

# URUGUAY 2023: SECURITY AS A PERSISTENT CHALLENGE AND THE DECLINE OF NON-POLICY POLITICS AS A POLITICAL ASSET

*Uruguay 2023: la seguridad como un desafío persistente y el declive del non-policy politics como un activo político*

DOI: 10.4067/S0718-090X2024005000108

VOLUMEN 44 / N° 2 / 2024 / 441-462

ISSN: 0718-090X

Revista de Ciencia Política  
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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes the main socio-political events that took place in Uruguay in 2023, Luis Lacalle Pou's fourth year as president (supported by a rightist coalition). During the 2019 electoral campaign, many of Lacalle Pou's promises were not based on a programmatic shift but on better management (non-policy politics), particularly of economic and security policies. While macroeconomic indicators show moderate performance, security indicators have not improved substantially. Dormant during the pandemic, security became a very important issue in 2023, materialized in high homicide rates and violence linked to drug trafficking and gang conflict. Much like in other Latin American countries, security has become a protracted problem that no single administration can improve. Furthermore, in 2023 there were a series of political scandals, some of which were linked to organized crime and drug-trafficking. We posit that, jointly, these facts undermine the better management capacity rhetoric. This suggests that the current administration lost the advantage of non-policy politics, which could affect its electoral chances in 2024.

**Keywords:** organized crime, security, corruption scandals, non-policy politics

## RESUMEN

*Este artículo describe los principales acontecimientos socio-políticos durante 2023 en Uruguay, el cuarto año de gobierno de Luis Lacalle Pou (un presidente apoyado por una coalición de derecha). Durante la campaña electoral de 2019, muchas de las promesas de Lacalle Pou se basaron en la garantía de una mejor gestión (non-policy politics), en particular en materia de política económica y de seguridad. Si bien los indicadores macroeconómicos muestran un desempeño moderado, los indicadores de seguridad no han mejorado sustan-*



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*cialmente. Los problemas de seguridad, en estado latente durante la pandemia, volvieron a ser un asunto importante en 2023 como muestran las altas tasas de homicidios y violencia vinculada al narcotráfico y al conflicto entre bandas. Al igual que en otros países de América Latina, la seguridad se ha convertido en un problema persistente de no sencilla resolución en un único periodo de gobierno. Además, en 2023 salieron a la luz una serie de escándalos políticos, algunos de ellos vinculados con el crimen organizado y el narcotráfico. En este artículo argumentamos que estos hechos, considerados en conjunto, socavaron las apelaciones discursivas a la mejor capacidad de gestión. Esto sugiere que la actual administración perdió la ventaja del non-policy politics, lo que podría afectar sus chances electorales en 2024.*

*Palabras Clave:* crimen organizado, seguridad, escándalos de corrupción, non-policy politics

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the main socio-political events that took place in Uruguay in 2023, Luis Lacalle Pou's fourth year as president. Lacalle Pou, a center-right president, headed a coalition (Coalición Multicolor, Multicolor Coalition) composed by center-right and right parties—Partido Nacional (National Party, PN, the president's party), Partido Colorado (Colorado Party, PC), Cabildo Abierto (Open Council, CA), a recently founded far-right party, and a small center party, Partido Independiente (Independent Party, PI). In 2019, the Multicolor Coalition won the election, replacing the incumbent leftist party since 2005, Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA).

Lacalle Pou won the 2019 election emphasizing programmatic and non-programmatic issues. Programmatic promises included: managing the economy – which had stopped growing–, lowering taxes, reducing the increasing fiscal deficit, maintaining social policies, and particularly, improving public security, one of the main challenges the previous government had faced due to rising levels of violence and homicide rates. Throughout the electoral campaign, Lacalle Pou claimed that many of these issues demanded urgent consideration. Therefore, he promised that upon taking office, he would use his constitutional power to expedite the consideration of bills by Parliament. The Uruguayan Parliament approved a bill in July 2020, four months after the new government took office. The resulting law, informally known as LUC (law of urgent consideration, Ley de Urgente Consideración, Nr. 19.889), was comprehensive. It was comprised of 497 articles addressing various issues. Approximately one-fourth of the articles focused on punitive policies, including a tougher stance on convictions for minor drug related offenses and increased police discretionary powers. Another important reform was a social security law (Nr. 20.130) passed in 2023 that increased the retirement age from 60 to 65 and changed the calculations for determining the amount of pensions at retirement.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the government implemented

<sup>1</sup> According to academic estimates, the new calculation method could have heterogeneous effects. It could not affect the lowest pensions, which will probably grow slightly, but it could negatively impact the rest of

an education reform that primarily involved changes to the secondary-level curricula, with the aim of reducing dropout rates.

Beyond its programmatic agenda, Lacalle Pou also won the election resorting to “non-policy politics”: non-programmatic appeals to mobilize voters by focusing on administrative capacity, bureaucratic and other officials’ competency, and the importance of honest politicians.<sup>2</sup> As Calvo and Murillo (2019) suggest, during electoral campaigns, non-policy politics appeals are just as important as policy ones, and in some cases, even more important. During the 2019 electoral campaign, many of Lacalle Pou’s promises were not based on a programmatic shift but on the assurance of better management, particularly on economic and security policies. The National Party’s campaign slogan, “A party prepared to rule,” as well as the party platform, highlighted how the party would improve these policy issues: by deploying better administrative capacity. In their own words: “we have the drive, energy, work ethic, technical capacity, and political will to move the country forward.”<sup>3</sup>

In Uruguay, the fourth year of an administration represents the last opportunity for governments to attempt major policy changes because the electoral cycle begins early in the fifth year. We review the year 2023 with a focus on non-policy politics as a tool to weigh the government’s accomplishments and setbacks. Our analysis of the government’s performance up to 2023 suggests that the current administration lost the bonus of non-policy politics. While macroeconomic indicators show moderate performance, security indicators have not improved substantially. Latent during the pandemic, security became a very important issue in 2023 partly because of high homicides and violence closely linked to drug trafficking and gang conflict. We pay special attention to describing the recent growth of illicit markets in Uruguay, and we present original data on criminal organizations linked to micro-trafficking in Montevideo, the capital city (we conducted a survey of 2,688 respondents in Montevideo including a battery of questions on experiences with criminal organizations)<sup>4</sup>. Much like in other Latin American countries, security has become a protracted problem that no single administration can improve. Furthermore, in 2023 there were a series of political scandals, many of which were linked to organized crime and drug-trafficking. We posit that, jointly, these facts undermine the better management capacity rhetoric.

