Democratic Citizenship: A Foundation of Uruguayan Democracy and Political Participation

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Abstract

Uruguay has a long history of democratic governance, but like many other countries in the region, the country experienced a period of military rule that was characterized by intense repression. Despite this, political participation and the strength of democratic institutions bounced back dramatically since the dictatorship. This paper addresses why Uruguay has been so successful in again achieving a strong democracy after the dictatorship and how political participation in this democracy remained prevalent even after intense political silencing. I trace the political heritage, party ideology, and government institutional structure of Uruguay to explain its uniquely resilient democracy.

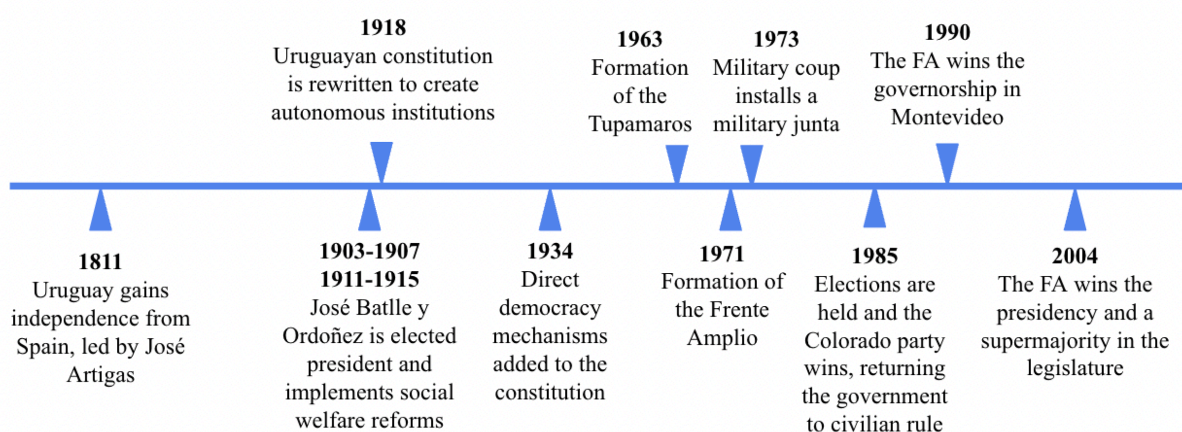
Democratic Citizenship: A Foundation of Uruguayan Democracy and Political Participation

Uruguay is one of the most consolidated democracies in Latin America and in the world, with strong government institutions and high levels of civic engagement. The Democracy Index from the Economist Intelligence Unit assigns Uruguay as having the strongest democracy in the Western Hemisphere (Our World in Data, 2023). Across the world, Uruguay is only surpassed by some of the most celebrated democracies in Northern Europe (Our World in Data, 2023). This democratic strength is supported by high levels of citizen engagement. High levels of voluntary participation are not accurately represented in voter turnout numbers as voting is compulsory in Uruguay, so measuring this phenomenon is largely incomplete. However, organizations such as Freedom House and Latinno compile multiple metrics that present a strong image of participatory democracy (Freedom House 2023; Pogrebinschi, 2017). The success of Uruguay's democracy is especially surprising because of their recent experience with a brutally repressive military rule from 1973 until 1985. This raises the questions: Why has Uruguay been so successful in establishing a consolidated democracy and why, especially with such a recent repressive government, are there such high levels of political participation? This commitment to democracy and political participation comes from a legacy of democratic citizenship, reinvigorated by the party rhetoric and policies of the Frente Amplio (FA) and the intentional expansion of institutional methods of political expression. In other words, strong democratic and participatory citizenship norms have deep historical roots that have been supported and protected by both government institutions and, more recently, by the Frente Amplio's "politics of closeness". To explore this idea of democratic citizenship, I build on Russel Dalton's paper, *Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation* (2008), which describes

citizenship norms and how they are formed, as well as how they impact political participation, specifically in the United States. I use this framework to understand the development of democratic citizenship within Uruguay and its revival by the Frente Amplio after the dictatorship. I also examine the role of institutionalized rather than socialized democratic participation and structures, and how they play a role in expanding and deepening this sense of democratic commitment.

Figure 1

Major Points in Uruguayan Political History



Note. This figure is not extensive and covers events that are pertinent to understanding the historical context of the content of this paper.

