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Policy mood and thermostatic representation in developing democracies: taking the temperature in Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

The dynamics of aggregate public opinion – particularly James Stimson’s measure of policy mood – have long been used to explain electoral outcomes and government responsiveness in the United States. However, we still know little about policy mood outside the US and a few Western European countries. Understanding the relationship between policy and preferences outside the pool of advanced democracies is crucial as voters outside that context are often depicted as outcome oriented; that is, they are depicted as voting based on valence issues, where there is shared agreement on the preferred outcome, instead of on a set of coherent policy preferences. We argue that this depiction of voters is attributable to the absence of data in these countries and not to the absence of coherent policy preferences. We test our argument by analyzing nearly three decades of Uruguayan public opinion data including 78 different questions administered 295 times. Our analysis shows that policy preferences across related issues in Uruguay largely move in tandem, suggesting that a coherent policy mood indeed exists. Further, we provide evidence that this policy mood is distinct from symbolic political ideology and that it responds thermostatically to changes in government. This thermostatic responsiveness suggests that Uruguayans do not merely focus on whether the economy is good or bad but, rather, update their policy preferences in response to the direction of government policy. Together, these results offer a much more nuanced depiction of public opinion outside advanced industrial democracies than previous research suggests, with important implications for democratic accountability in Latin America and other developing economies.

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KEYWORDS Policy preferences; policy mood; ideology

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Introduction

Representative democracy is based on people's policy preferences guiding policy decisions. Within the United States, one prominent approach to examining the opinion-policy relationship includes analyzing mass-elite congruence (Converse and Pierce 1986; Miller and Stokes 1963; Powell 2000). Studies of "policy congruence" evaluate whether citizens' and politicians' preferences are aligned but do not tell whether mass preferences are translated into policies implemented by a government, or even whether political parties are punished for not representing public preferences in their policy implementation. A second, perhaps even more influential, approach considers "dynamic representation," the process by which policy makers adjust policy to align with shifting public preferences (Enns 2022; Erikson et al. 2002; Stimson et al. 1995; Wlezien 1995). Dynamic representation can reflect two underlying processes: either the process of governments responding directly to citizens' shifting policy preferences ("policy accommodation") or the process of electorates changing the government when the political parties in charge are not representing mass preferences ("electoral turnover") (Bartle, Bosch, and Orriols 2020).

A substantial body of research examining the United States and other advanced western democracies (Ford, Jennings, and Somerville 2015; Jennings and Wlezien 2015; Soroka and Wlezien 2010) has found evidence of dynamic representation.¹ Despite the importance of opinion *change* for understanding representation, the study of shifting policy preferences has largely been neglected outside advanced western democracies. In the context of Latin America, we believe theoretical considerations and data availability issues have kept scholars from carefully considering opinion change.

Much research conducted in Latin America suggests that public opinion in these countries generally is not policy focused. To the extent that past research has identified policy-driven attitudes, the focus has been on valence issues, where there is shared agreement on the preferred outcome, such as a strong economy or low incidence of crime (Carlin, Singer, and Zechmeister 2015; Enns and Gomez 2019). This research suggests that Latin American citizens (like voters in other parts of the world) reward or punish incumbents based on their ability to deliver on these types of uniformly supported issues (Murillo and Visconti 2017; Murillo, Oliveros, and Vaishnav 2010; Remmer 1991; 2002; Singer and Carlin 2013). A second line of research finds evidence that, in some countries, vote choice reflects symbolic ideology (i.e. self-identified political ideology as left/right or

¹The normative implications of dynamic representation are not always positive. Enns (2014, 2016) shows that responsiveness to increasingly punitive public attitudes was a primary cause of the rise of mass incarceration in the United States.

liberal/conservative) (Singer 2002; Zechmeister 2008). Although much of this research is cross-sectional, the lack of focus on policy preferences in cross-sectional research helps explain the lack of attention to change in policy preferences. If Latin American public opinion is thought to be primarily focused on outcomes, such as economic performance, or political ideology (e.g. am I a liberal or conservative?), there is little reason to expect support for policies to shift in meaningful ways over time. This type of systematic opinion change not only requires coherent policy preferences, but it requires sufficient attention to the political environment to update these policy preferences as policies and outcomes change.

