much less badly than Argentina(1)." This being due to the distrust that many Argentine's have had towards their government. Many have invested their money into Uruguayan farming, ranching, and other important aspect of the economy of

Uruguay. Although Uruguay does rely heavily on Brazil, Argentina, and other foreign investors, the level of confidence in Uruguay's economy has dramatically risen.

## **Conclusion**

Uruguay has had the ability to completely reconstruct its regime, and persist through economic backlash because of their past experiences, and globalization. Globalization has shaped the political culture. Although their chief exports consist of farming, and other agriculture, Uruguay has placed great significance on modernization. Their banking, communications, and resort revenues are beginning to play a more vital role in their economy. The want to compete, and communicate in the flat world is illustrated through their recent laws, and political philosophy. President Mujica has embraced his position, and created the change that Uruguay desperately needs for the twenty-first century. In the near future, Uruguay may play a significant role, internationally. Uruguay is historically a political shape shifter, and as President Mujica's successor takes office, time can only tell what lays ahead. For now, it is clear that Uruguay can rise to the challenge.

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