In the next sections, we describe the performance of Lacalle Pou’s administration up to 2023. In doing so, we first analyze the evolution of socio-econom-

the groups (two thirds of retirees) who would obtain a lower pension in the future (“Diez preguntas clave sobre la reforma de la seguridad social”, *La diaria*, February 11, 2023. Available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2023/2/diez-preguntas-clave-sobre-la-reforma-de-la-seguridad-social/>, last accessed: February 28, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Other types of non-policy politics involve patronage and clientelism.

<sup>3</sup> “Programa de Gobierno” (party platform), available at: <https://lacallepou.uy/programa/> (last accessed: 26 February, 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Data on organized crime comes from the project “Criminal Governance Strategies in Uruguay” (FSSC\_1\_2020\_1\_164813), funded by Agencia Nacional de Investigación e Innovación (Uruguay)

ic and security indicators. Then, we review a series of political scandals that affected the government's reputation. We conclude with a discussion of how the center right parties in government have reduced the non-policy political advantage with which they came to power in 2020, examining how this may affect their electoral chances in 2024.

## II. PERFORMANCE OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INDICATORS

The main socio-economic indicators in 2023 show a moderately positive performance. After the end of the pandemic, the economic recovery is “V shaped”, which is to be expected at the end of a crisis. After the Uruguayan economy bounced back, like in other Latin American economies, the growth levels reached in 2021 were not sustained (Figure 1a). Even though at the time of writing this article the figures for GDP growth for 2023 are not yet public, partial data as of September 2023 as well as World Bank projections suggested moderate growth (1.5%), quite below the growth rate in 2022 (4.9%) (Banco Central del Uruguay 2023).<sup>5</sup> Economic growth in 2023 was affected by one of the most severe droughts in the last decade, and by the economic crisis in Argentina.<sup>6</sup> The drought negatively affected agricultural and livestock production, pushing the government to decree a state of emergency in the sector, which led to a reduction in tax levied as a result of the tax relief measures implemented. Furthermore, the government had additional expenses because of the water crisis affecting Montevideo, the capital city, and areas close by. For a period of three months there was no drinkable water in Montevideo, which forced residents to consume bottled water and generated multiple disruptions in industry, and in services such as hospitals and schools.

During the Lacalle Pou administration, excluding the effects of the pandemic, there has been a reduction in fiscal deficit. In 2019, the previous administration's last year in government, the fiscal deficit had been high (3.9% of GDP). In 2023 the fiscal deficit was 3.3% of GDP, similar to 2022. Nevertheless, this reduction is considered a “transient reduction” influenced by a decrease in real income and pensions since 2020, and by a decline in investment. Studies of the behavior of the fiscal deficit in Uruguay have demonstrated that the fiscal deficit follows the electoral cycle: it decreases during the first years of an administration, and it increases during the electoral campaign. Economic analysts argue that by the end of the current administration the fiscal deficit should behave in the same way as a result of the likely increase in public spending at its end (De Haedo 2023). Furthermore, the reduction in the fiscal deficit should be

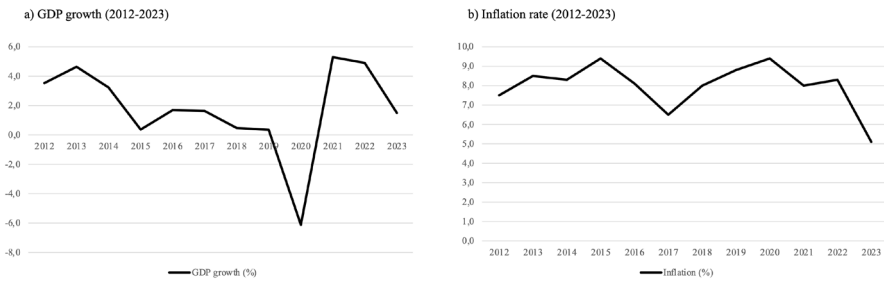
<sup>5</sup> See also: “Uruguay: panorama general” (World Bank, September 2023) available at: <https://www.bancomundial.org/es/country/uruguay/overview> (last accessed: 26 February 2024).

<sup>6</sup> “2023 cerró con deficit fiscal del 3% del PIB y una caída bruta de la recaudación del 1,3%” (*La diaria*, February 1, 2024), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/economia/articulo/2024/2/2023-cerro-con-un-deficit-fiscal-de-3-del-pib-y-una-caida-bruta-de-la-recaudacion-de-13/#:~:text=De%20acuerdo%20al%20informe%20que,Rendici%C3%B3n%20de%20Cuentas%20de%202022>. (last accessed February 22, 2024).

interpreted jointly with an increase in public debt from 49.1% of GDP in 2019 to 57.2% in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

The reduction of inflation stands out among the macroeconomic indicators in 2023. During the previous administration inflation reached a peak of 9.4% in 2015, and in 2019 it decreased to 8.8% (Figure 1b). At the beginning of the current administration, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation peaked at 9.4% again, to then constantly decline to 5.1% in 2023, the lowest level in the last ten years (Banco Central del Uruguay 2023). Overall, the management of macro-economic indicators yielded positive results for the management of inflation, but for other relevant indicators government performance was not outstanding, suggesting that their comparative advantage in administration was not as strong as they claimed during the electoral campaign.

Figure 1. Macroeconomic Indicators



Source: World Bank

Regarding social indicators, 2023 was the first year in the Lacalle Pou administration when the real salary increased, following consecutive reductions in the previous years. (see Figure 2a). The increase placed the real salary at the 2019 level, the last year of the previous administration (Instituto Cuesta Duarte PIT-CNT 2024b).