Is public opinion (and, thus, democratic responsiveness) in Latin America primarily a function of symbolic ideology, valence issues, and economic outcomes? Given the authoritarian experiences of many Latin American countries, it could be argued that political preferences are structured differently than in advanced democracies. However, we believe this to be an overly restrictive view of Latin American public opinion. First, many economic and political inputs to opinion change are ubiquitous and easy to process, leading – at least in the U.S. – the most and least informed citizens to update their policy preferences virtually in tandem (Enns and Kellstedt 2008). Second, despite some differences, the news media environment in Western Europe and Latin America share many commonalities (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Walter 2011; Parker 1997, 26–27). Consistent with this view, existing evidence suggests there are compelling reasons to expect Latin Americans' policy preferences to shift in meaningful ways. For example, there is some evidence that policy positions are connected to electoral behavior and outcomes in Latin America (Baker and Greene 2011; 2015; Dominguez and Lawson 2004; Nadeau et al. 2017; Schiumerini 2019; Zechmeister 2008). Although much of this research is based on election studies, if policy preferences influence election outcomes, we have reason to believe that policy-focused opinion can shift in meaningful ways in the Latin American context. Indeed, Remmer (2021) goes even farther and argues that the study of “national mood” may be even more applicable to Latin America than to OECD countries due to the former's greater susceptibility to international economic shocks and associated constraints on policy choice.

Given these theoretical considerations, why is there little evidence of systematic opinion changes in Latin America? One reason is the previously mentioned theoretical focus on symbolic ideology and valence issues. If voters consistently support a particular political ideology and directional outcomes such as a strong economy and low crime, there is little reason to expect policy preferences to shift in a meaningful way. A second reason is the lack of relevant longitudinal public opinion data. In Latin America, regularly conducted media or academic public opinion surveys remain scarce. Further, while immensely valuable, the few long-term international public opinion projects

have tended to focus on issues related to democratic preferences, trust in institutions, valence issues, and symbolic ideology over specific policy issues. It is impossible to know the extent to which the limited number of repeated policy-focused survey questions *reflect* an implicit view that Latin American voters tend not to hold meaningful policy preferences or whether the limited number of policy questions has *shaped* subsequent theorizing.² Either way, as a result of the available data, scholars have substantial knowledge about Latin Americans' preferences for democracy and their ideological self-identification, but much less about their views concerning specific policy issues and how these views change over time. The process of economic liberalization fostered the inclusion in these international public opinion projects of a regularly-asked set of questions about market orientation preferences, yet even on this topic we know relatively little about respondents' views towards specific policy issues.

To test our argument about the nature of public opinion in Latin America, we need policy-specific questions that have been asked repeatedly over time. Repeated questions are necessary to evaluate whether the public's policy preferences shift in a structured way and whether these changes respond to (and have the capacity to influence) government outputs. We focus on the case of Uruguay, which offers an unprecedented opportunity to analyze previously unavailable policy-focused survey data (Uruguay also offers important theoretical advantages, which we discuss below). Specifically, we partnered with the two main Uruguayan survey firms (*Cifra* and *Opción Consultores*) who shared relevant survey data dating back to 1993. As part of this project, we recovered all data from the various storage formats, converted the data to updated formats, cleaned the data, and generated poststratification weights. All project data are archived with the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Once all surveys were recovered and cleaned, we searched all the datasets and questionnaires, selecting policy-related questions and computing survey marginals for each question. Additionally, we repeated the same process for three international public opinion surveys conducted at least twice in Uruguay (Americas Barometer, Latinbarometer, and World Values Survey).³ The resulting aggregated dataset includes 78 different policy-related survey questions administered 295 times by 5 survey organizations across nearly a thirty-year period with a total sample size of over 70,000 respondents. These data allow us to analyze policy preferences across six

²An additional possibility is that the cross-national design of these surveys made it harder to ask questions about specific policies that would apply to all countries in the survey. However, we do not think this fully accounts for the question choice because policy questions can be worded in a sufficiently general way to apply to all countries in a survey; for example, "Would you like to see more, less, or about the same spending on a particular policy?"

³As noted above, while none of these international surveys individually have enough policy questions for longitudinal analysis, together, combined with all that data from *Cifra y Opción Consultores*, we can analyze our hypotheses related to opinion change in Uruguay.

elections, which is unprecedented in Latin America and outside the usually studied pool of developed countries.

The case of Uruguay offers theoretical advantages. In the context of Latin America, Uruguay belongs to the select group of “most democratic cases,” and has one of the highest democratic records. It also has a stable party system with high levels of mass-elite congruence (Luna and Zechmeister 2005). These characteristics make it easier to identify which set of policies is favored by each political party. Thus, theoretically, we have reason to believe citizens have structured policy preferences. Furthermore, during the period under study, the country was ruled by different political parties roughly covering the entire ideological spectrum. It also experienced significant reforms in several policy areas such as social security, education, taxation, wage setting, income distribution, marijuana legalization and gay marriage. That provides an opportunity to observe whether changes in the ideological sign of governments correspond to thermostatic movements in the electorate.