Dalton (2008) describes citizenship norms as a "shared set of expectations about the citizen's role in politics," which in turn affects their political behavior (p. 78). This overarching set of norms is then further split into values of political participation, autonomy in democratic deliberation, acceptance of the legitimacy of the state, and the moral responsibility to others ~~(p. 78,79)~~. Various broader norms of citizenship prioritize each of these values differently. For example, in the US political landscape, Dalton (2008) describes a duty-based citizenship that highly values respect for the state and its institutions (p. 80). He juxtaposes this mode with that of an engaged citizenship that prioritizes participation, democratic deliberation and social

responsibility (p. 81). Of course, what is expected of citizens and what they expect of the government changes political behavior (p. 84). For Dalton (2008), the general trend of the decade prior in the US has been for citizens to move from highly institutionalized, duty-based participation into more informal realms of political involvement, such as protesting, petitioning, organizing, and advocacy work (p. 93). This newer style of US citizenship places more control over political activity with the citizen and allows participation to become more targeted and powerful, influencing policy through a broad range of political activity (p. 94). These ideas about the role of citizenship norms, their basis in political values, and their effect on political participation are crucial in understanding heightened democracy and participation in Uruguay.

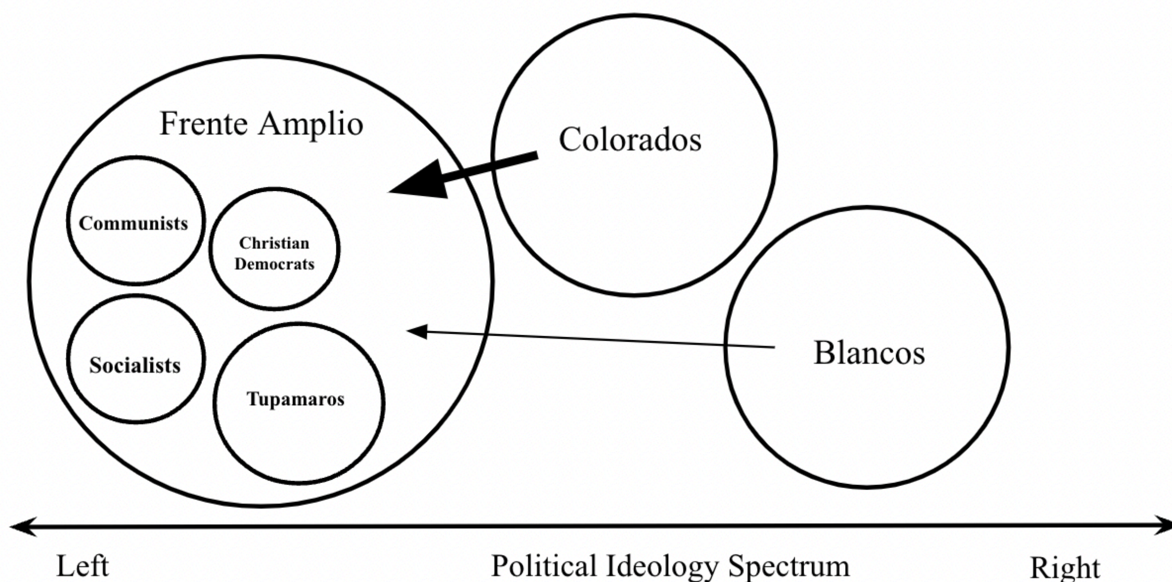
In Uruguay, the model of engaged citizenship has been part of political culture for most of its independence. As I lay out below, the forebears of domestic democratic thought and the people they influenced emphasized the centrality of the citizen in political processes. These citizenship norms are uniquely durable because they have deep historical roots. As such, they could be re-established in the years following the end of the stark repression of the dictatorship in 1985. Expanding on Dalton's (2008) categorizations, engaged citizenship in Uruguay has been fostered by intentional institutional design giving direct power to the citizens' voice. This priority in design incorporates aspects of duty-based citizenship that center around institutional engagement, but differ from the participation that Dalton (2008) categorizes as duty-based. The expectation of robust political involvement outside of institutions has created more targeted and citizen-led means of institutional participation. Institutions are adopted and fueled by the power of this participation.