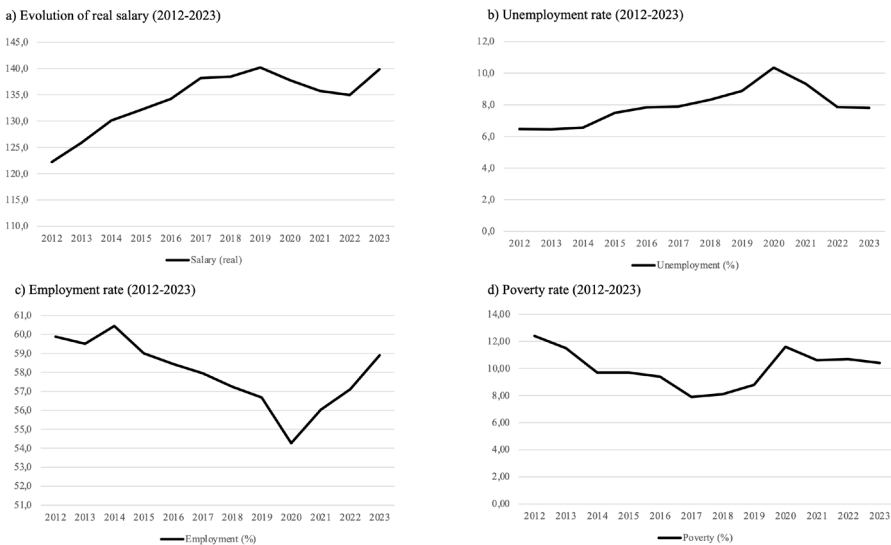
Following the impact of the pandemic on the unemployment rate, this indicator improved systematically reaching 7.8% in 2023, its best performance since 2016 (see Figure 2b). The employment rate also improved, it was 58.9% in 2023, also its best performance since 2015 (Figure 2c). These improvements could be interpreted as resulting from better management. Yet, analysts have highlighted that most of the jobs created in 2023 are not registered with social security and are thus considered informal. In all, considering the four years into the current administration, there is no identifiable change in the trend towards a

<sup>7</sup> “Lacalle Pou dará su último mensaje ante la Asamblea General: ¿con qué cifras cerró el 2023?” (*La Diaria*, February 24, 2024) available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2024/2/lacalle-pou-dara-su-ultimo-mensaje-ante-la-asamblea-general-con-que-cifras-cerro-el-2023/> (last accessed: February 26, 2024).

reduction in informal employment between 2019 and 2023, which had systematically decreased from 2006 to 2019. For example, in 2006 it was 35%, in 2019 it was 25%, and in 2023, 23% (Instituto Cuesta Duarte PIT-CNT 2022; 2024a).

The least auspicious indicators for the current administration relate to poverty. In 2023, the poverty rate was 10.4%, the highest since 2013 (11.4%) (see Figure 2d). The rise in child poverty is particularly relevant; in 2023, it was 20.9% for children between 0 and 6 years of age, and 19.4% for children between 6 and 12.<sup>8</sup> These indicators are the worst in the last ten years; adequate management of economic issues should result in an improvement of in the overall wellbeing of the population. The number of unhoused people also increased; this phenomenon has been on the rise likely before its systematic tracking began in 2006, but it has worsened in the last few years. In 2023, there were 2,758 unhoused people in Montevideo, 32.5% higher than in 2020, and 98% higher than in 2016. Of those unhoused in 2023, 53% stated having been in prison for a period of time, as compared to 43% in 2016 (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social 2023). The deterioration of social indicators also manifests in increased inequality. Even taking into account that Uruguay is one of the most egalitarian countries in Latin America, between 2019 and 2022 it was the only country where

Figure 2. Social Indicators



Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National Institute of Statistics, INE).

<sup>8</sup> Technical reports on poverty estimates in Uruguay, Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), available at: <https://www.gub.uy/instituto-nacional-estadistica/tematica/pobreza> (last accessed: May 14, 2024).

inequality increased (CEPAL 2023). In 2023, inequality rose again with respect to 2022 (GINI is 0.394). After the pandemic, inequality indicators continued to worsen, which represents a change in a sustained trend of reduced inequality since 2007. On balance, economic and social indicators have not improved as much as would be expected based on better management arguments alone.

### III. PERFORMANCE OF SECURITY INDICATORS

Much like in the rest of Latin America, security issues are a key concern for voters, as many of them are affected by violence and insecurity daily (Bonner 2018; Krause 2014; Latinobarómetro 2016; 2017; Visconti 2020; Yashar 2018; Nocetto, Piñeiro, and Rosenblatt 2020; Tiscornia and Pérez Bentancur 2022). Concerns with insecurity frequently force governments across the ideological spectrum to develop punitive policies as visible tools, albeit with almost no results (González 2021; Lessing 2017)

The deterioration of both subjective and objective security indicators was one of the main reasons for the decline in the image of the previous government, which Lacalle Pou capitalized on during the electoral campaign (Nocetto, Piñeiro, and Rosenblatt 2020). He strongly emphasized that security would be a priority for his government, promising to reduce robberies and homicides and to fight drug trafficking. However, like previous governments, Lacalle Pou's administration faced significant security challenges, including persistently high homicide rates, and growing violence related to micro-trafficking.

During Lacalle Pou's administration, the rates of violent and non-violent robberies decreased (Schmidt and Repetto 2022). However, the use of this indicator presents challenges since it is based on reports, and a decline in reporting should not be interpreted as a reduction in the effective rate of a crime. For this reason, homicide rates are often used as a more reliable indicator (Yashar 2018). Despite a reduction in the homicide rate resulting from the pandemic, three years later, in 2023, this indicator is back to its 2019 levels (see Figure 3). This suggests that, as in other countries, any reduction is likely to be the result of behavioral changes induced by the pandemic, rather than policy changes implemented by the current administration (Rojido, Cano, and Borges 2023).

Homicides in Uruguay are concentrated in Montevideo, especially in peripheral neighborhoods. According to official data, over half of these homicides stem from gang disputes.<sup>9</sup> However, these statistics should be interpreted with caution due to the difficulty in ascertaining the precise cause of death. Likely, this indicator overestimates the number of homicides that result from gang disputes (Rojido, Cano, and Borges 2024). Beyond the impact of drug trafficking

<sup>9</sup> "El mapa de los homicidios en Montevideo" (*El País*, n/d), available at: <https://www.elpais.com.uy/que-pasa/el-mapa-de-los-homicidios-en-montevideo-las-calles-y-esquinas-mas-peligrosas-y-el-avance-del-poder-narco> (last accessed: 27 February, 2024).

on the homicide rate, the violence that criminal groups generate has a significant impact on peripheral neighborhoods, which disrupts residents' daily lives (Tiscornia and Pérez Bentancur 2022; Tiscornia et al. 2023; Fynn 2023).

