

Uruguay quietly beats coronavirus, distinguishing itself from its South American neighbors – yet again

June 16 2020, by Jennifer Pribble



The main plaza in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital. Credit: [Wikimedia/Flashpacker Travel Guide, CC BY](#)

Latin America is the world's new [coronavirus epicenter](#), but Uruguay—a small South American nation of 3.5 million people—has so far avoided the devastation raging across the rest of the region.

As of June 14, the country had [847 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 23 deaths](#). By population that's 244 cases and 7 deaths per 1 million inhabitants, well below neighboring Brazil, with 4,001 cases and 201 deaths per million; and Chile, with 9,118 cases and 174 deaths per million.

Uruguay [moved swiftly](#) in March to enact social distancing, testing and community tracing, though President Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou never decreed a lockdown. Offices and shops are open for business, and Uruguayan children will return to school by [June 29](#) even with winter and flu season coming to the Southern Hemisphere.

In avoiding the tragedy playing out nearby, Uruguay continues its tradition of bucking regional trends. My research on Latin American politics shows that the country has long stood out for its [vibrant participatory democracy](#), [low inequality](#) and [expansive social policies](#) – all attributes that help explain Uruguay's relative success in the pandemic.

Uruguayans support democracy

In a region marked by political discontent, Uruguayans generally like their political system. In 2016, [57%](#) of Uruguayans were satisfied with democracy, compared to 47% of Argentines, 34% of Brazilians and 40% percent of Chileans, according to Vanderbilt University's Latin American Political Opinion Project.

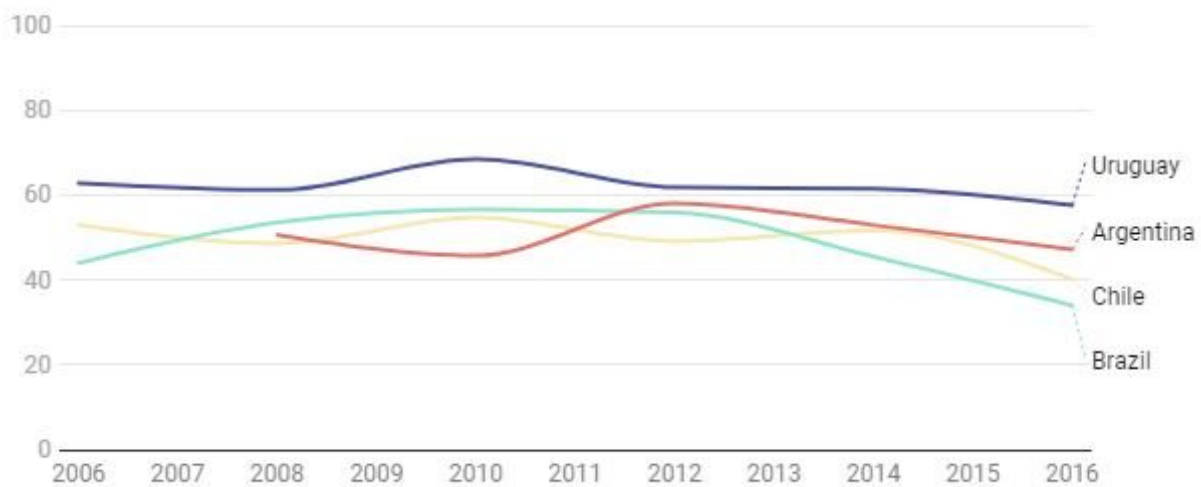
Satisfaction with Uruguay's democracy is matched by high trust in political institutions. In 2016, [65%](#) of Uruguayans voiced support for

institutions, Vanderbilt's data shows. This is 7 points higher than Argentina and over 20 points higher than Brazil or Chile.

Uruguayans have good reason to trust the system. The country's [expansive welfare state](#) provides [near-universal](#) access to pensions, child care, health care, education and income support for the poor.

Uruguay's happy democrats

Uruguayans are far more supportive of democracy than their neighbors in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. Around 60% say they are "satisfied" with their democracy, while fewer than half of Argentines, Brazilians and Chileans do.



2006 data missing for Argentina. Credit: Chart: The Conversation SA-BY-ND
Source: LAPOP/Vanderbilt University

Uruguay also has one of Latin America's smallest gaps between rich and poor, rivaled only by Argentina. Uruguay's latest Gini Index, a World Bank measure of income inequality, is [39.5](#) – better than the United States, though higher than much of Europe.

Most South American countries have a Gini index above 45, meaning wealth distribution is highly unequal.