Though democracy has been the norm in Uruguay since independence, the period from 1973-1985 was characterized by a profoundly undemocratic military regime marked by intense

repression, especially of political voice (Gillespie, 1985, p. 99). Numerous laws were implemented to limit the political expression of both civilians and politicians. The Uruguayan dictatorship was not as deadly as that of Argentina or Chile, but this military government organized an intense regime of mass incarceration as a means of maintaining control. Uruguay had the highest levels of political imprisonment per capita of anywhere in the world to date (p. 100). At its peak, 2% of the entire national population was imprisoned (Amnesty International, 1979). The most abject repression utilized by the dictatorship targeted the political Left that included the Tupamaros, a communist urban guerilla group and the most pronounced violent threat to the power of the military (Gillespie, 1985, p. 103). Five thousand ex-politicians (those in power before the military coup) from all parties were banned from taking part in elections as candidates or voters (p. 100). The repression during this time virtually silenced political activity and changed the norm of engagement to spectatorship. The return to democratic rule, headed by the Colorados, also maintained some of the disasters resulting from military rule (Oyhantçabal, 2019, p. 127). The dictatorship had implemented over a decade of neoliberal economic policy, devaluing the workforce, opening capital markets (direct or indirect investment), and promoting exports (p. 126). Even after the transition, two decades of administrations maintained these policies. The growth of poverty, inequality, and wage loss, along with two economic crashes (1982, 1998-2002), led to a large ideological swing to the left and allowed a party on the political Left, the Frente Amplio, to gain traction despite the intense repression they faced a few decades earlier (p. 128). This swing gave the party momentum within the political sphere to reclaim the political narrative of the country and again build engagement and power among the people.

Figure 2

A Map of the Major Parties in Uruguay and a General Categorization of their Political Ideology



Note. The circles within the Frente Amplio represent some of the major groups that constitute this party. The arrows show the movement of citizens from the two traditional parties to the Frente Amplio after the dictatorship. The thickness of the arrows represent the relative number of people that moved to the FA from these parties.

The Frente Amplio, a coalition of twelve leftist parties ranging from Christian democrats to socialists to Tupamaros, is the culmination of the ideological Left in Uruguay (Rodd, 2019, p. 32). This movement and party were formed in 1971, two years before the coup, but were most vocal and unified as a progressive force during the dictatorship (p. 32). This collection of parties gathered under the values of liberation and pluralist democracy (p. 33). Their foundation in grassroots movements gave the party strength in its ability to flex across forms of political expression, ideology, and organization (p. 33). It also promoted their strong commitment to inclusive and participatory government because it was founded by groups that used mass mobilization and protest to project their political voice (Luna, 2007, p. 5). This commitment persisted at the federal and local scale as the party gained political power with rhetoric and action

that sought to give the informal demands of the masses political legitimacy. The party also attracted many citizens who were disenchanted with the two traditional parties because of the inclusivity and fresh progressive calls of the FA (Figure 2). Especially because the Colorado party maintained the course of unpopular neoliberal economics through the end of the century, this ruling party was largely discredited and saw a drop in membership with a large number moving to the FA (Oyhantçabal, 2019, p. 128). Though the FA was not the party to reintroduce democracy back to the country after the dictatorship, their eventual rise to power would lead to the introduction of new institutions and attitudes that fostered political participation much more than the Colorado party in the decades prior. The appeal of the FA to those who were members of the two traditional parties was augmented by drawing on historical leaders important to both of the established political parties: the Colorados and Blancos (Rodd, 2019, p. 34). Both of these leaders embodied aspects of social equality and citizen engagement and created some of the fundamental values of Uruguay's democracy.

José Artigas, a military general, won Uruguay's independence from Spain in 1811, but, in establishing a government, was wary of strong authority and its ability to undermine democracy (Rodd, 2019, p. 37). He envisioned a government responsible for ensuring equality and liberty (p. 38). In fact, Artigas was critical of the US Constitution because it excluded the poor, illiterate, black, and indigenous peoples from citizenship (p. 38). He saw the discrepancy between formalized equality and social equality in its capacity to limit true, pluralist democratic participation (p. 38). In his image of Uruguay, the importance of participation was evident in his vision of cabildos (municipal or city councils). These councils would be open to anyone to participate in decision-making, responsive to local concerns, and function as an institutionalization of public opinion (p. 38). This is just one example of Artigas' far-reaching

ideas about how to establish representative institutions with local Uruguayans (p. 39). The Frente Amplio harnessed this fervor for local, participatory citizenship to inspire their "politics of closeness" (p. 39). The revival of Artigas's ideas was especially appealing to members of the Blanco party, as he was one of the main authors of this party's ideology (p. 37). Incorporating the legacy of Artigas into the FA's rhetoric of inclusivity and participation revived the norm of citizenship that was previously established in Uruguayan cultural heritage but had been suspended by the dictatorship.