A direct consequence of the deterioration of security indicators is an increase in perceptions of insecurity. Public opinion surveys show that insecurity was the most important concern among citizens during the previous government, becoming less relevant during the pandemic and retaking the first place among the most important concerns in 2023 (Figure 3a). The steady increase in the perception of insecurity dates back to the 2000s, coinciding with the identification of violence as a structural problem in Uruguay, as in other countries in the region (Nocetto, Piñeiro, and Rosenblatt 2020).

Lacalle Pou's government implemented a public security agenda that emphasized and deepened certain punitive policies adopted by the last FA government. Through the LUC, the government incorporated, among various other issues, a stringent stance on sentencing for minor drug-related offenses and expanded police discretionary authority. About a fourth of the articles in the LUC (117 out of 497) centered around public security (Schmidt and Repetto 2022). The LUC deepens a trend in Uruguay and in Latin America, present since the 1990s, towards punitive security policies despite ample evidence of their inefficacy in improving security indicators, and their negative consequences for civil rights, police violence, and crime (Flores-Macías and Zarkin 2021; Holland 2013; Yashar 2018). In 2023, the consequences of the punitive security strategy outlined in the LUC remain quite visible: high punitiveness with no correlate in the reduction of violence, and high recidivism rates (Bogliaccini et al. 2022; Bogliaccini, Flores-Macías, and Tealde 2024).

An empirical manifestation of punitive security policies is the steady increase of the prison population since at least the year 2000 (Figure 3c), which puts Uruguay today among the ten countries with the highest prison population in the world. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there has been a sharp increase in the number of incarcerated women (Figure 3d), likely attributable to the stricter sentencing policies for minor drug-trafficking offenses.<sup>10</sup> While women remain a minority within the prison population, their relative presence in it indicates a rising trend. The growing prison population directly impacts living conditions in prisons, leading to overcrowding. At least since 2020, the number of prisoners far exceeds housing capacity. Academics and human rights organizations have pointed out that overcrowding distorts multiple dimensions of prison life, increasing the potential for conflict and rights violations, as well as recidivism (Comisionado Parlamentario Penitenciario 2022; Bogliaccini, Flores-Macías, and Tealde 2024).

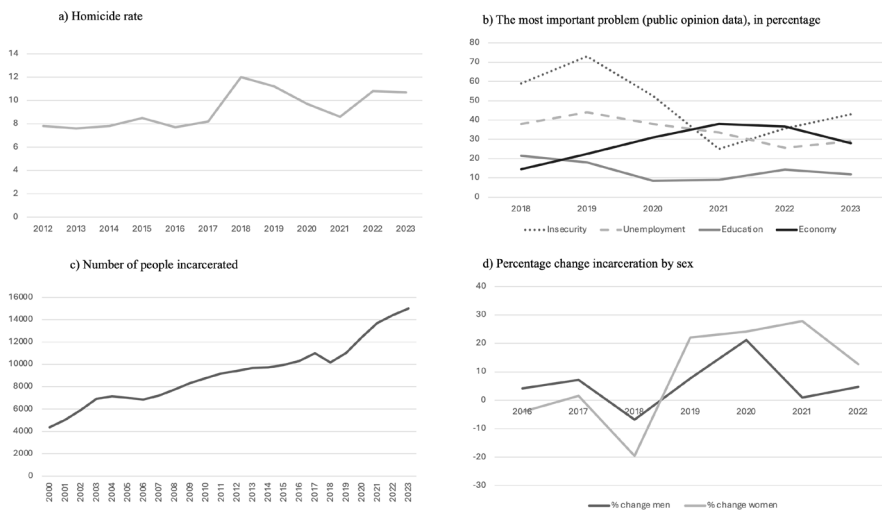
<sup>10</sup> "Persecución del microtráfico en la LUC: 95% de quienes caen presas por intentar ingresar drogas a las cárceles son mujeres" (*La diaria*, September 29, 2021), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/luc/articulo/2021/9/persecucion-del-microtrafico-en-la-luc-95-de-quienes-caen-presas-por-intentar-ingresar-drogas-a-las-carceles-son-mujeres/> (last accessed: February 27, 2024).



Due to the difficulties to improve security issues, the Ministry of Interior, the government entity in charge of public security, designed a new national security strategy that emphasizes prevention. This new policy, designed during 2023 and largely unimplemented, includes social initiatives like violence interruption programs, and policing efforts such as problem-oriented community policing.<sup>11</sup> However, if stringent laws and the LUC remain in place, the marginal changes incorporated in the new security strategy do not represent a movement away from the punitive approach.

The evolution of security indicators suggests that security has become a structural issue, like in other countries in Latin America. As a result, it is unlikely that security will improve over the course of one administration. More importantly, it is unlikely that security issues will be resolved on the basis of better administration alone, rather, they require long-term programmatic approaches. Considering the issue of security in particular, the non-policy politics approach did not yield the expected outcomes.

Figure 3. Evolution of Security Indicators



Note: The homicide rate is the total number of homicides in the total population per 100,000 inhabitants.

Sources: a) Observatorio de Seguridad, Ministerio del Interior (Security Observatory, Ministry of the Interior), b) Equipos Consultores,<sup>12</sup> and c) and d) Comisionado Parlamentario para el Sistema Penitenciario (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Penitentiary System).

<sup>11</sup> Estrategia de Seguridad Integral y Preventiva: Informe Final de Discusión Interpartidaria. Ministerio del Interior, June 2023.

<sup>12</sup> "Inseguridad, desempleo y economía se mantienen como los principales problemas del país para los uruguayos" (Equipos Consultores, February 1, 2024), available at: <https://equipos.com.uy/tag/principal-problema-del-pais/> (last accessed: March 1, 2024).