Progressive politics and Uruguay's success

Uruguay may be best known for [legalizing recreational marijuana use](#) in 2013. That first-in-the-world policy is the latest in a century-long progressive trend.

Under the Paris-educated [President José Batlle y Ordoñez](#), who led the country from 1903 to 1907 and 1911 to 1915, Uruguay got unemployment insurance, paid [maternity leave](#) and divorces at the wife's request. In 1915, Uruguayan workers became the Latin American workers to be guaranteed an 8-hour work day.

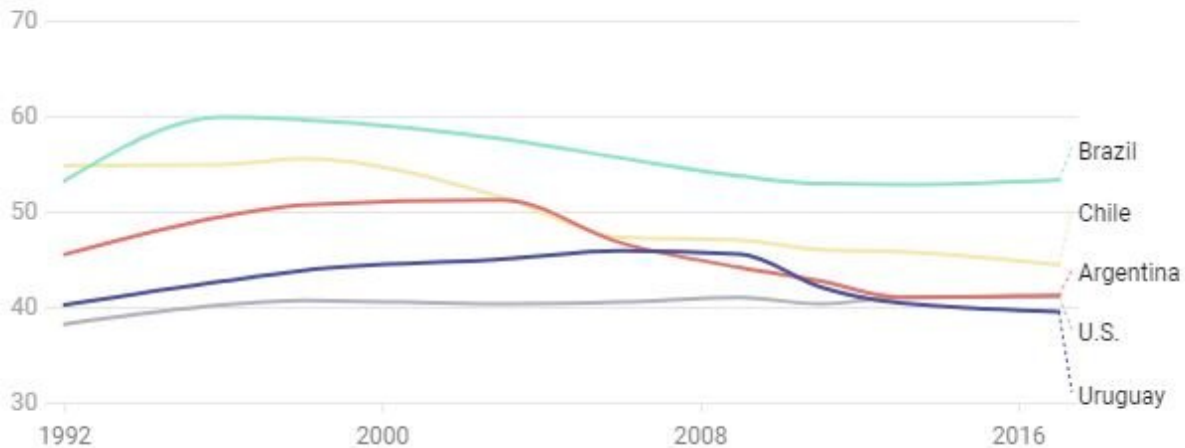
By 1943 Uruguay had established a system for [collective wage negotiations](#), allowing unions to bargain with employers and the government to set salaries, putting the country on a course to become solidly middle class.

Uruguay underwent another period of [strong development](#) in the early 2000s under the left-leaning Frente Amplio party.

Among other reforms made during this 15-year period of progressive government, President Tabaré Vázquez in 2005 revived collective bargaining rights, which had been [gutted in the 1990s](#). As a result, [stagnant wages rose](#), [more informal workers got labor contracts](#) and [labor conditions improved](#) – significant achievements in a region that struggles to provide steady, well-paid employment.

Egalitarian Uruguay

Wealth is relatively well shared among Uruguayans, giving the country lower income inequality than its South American neighbors and, since around 2013, the United States. Inequality is measured using the GINI scale of 0 to 100, where higher numbers reflect a bigger gap between rich and poor.



Shows GINI index from 1992, 1996, 1998, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2017 except for U.S, where data is from 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016. Credit: Chart: The Conversation CC-BY-ND Source: World Bank

Between 2010 to 2015, Vazquez's successor, José Mujica, [legalized abortion](#) and [same-sex marriage](#) in addition to recreational cannabis. Uruguay is [one of only six](#) Latin American countries that recognize marriage equality.

Though the Frente Amplio candidate narrowly [lost Uruguay's 2019 presidential election](#), the party remains the dominant political force, and Uruguayans overwhelmingly [support](#) the left's legacy of generous welfare programs. This makes it unlikely that the center-right President Lacalle Pou, who took office in March just before the pandemic, will radically change course.

Uruguayan exceptionalism

Uruguay does have challenges. It has been slow to address [racial inequality](#) and a rising school [dropout rate](#). Its [aging population](#) has also strained the welfare state.

Nonetheless, the country is weathering the COVID-19 pandemic remarkably well. While it has not eliminated the virus, as similarly sized New Zealand has, Uruguay is one of just a handful of countries to effectively manage the disease.

Its unique and defining characteristics likely helped. Political trust and support for democracy encourage people to follow public health recommendations, and a strong welfare state provides income support and reliable [health care](#) to help slow infection.

Having a strong, transparent democracy, in other words, has enabled Uruguay to [acknowledge, evaluate and control](#) a pandemic that has overwhelmed so many bigger and richer nations.

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