The FA also drew on the Colorado party's main ideological root, José Batlle y Ordoñez (Rodd, 2019, p. 34). Batlle was the president of Uruguay from 1903-1907 and 1911-1915 during which he created a state structure that expanded social and civil rights: healthcare, education, and dignified working and living conditions (p. 34). His administration marked the wide expansion of redistributive policies (p. 35). Like Artigas, Batlle emphasized the importance of both social justice and civil liberties, moving away from traditional Anglo-liberal traditions of individual freedoms and rights (p. 36). Paired with his priority of equality, Batlle emphasized tolerance as a key value in a pluralist state (p. 36). He encouraged immigration and acknowledged radical ideologies to diversify the nation (p. 35). Along with huge investments in education, these ideas established his dedication to social democracy (p. 35). The emphasis on the collective formed the basis for a community-driven civic republicanism. The outstanding government goal of equality also stressed the importance of state responsibility towards citizens in lowering barriers to participation (p. 36). Batlle set a standard for prioritizing social equality as a means of mobilizing and engaging citizens with a sense of communal responsibility. The FA brought forward Batlle's legacy by rejecting neoliberal policies instituted by the dictatorship and following administrations and by guiding development through redistribution and social services

(p. 37). Batlle's values also brought a new dimension to Artigas' legacy, solidifying the political struggle for social justice as a framework for citizenship within and outside of government (p. 36). The FA reinvigorated this perception of citizenship with their revival of Batlle's persona and ideology and reiterated the government's responsibility to this perception. With the promotion of these two figures, the FA pulled together two different strategies for centering the citizen as the principal agent of democracy: Batlle's social justice legislation and Artigas' ear to the people (p. 43). In this way, the party cultivated engaged and active political citizenship not as a partisan but as a national identity.

This historically rooted value of participation has led to mechanisms of democracy that promote the decentralization of political influence and institutions throughout Uruguay's political history. One example of this phenomenon is Uruguay's substantial use of direct democracy. Citizen referendums were officially written into the 1934 constitution and broadened in 1967, but they have been in Uruguayan political thought since Batlle (Altman, 2008, p. 3). Batlle sought to give citizens the ability to check powerful politicians and this mechanism has indeed been put to test: After the takeover of the Uruguayan military in 1973, the junta that consolidated power tried to amend the constitution to restrict opposition candidacies and to maintain power (Gillespie, 1985, p. 100). However, a plebiscite, an obligatory referendum, was required to amend the constitution (Altman, 2008, p. 4). So, in 1980, the public exercised their political voice and voted down the amendment of the military with 57% percent voting 'no' despite all the opposition politicians being barred from voting and much of the political Left in jail or exile (Gillespie, 1985, p. 101). This outcome delivered a serious blow to the perceived power of the regime in their failure to change the political structures of the country and set a tone of resistance to military rule (p. 101). Since the transition to democracy, the role of direct democracy has

changed from Batlle's vision of limiting autocratic, executive power to a means of steering the direction of legislation (Altman, 2008, p. 6). This evolution shows that even when democracy is disrupted, the strength of direct democratic mechanisms such as referendums can persist. When democracy is strong, these democratic mechanisms support engaged political participation by providing tools for political change. It also demonstrates the way that these crafted mechanisms can differentially support democracy in the face of a passive or a vocal citizenry as seen during and after the dictatorship.

Obligatory referendums are fairly common in democracies around the world, but Uruguay stands out in its use of other types of direct democracy, especially those that are actuated by the citizenry. Three categories of direct democracy mechanisms exist in the Uruguayan constitution: obligatory referendums, facultative referendums, and popular initiatives (Altman, 2008, p. 2). Obligatory referendums are required by the constitution under a set of parameters, usually for amendments to the constitution, and therefore they are not initiated by citizens (p. 2). Popular initiatives and facultative referendums, on the other hand, are initiated through a collection of signatures (p. 2). Though they are different manners of citizen consultation, both enable direct input to the legislature. Collecting signatures is led by citizens and gives power to individuals while promoting political engagement and community formation around democratic processes. Referendums have been a powerful instrument to legitimize the voice of the people in Uruguay's democracy and served as a method for citizens to change the course of policy (p. 6). This direct influence on policy and control of political participation is one of the key elements that is strong within norms of engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008, p.18) As an opposition tool before rising to power, the FA has encouraged the use of these direct democratic tools (Luna, 2007, p. 13). This strategy was used in 1992 to block economic reform after the