## IV. THE GROWTH OF ILLICIT MARKETS AND VIOLENCE

### The micro level

For the past twenty years, Uruguay has faced increasing problems related to the development of illicit markets, and the entrenchment of violence in peripheral neighborhoods across the country, and in particular in Montevideo, the capital city. Given Uruguay's relative state strength, high levels of equality, and extensive welfare policies, it is surprising to see the growth and entrenchment of criminal organizations (Tiscornia et al. 2023). The current government inherited many of these problems, but its policies do not seem to have mitigated them. In fact, from a policy standpoint, the path it took has deepened punitive responses (Schmidt and Repetto 2022).

Despite being a persistent problem, information on the development and growth of criminal organizations is scant. Our recent research (Tiscornia et al. 2023) is one of the first systematic efforts to provide descriptive information contributing to the development of evidence-based policy. In this section we present information that results from two years of extensive fieldwork that included the systematic review of press, in-depth interviews, and an online survey. Based on our findings, we suggest that the presence of criminal groups in the city of Montevideo is relatively extensive. Our analysis also suggests that these groups use varying degrees of violence to control illicit markets. Criminal groups generate important distortions and increasing levels of violence that affect neighborhood residents' everyday lives.

In the absence of official statistics, we resorted to the systematic review of newspaper articles and 66 in-depth interviews, which reveal that criminal groups are present in approximately one third of Montevideo's neighborhoods<sup>13</sup>. Our data identifies at least 36 organizations in operation in 24 out of Montevideo's 62 neighborhoods between 2012 and 2022 (Figure 4a). The groups are not distributed homogeneously across neighborhoods, rather, the vast majority are in neighborhoods of lower socio-economic level, in the center, west and north of the urban portion of Montevideo, as shown on the map in Figure 4a. A similar pattern can be observed in other contexts (Arias 2017; Barnes 2022; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo 2020; Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009). Our interviews show that these groups are generally composed of members of families that originally engaged in petty crime, who then became involved in drug dealing.

<sup>13</sup> We reviewed 169 press articles from the four national newspapers between 2012 and 2022, most of the articles are from 2017 onwards. In each article we looked for: name of group, neighborhood, how they relate to the community, other relevant information (members, leaders who might be mentioned, details about its history, origins, etc.). We conducted interviews between 2019 and 2022 in three neighborhoods with high criminal presence, we spoke to residents, workers, local community leaders, local politicians, among others.

Figure 4. Criminal Organizations in Montevideo



Source: Authors' elaboration based on a) systematic press revision, and b) data from survey data, Project Criminal Governance in Montevideo (FSSC\_1\_2020\_1\_164813).

In addition to our systematic review of press and our in-depth interviews, we conducted an online survey between December 2022 and March 2023 (N=2,688) that included questions with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the prevalence of criminal organizations across neighborhoods of Montevideo<sup>14</sup>. Figure 4b shows that about 60% of respondents believe that the presence of groups in their neighborhood is highly prevalent or prevalent, whereas roughly 40% believe there are few or no groups. These results change slightly if we divide Montevideo in two groups based on the way the Ministry of Interior divides neighborhoods (closely linked to average socio-economic status), we refer to them as zone A and B (Figure 5c). Zone A (higher socioeconomic status) exhibits lower presence of criminal groups, whereas zone B concentrates most of the groups. As Figure 4c shows, the categories “a lot” and “somewhat” are more relevant in zone B.

We also asked survey participants about whether they witnessed specific criminal group behaviors. We documented the presence of violent (such as threats, physical violence, and evictions) and nonviolent behaviors (the provision of precarious jobs, make donations in the neighborhood, payment of utilities). Figure 4d shows that, despite dominant accounts in the press, criminal groups in Montevideo behave violently and nonviolently. The categories more commonly mentioned are threats (roughly 16%) and making donations (roughly 21%). Other categories with fewer mentions are evictions (about 6%) and of-

<sup>14</sup> We used Facebook as a tool to disseminate our online survey.

fering jobs (about 13%). These results suggest that the presence of criminal organizations in Montevideo is extensive. From our interviews we learned that threats typically involve dissuading neighbors from talking to police, or from buying drugs from competitors. Donations may involve providing goods for the community (such as footballs for the children's club), or private donations (supply gas stoves, or pay a utility bill). Jobs offered are typically precarious and are often directly linked to the drug business (lookouts, mules, hitmen). Evictions generally take place so that buildings can be used as stash houses for drugs, or weapons.

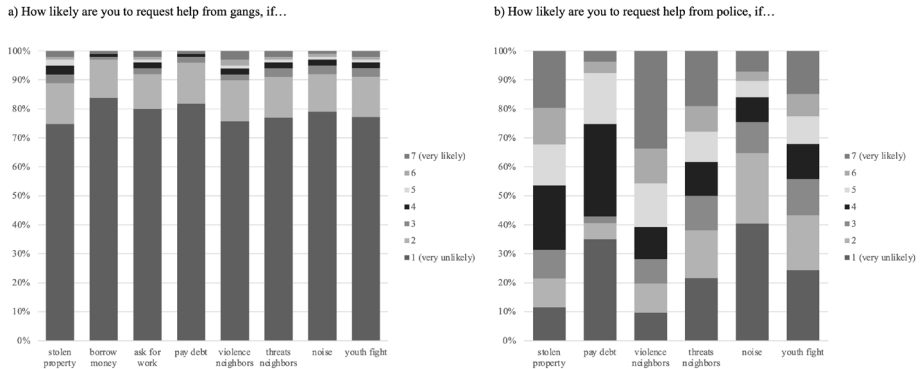
Our interviews also suggest that these groups' presence also generates high levels of violence and insecurity in the neighborhoods where they operate. Violence and insecurity manifest in a concrete (although less frequent) way: homicides, which generate high alarm in public opinion. But it is also present in a very frequent manner in other episodes (fights, shootings, robberies) that dramatically alter everyday life, it affects mobility, creates limitations to attend community centers or schools. In extreme cases, when there are confrontations between groups, or with the police, they may also affect the frequency and availability of public transport, leaving neighborhoods in isolation (Tiscornia and Pérez Bentancur 2022).

Notwithstanding the high levels of violence, criminal groups seem to be focused on the control of illicit markets, and less so on political or social control, as it happens in other countries in Latin America (Arias 2017; Lessing 2020; Magaloni, Franco-Vivanco, and Melo 2020; Magaloni et al. 2020; Moncada 2022; Trejo and Ley 2020). Figure 5 provides evidence of how likely it is that neighborhood residents ask criminal groups to intervene and resolve community problems. Figure 5a shows that residents are highly unlikely to ask criminal gangs to intervene when there have been robberies, or community violence. Conversely, Figure 5b shows that residents are a lot more likely to resort to the state when they need help to solve issues in the community. Our fieldwork suggests that criminal organizations appear to be "contained" from exercise community control beyond illicit markets. We suggest that this dynamic of containment is the result of the extensive presence of social welfare policies in Uruguay. Our research shows that social policies are important to mitigate criminal organizations' growth and capacity for community control. This is because social policies provide neighborhood residents with basic resources, so they won't have to seek help from gangs.

The impact of social policies on the encroachment of criminal organizations is in tension with existing trends in security policy. Even though security policy also contributes to contain criminal organizations' expansion (through the removal of members, the confiscation of drugs), when it becomes progressively punitive, it can backfire and have the opposite effect, i.e., mass incarceration can facilitate groups' organization and consolidation in prisons (Lessing 2017). In addition, state intervention can lead to the breakdown of equilibria that can

result in confrontations between groups, and increased violence towards communities.

Figure 5. Gang and State Service Provision



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Survey Criminal Governance in Montevideo

## The macro level

The issues related to criminal gangs described in the previous section, in particular the development and growth of micro trafficking—local sales of illicit drugs—have continuously expanded in Uruguay over the course of the last two decades as a localized manifestation of organized crime within the larger drug market (Trejo and Ley 2020). Due to the heightened levels of violence and security concerns associated with micro trafficking in peripheral neighborhoods, it often stands out as the most visible aspect. However, organized crime in relation to the drug market constitutes an international phenomenon involving a variety of actors engaged in the different parts of the chain of production and distribution, including laundering of the proceeds. While the criminal groups operating in each stage may differ, they frequently share points of connection as part of the same business (Feldmann and Luna 2023), in “a global chain of local operations” (Trejo and Ley 2020).

Since the 1990s, Uruguay has been involved in the international drug trade as a transit point, facilitating the export of drugs primarily to Europe through the port of Montevideo, and as an attractive financial hub for money laundering (Feldmann and Luna 2023; Tenenbaum 2022; UNODC and EUROPOL 2021). More recently, changes in the geopolitics of the drug market have led to changes in trafficking routes, increasing transit through countries in South America (Yashar 2018). This not only modifies Uruguay’s international position in the drug market but also could create opportunities for the emergence of new businesses such as the establishment of drug storage centers. Data from recent journalistic investigations suggest that criminal groups operating in the coun-

try's peripheral neighborhoods have connections with international criminal organizations, offering them drug transfer and stockpiling services.<sup>15</sup>

In Uruguay, public opinion and political discourse have centered on the activities of criminal groups associated with micro trafficking as the primary issue affecting security.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, recent events, and particularly those in 2023, point to the existence of more intricate ties between the state and organized crime, which is worth focusing closer attention. During 2023, the case of the passport issued to drug trafficker Sebastián Marset described in the following section stands out as a prominent example.

Furthermore, among the multiple changes in the LUC a noteworthy one is allowing transactions of any kind up to USD 120,000 to be made in cash when previously they had to be made through the banking system. Notaries and other agents' obligation to report suspicious activities was also relaxed. These reforms are viewed as measures that facilitate money laundering and increase the flow of revenue from illicit activities, including drug trafficking (Tenenbaum 2022). A suggestive indicator of this flexibilization is the reduction in reports of money laundering.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the facilitation of money laundering through lax legislation, a common way in which criminal organizations take progressive control over politics is through financing political campaigns and political parties.<sup>18</sup> Even though there is no existing evidence of a link between drug cartels and campaign financing in Uruguay, the existing law that regulates campaign finance is quite lax in terms of transparency requirements, potentially leaving the country vulnerable to those kinds of influence.

The increasing role of criminal organizations in "atypical" contexts like Uruguay has become a serious issue in Latin America in similar contexts such as Argentina, Chile, and Costa Rica (Flom 2022; Auyero and Sobering 2019; Feldmann and Luna 2023), but also in similar contexts in other parts of the world, such as some countries in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Spikes in violence and security issues at the micro level (in peripheral neighborhoods) distract public opinion's attention

<sup>15</sup> "Grupos locales trabajan para "organizaciones criminales internacionales" en traslado, acopio y envío de cocaína a Europa, concluye documento interno de la Policía", (*La diaria*, February 9, 2024), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/justicia/articulo/2024/2/grupos-locales-trabajan-para-organizaciones-criminales-internacionales-en-traslado-acopio-y-envio-de-cocaina-a-europa-concluye-documento-interno-de-la-policia/> (last accessed February 21, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> "Heber sobre persecución al microtráfico: "Así como cerramos una boca, se abre otra"" (*La diaria*, July 27, 2022) available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/justicia/articulo/2022/7/heber-sobre-persecucion-al-micro-trafico-asi-como-cerramos-una-boca-se-abre-otra/> (last accessed February 27, 2024).