dictatorship (p. 13). Only seven years after the end of the dictatorship, an initiative to reject the privatization of state-owned companies received enough signatures (over 25% of the population) to be put to vote and, ultimately, successfully struck down this law, backed by an overwhelming 79% of the citizenry (Altman, 2008, p. 6). Citizens were not only able to mobilize sufficiently to trigger a referendum but to resolve a divisive issue in their interest very soon after a period where such power and voice were stifled. This, in itself, is a testament to the endurance of this democratic mechanism. Such mass mobilization was driven by intentional direct democratic institutional design and legitimizes both democratic voices and representative institutions. This variety of mechanisms and their consistent use shows the unique resilience of democratic institutions in Uruguay.

The threat of referendum in and of itself gives more weight to citizen ideology or desires (Altman, 2008, p. 11). In interviews with Uruguayan legislators in 2008, 70.4% agreed that the presence of a potential referendum is a sufficient reason to find consensus between political parties (p. 9). Polling public opinion can fundamentally change legislators' calculation of policy and hold the government accountable to the wishes of the people in a truly representative manner (p. 12). The threat of popular vote is additionally taken seriously because it forces parties or politicians to take positions on the issues at stake (p. 8). All these pressures lead to more transparent governance and further highlight the power of citizen participation. 73.7% of legislators interviewed by Altman (2008) believed that direct democracy develops civic virtues and 57.2% believe that referendums counteract alienation and apathy among citizens (p. 10). Also, 61.6% of legislators did not think that direct democratic mechanisms weaken their representative policymaking role (p. 9). In fact, the majority of politicians believe that popular initiatives strengthen representative democracy (p. 9). Clearly, politicians see their role in a

representative democracy supported by the ability for citizens to intervene in the legislative process. But, this perception among politicians is skewed by party affiliation; in the FA, 77.8% agree while only 35.4% and 46.4% from the Colorado and Blanco parties respectively hold this belief. Though evident how important referendums are, their value is appreciated much more by members of the FA. Respect for political participation by citizens, especially from politicians in the FA, is held up by those with a highly institutionalized role in government, which shows how ingrained this value has become in political society and in norms of citizenship.

This example of the power of referendums to enact direct democracy is part of a larger pattern of mechanisms that encourage participation written into Uruguay's governmental design. There are also forms of decentralized political institutions that embody co-participation, the spread of participatory power among various groups. As specified by the 1918 constitution, Uruguay has several autonomous institutions associated with the state where a co-participatory structure thrives; the sectors of public industry, education, public banks, social services, and non-market regulators of the economy all incorporate autonomous institutions (Lanzaro et al., 2020, p. 6-8). These different kinds of institutions were initially set up to separate administrative powers from political power (p. 2). The depoliticization of what is considered administrative has allowed interest groups, unions, and other organized bodies more power to operate within these institutions (p. 9). Because they run outside of a hierarchical government ministry, they are led by collective boards of government delegates, business representatives (when applicable), and delegates of other citizen groups (p. 9). Autonomous institutions have been especially effective with measures surrounding wages, working conditions, and economic policy (Goldfrank, 2011, p. 265). Corporate policies that influence the government and workers are decided in a collaborative setting. Participation then extends pluralist democratic structures to that of

business. The culture of equal power to every voice flourishes even in non-government institutions. Additionally, in the realm of social services and education, the foundational decision-making has been shaped by representatives of the masses that they serve. This distinct form of decentralization maintains communication and participation throughout the major bodies of power (both business and government) and citizen stakeholders. This creates a space for citizens to take part in more formal decision-making and supports the needs of an engaged citizenry.