<sup>17</sup> "Lavado de activos: reportes bajan por segundo año consecutivo y piden fiscalía especializada", (*El Observador*, March 20, 2022) available at: <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/lavado-de-activos-reportes-bajan-por-segundo-ano-consecutivo-y-piden-fiscalia-especializada-202232015037> (last accessed February 27, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> For example, a recent article in *The New York Times* suggests that Mexican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has received funding for his political campaigns from the main drug cartels. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/22/world/americas/mexico-president-drug-cartel.html>

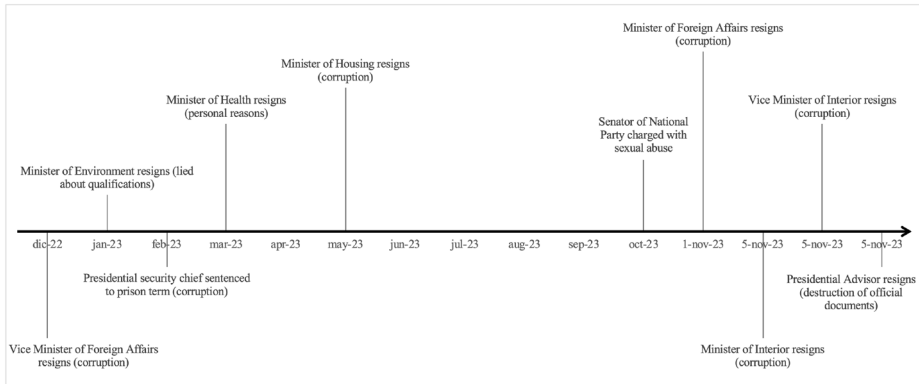
<sup>19</sup> See the recent example of the Netherlands <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/jan/05/amsterdam-netherlands-drugs-policy-trade>

away from other more complex and potentially more dangerous connections between the State and organized crime.

## V. POLITICAL SCANDALS AND CORRUPTION

In addition to the challenges faced by Lacalle Pou's government regarding the management of the economy and security policy, during 2023 it also confronted a variety of political and corruption scandals, which affected its non-policy politics advantage. These scandals triggered political crises and the resignation of high-ranking government officials and other prominent officials close to the president (see Figure 6). Some of these facts were derivations of events that began in the previous year (Vairo and Antía 2023).

Figure 6. Timeline of Political Scandals



A relevant event at the end of 2022 was the resignation of Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Carolina Ache (Colorado Party) due to her involvement in the issuance of a passport to Sebastián Marset, a Uruguayan drug trafficker detained in the United Arab Emirates. Marset is a well-known drug trafficker with links to various criminal organizations in different parts of the world, including the Infrán clan in Paraguay, the First Command of the Capital (PCC) in Brazil, and the 'Ndrangheta in Italy.<sup>20</sup> Marset is internationally investigated for drug trafficking and money laundering offenses, but he has also been linked to the murder of a Paraguayan prosecutor in charge of Operation A Ultranza PY, which aimed to dismantle a criminal network linked to former Paraguayan President Horacio Cartes (Feldmann and Luna 2023).

<sup>20</sup> "Sebastián Marset" (*Insight Crime*, November 8, 2023), available at: <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias-crimen-organizado-uruguay/sebastian-marset/> (last accessed February 22, 2024).

During 2023, the Marset case had consequences that generated the worst political crisis faced by Lacalle Pou's government, culminating in the resignation of high-ranking government officials very close to the president. In November 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Francisco Bustillo, Minister of Interior Luis Alberto Heber (National Party), the Deputy Minister of Interior Guillermo Maciel (former member of the Colorado Party until 2019 when he abandoned the party joined to the National Party), and the principal communication advisor of the presidency, formerly Lacalle Pou's campaign manager, Roberto Lafluf, resigned. These resignations were associated with the disclosure of WhatsApp messages from former Vice Minister Carolina Ache, which suggested that a meeting had been planned between the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Presidency to conceal relevant information about the Marset case from Parliament. The messages also suggested that relevant official documents pertaining to the investigation into this case, conducted by the Attorney General's Office, had been destroyed.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this case, in early 2023 other events took place that also affected the government politically.

In January 2023, the Minister of Environment, Adrián Peña (Colorado Party), resigned because he was caught lying about his university degree (he alleged he had completed his degree and graduated, when in fact he had not). In and of itself, this fact is relatively minor. However, it took on political relevance because during the prior administration the parties of the now ruling coalition, in particular the National Party (the president's party), intensely criticized the previous administration for a similar event: the vice president Raúl Sendic (Frente Amplio) had also lied about his university degree (Carneiro and Traversa 2018).

In February, President Lacalle Pou's former security chief's prison sentence was made public. Alejandro Astesiano had been detained preventively at the end of 2022 for participating in an international criminal network that falsified documents so that Russian citizens could obtain Uruguayan passports. It was later revealed that Astesiano carried out multiple favors for different types of actors using state information and intelligence resources, operating from an office in the Presidency (Vairo and Antía 2023). Among other things, Astesiano was implicated in espionage against lawmakers of the current opposition and other high-ranking officials of the previous administration (Frente Amplio), as well as against leaders from trade unions and students. He was also implicated in the provision of information to businessmen in relation to public tenders.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Así es el documento de 12 páginas en el que Ache dejó constancia del chat con Maciel" (*Montevideo Portal*, November 11, 2023), available at: <https://www.montevideo.com.uy/Noticias/Asi-es-el-documento-de-12-paginas-en-el-que-Ache-dejo-constancia-de-chat-con-Maciel-uc870491> (last accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> "Caso Astesiano: Fiscalía abrió una nueva causa para investigar licitaciones públicas tras declaración de empresario" *La diaria*, September 20, 2023), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/justicia/articulo/2023/9/caso-astesiano-fiscalia-abrio-una-nueva-causa-para-investigar-licitaciones-publicas-tras-declaracion-de-empleado/> (last accessed February 22, 2024).



In May, Housing Minister Irene Moreira (Cabildo Abierto) resigned because she had discretionally awarded a house from a state social housing program to a militant of her party. Later, it became known that there had been several direct housing adjudications.<sup>23</sup> The Minister's resignation also generated a conflict with one of the members of the government coalition, Cabildo Abierto, which was later resolved by appointing another politician from that party as Minister.

All these events are compounded by the so-called "Penadés case," referring to Senator Gustavo Penadés (National Party) Lacalle Pou's most important parliamentary operator. A member of his party accused him of having engaged in sexual relations with her in exchange for money when she was a minor.<sup>24</sup> Later, multiple victims emerged who accused the Senator of similar acts. As the Prosecutor's Office progressed in the investigation, Penadés resigned from the National Party, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity, and expelled from the Senate. Finally, on October 10, he was placed in pretrial detention for multiple crimes of sexual exploitation of minors. Up until the point when the indictment became known, the President and the Minister of Interior publicly defended Penadés. In the ruling, an accusation against Carlos Taroco, director of one of the country's main prisons, was also revealed. He was charged with having led, at Penadés's request, a parallel police investigation. Taroco's action involved the use of state resources to favor Penadés, which included espionage, surveillance, photographic records, clandestine wiretapping, and investigation of the victims.<sup>25</sup>

In all, the year 2023 involved multiple replacements of political leaders who were close to the president. These replacements impacted the composition of cabinet. In 2023 alone there were five ministerial changes (in addition to the ones already mentioned, the Minister of Health, Daniel Salinas (Cabildo Abierto), left his position due to personal reasons), in addition to seven prior ones, resulting in a total of twelve changes in cabinet during the first four years of Lacalle Pou's administration. Table 1 shows the number of changes in cabinet during each administration since 1985. As compared to the same period in previous administrations (the first four years), Lacalle Pou's administration seems relatively unstable. This can be expected from a coalition government, in particular Lacalle Pou's coalition has been the most fragmented of all governing coalitions since the return of democracy in 1985 (Chasquetti, Buquet, and Cardarello 2013). One dominant feature of these cabinet changes is that many

<sup>23</sup> "Lacalle Pou le pidió la renuncia a la Ministra Irene Moreira y Cabildo Abierto no descarta irse de la coalición" (*El Observador*, May 5, 2023), available at: <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/lacalle-pou-le-pidio-la-renuncia-a-irene-moreira-20235585958> (last accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> "2023: el año más crítico del gobierno de Luis Lacalle Pou" (*La diaria*, December 30, 2023), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/politica/articulo/2023/12/2023-el-ano-mas-critico-del-gobierno-de-luis-lacalle-pou/> (last accessed February 22, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> "La Justicia prorrogó la prisión preventiva para Carlos Taroco, exdirector del Comcar" (*La diaria*, February 14, 2024), available at: <https://ladiaria.com.uy/justicia/articulo/2024/2/la-justicia-prorrogo-la-prision-preventiva-para-carlos-taroco-exdirector-del-comcar/> (last accessed February 22, 2024).

of them were linked to corruption and political scandals, notably, the changes in the two most important ministries: Interior and Foreign Affairs. During previous administrations, the changes that resulted from political scandals were marginal (Chasquetti, Buquet, and Cardarello 2013, 38). Political scandals during the Lacalle Pou administration undermined the government's non-policy politics' advantage as the administration's differential resource; they were very prominent in the news cycle and impacted public opinion in a negative way. According to a survey from polling company Equipos Consultores at the end of 2023, following cabinet changes prompted by the Maset case, the President's approval rating was 45%, while 36% expressed disapproval.<sup>26</sup>

Table 1. Changes in Cabinet During the First Four Years of Uruguayan Governments (1985-2023)

Government	Number of changes in cabinet	Number of Ministries
Julio María Sanguinetti, Colorado Party (1985-1990)	5	11
Luis Alberto Lacalle Herrera, National Party (1990-1995)	12	12
Julio María Sanguinetti, Colorado Party (1995-2000)	8	12
Jorge Batlle, Colorado Party (2000-2005)	15	13
Tabaré Vázquez, Frente Amplio (2005-2010)	8	13
José Mujica, Frente Amplio (2010-2015)	7	13
Tabaré Vázquez, Frente Amplio (2015-2020)	2	13
Luis Lacalle Pou, National Party (2020-2025)	12	14

Note: The number of changes in cabinet reflects the quantity of ministers removed, rather than the number of ministries that underwent alterations in ministerial positions.

Source: authors' elaboration based on data from Oficina Nacional de Servicio Civil (National Civil Service Office).

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have analyzed the most relevant socio-political events during 2023, the fourth year of the Lacalle Pou administration. Security—a central aspect of the administration, as well as the 2019 electoral campaign—did not improve. Like in the broader context of Latin America, security policy is a lingering problem that is difficult to address. The Uruguayan experience shows that the management of security is complex, and it is unlikely to be resolved in a 5-year period of government. Nor is it a matter of non-policy politics. As demonstrated by the lack of improvement in security as well as the multiple political scandals faced by the current administration, appeals to better administrative capacity are hard to sustain.

<sup>26</sup> "Evaluación de Lacalle Pou en Noviembre: 45% aprueba, 33% desaprueba" (Equipos Consultores, December 12, 2023), available at: <https://equipos.com.uy/evaluacion-lacalle-pou-en-octubre/> (last accessed: May 22, 2024).

Lacalle Pou's administration continues to enjoy positive evaluations from public opinion, although the gap between approval and disapproval has steadily narrowed since the second half of 2021 (Vairo and Antía 2023). Despite the President's consistently high approval, voting intent for his party, the PN, has remained at around 30%, maintaining the levels from the first round of the 2019 election. Neither of these figures has translated into increased support among other coalition partners, as shown by opinion poll data.<sup>27</sup>

The current electoral landscape seems to be favorable for FA. Not only is voting intent for FA above the turnout it reached during the first round of the general election in 2019 (39%), but also, it is above the forecast from public opinion surveys prior to that election. This situation is the result of two factors: First, FA capitalized on existing voter dissatisfaction among certain groups, mainly through its opposition to several reforms implemented during the current administration (specifically the LUC and the social security reform), as well as on the discontent resulting from the decline in real income in a context of economic growth post pandemic. Second, the political scandals and corruption events surrounding the government have worked to undermine its earlier appeals to superior administrative capabilities, potentially rendering non-policy politics a less effective campaign strategy.

The positive prospects for FA do not imply that the winners and losers of the 2024 electoral campaign are set. Beyond the current political context, the two main competing parties, the FA and the PN, are strong political organizations with significant grassroots and ability to mobilize their constituencies (Pérez Bentancur, Piñeiro Rodríguez, and Rosenblatt 2020; Rosenblatt 2018). While the electoral landscape appears favorable to FA, its primary competitor will be PN, which has the advantage of controlling the resources of the State and most local governments. Everything points to a highly competitive election.

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<sup>27</sup> See for instance trends in public opinion data fro Equipos Consultores: "Simpatía política por Partido en abril: FA 43%, partidos de la Coalición 39%" (Equipos Consultores, May 21, 2024), available at: <https://equipos.com.uy/simpatia-politica-por-partido-en-abril/> (last accessed: May 22, 2024).

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**Received:** March 1, 2024.

**Accepted:** May 24, 2024.

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