Another means of implementing decentralized government institutions has been not only encouraged but pioneered by the Frente Amplio. Tabaré Vásquez and his successors, mayors of Montevideo from the FA, experimented with new forms of participation (Goldfrank, 2011, p. 122). Vásquez, for example, began holding cabinet meetings in different neighborhoods each week, offering citizens the opportunity to pose questions, air complaints, and simply learn more about municipal affairs (p. 124). For example, in 1990, they implemented participatory budgeting in the city, changed local boards from appointed to elected bodies, and expanded informal and decentralized community centers that were an extension of the city government (p. 124). Many of these structures improved government responsiveness and transparency and further encouraged interaction with them. For instance, these community centers or Centros Comunales Zonales (CCZs) held public assemblies with delegates from the executive branch of the municipal government around local issues and budgetary distribution (p. 123). CCZs brought local government much closer to the residents and relied on very informal volunteer-based participation and had very few fixed procedures to stall activity (p. 125). Much of the administrative activity of the local government was also delegated to these CCZs. For example, citizens could obtain a birth certificate, see a social worker, or address public service problems

all in the same place (p. 124). The CCZs also built relationships with different community organizations and schools, giving these groups more intimate connections to the municipal government (p. 124). These structures were very well received and in surveys of citizens, 85% approved of the program and could name positive results from relationships with their CCZ (p. 127). For example, in a survey of 123 community organizations, 33% claimed that they had been meaningful participants in the administration's decision-making process and 76% found successes in their relationship with CCZs. Additionally, in 1990, the year that these reforms were implemented, 25,000 people attended a participatory budget vote (p. 125). This immediate high participation shows the excitement around new means of citizen involvement and its quick embrace even in the initial trial years. The citizenship norm of political engagement allowed this local decentralization to thrive, and the enthusiasm from the FA for their implementation supported the validity of participation. However, largely because of resistance by the Blancos and Colorado parties, Vásquez was forced to alter this decentralization program (p. 128). These zonales were changed to have two layers of representation, and the range of issues were moderated without any increase in decision-making power (p. 140). By the late 2000s, after a steep fall in participation in these programs, some of these barriers were removed to recreate the informal, responsive nature of the CCZs (p. 163). Still, thousands of people participate in CCZs each year in Montevideo (p. 121) Though the FA had varying success in creating an institutional design that consistently attracted a diverse group of citizens, the creativity and dedication to these attempts attests to their perception of the value of informal, decentralized structures for participatory democracy.

After the wave of dictatorships in South America, democracies have had varying success in establishing legitimacy, public trust, and, as a result, participation in the government. Uruguay

is a stunning example of success in this regard. However, this rosy picture of democracy is by no means perfect. Like many South American countries with dictatorships in the last 50 years, Uruguay struggles with addressing the human rights violations of the past. Today, banners with a flower missing a petal hang in the streets, a symbol of those who were forcibly disappeared during the military dictatorship. As seen by massive marches of remembrance, the Uruguayan people continue to demand that the government answer their calls for healing and justice for past state violence. Even without ample response from the Uruguayan government, it is notable these protests have not fallen off, but remain a potent expression of the people's belief in the power of their collective voice to encourage political action. With so many deeply harmed by the dictatorship, the collective memory of the profoundly undemocratic and oppressive military regime is a legacy that must be reckoned with to maintain meaningful trust and participation within Uruguay's political structures.

Dalton's (2008) ideas about the formation and manifestation of citizenship norms and his categorization of engaged citizenship provide a powerful framework for understanding participatory democracy in Uruguay. Because participatory citizenship has been an expectation for much of Uruguayan political history, mechanisms of democracy and government institutions are engineered to give power to citizen participation. By contrast, institutions in the US, as outlined in Dalton's (2008) paper, are built around duty-based citizenship, so they are less responsive to an actively engaged citizenry. This key difference has allowed Uruguayan citizenship norms to survive even after the brutal repression of the dictatorship. The dictatorship also disrupted many of the preexisting power arrangements, so there was a unique opportunity for the FA to come into power. Though the Colorado party assumed political power immediately after the dictatorship, the FA was a key player in transforming what had become a

spectator-driven form of citizenship during the dictatorship back into one that was and remains engaged and vocal. Their simultaneously revolutionary and historically grounded ideology and rhetoric both revitalized existing legacies of democratic citizenship and instated new egalitarian policies around participation. The strong Uruguayan identity with plural democracy, from Artigas and Batlle, had only to be reignited to begin to take hold and guide the reformation of political citizenship after the dictatorship. The FA has expanded historical government institutions to include informal spaces for participation from citizens, supported by politicians who prioritize this practice. They emphasized the integration of the informal public sphere and the formal political sphere with the radical assertion that participation is no longer solely a counter to power, but a fundamental tool for planning how power functions. Uruguayan democracy has been able to endure dictatorship and maintain high levels of political engagement because of citizenship norms that value social equality, pluralist democracy, and political participation.

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