To evaluate how Uruguayan policy preferences change over time, we utilize the method developed by Stimson (1991) to combine the data into a single measure of Uruguayan policy mood from 1993 to 2020. Policy mood captures shifts over time in the public’s aggregate *policy* preferences along a liberal-conservative or left-right dimension. Higher values indicate the public is more supportive of government action and spending, while lower values indicate the opposite: conservative or rightist preferences. Importantly, policy mood, which is sometimes referred to as operational ideology, is distinct from standard self-identified liberal/conservative (or symbolic) political ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2012). The focus on estimating Uruguayan policy mood offers three advantages for our analysis. First, it offers a direct assessment of the coherence (or lack thereof) of Uruguayan policy preferences. Second, if, as we expect, we estimate policy mood, it will provide a time-series measure that we can use to test whether opinion change is systematic and whether it responds thermostatically (Wlezien 1995), as it does in advanced industrial countries. Third, this measure is important as it can be used for future research to further evaluate the causes and consequences of shifts in Uruguayan public opinion.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we develop our theoretical expectations. Second, we describe the method and data we use to measure policy mood. We then use the measures to test the dynamic relationship between public opinion and policy. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings. Of particular importance, we provide some of the most compelling evidence to date of issue-based preferences in Latin America and their relationship to government outputs. In other words, policy preferences are relevant in Latin America. This paper makes four main contributions: (1) It strengthens and extends theories of democratic

accountability in developing countries by looking at whether the aggregate movement of policy preferences is meaningful and how they respond to electoral outcomes; (2) it explores the foundations of political ideology in developing democracies, (3) it provides insight into the political repercussions of policy shifts in Uruguay with important implications for or extensions to other Latin American democracies; and (4) it makes a large amount of Uruguayan survey data public through the Roper Center and freely available to Uruguayans through the National Agency for Research and Innovation (*ANII* by its acronym in Spanish). The contributions are grounded in the recovery, examination, and harmonization of over 200 public opinion surveys from local pollsters that were previously unavailable. Taking advantage of this new data, we consolidated an original database of individual-level data on public opinion for the period 1993–2020 for Uruguay. To our knowledge, no such database is available for any country in Latin America.

Theoretical expectations and analytic strategy

Theoretically, we have reason to believe citizens have structured policy preferences and the potential for dynamic representation in developing countries, as do citizens in many established democracies. We hypothesize that structured policy preferences are present in developing countries and vary through time. Following this idea, we focus on opinion change by looking at how policy preferences evolve. In doing so, we rely on two different measures: policy mood (Stimson 1991) and symbolic ideology.

Policy mood, which is sometimes referred to as operational ideology, is distinct from symbolic or standard liberal/conservative political ideology (Ellis and Stimson 2012). While much political science research elaborates upon the concept of ideology, its measurement remains subject to debate. On the one hand, in its classic definition, ideology is a summarized worldview composed of a set of political, social, and economic attitudes and ideas bound together, usually along one dimension (left-right or liberal-conservative) (Converse 2006; Mason 2018). On the other hand, ideology can be understood as a heuristic tool used by citizens to simplify information, evaluate political alternatives, and make political decisions more efficiently and precisely (Downs et al. 1957), without constituting a cohesive set of policies. In the same vein, Ellis and Stimson (2012) argue that there are two different conceptions of ideology: operational ideology – concrete policy preferences – and symbolic ideology – a representation of how individuals think of themselves.

Recent research argues that policy preferences are just one element of ideology, with social identity – the identification with “liberal,” “conservative,” “right,” or “left” tags – being an important part of ideology (Mason 2018). At elite levels, there is often little difference between symbolic and operational ideology. However, these two brands of ideology may differ significantly

among citizens. For instance, in the US, research shows that, on average, citizens identify themselves with the conservative label, while having on average more liberal policy preferences (Ellis and Stimson 2012).

The dynamic of symbolic and operational ideology in Latin America has been largely overlooked as most research in the region relies on self-reported ideology (symbolic ideology). This is partly due to the lack of comprehensive and reliable public opinion data on Latin Americans' policy preferences (Bogliaccini, Sánchez, and Queirolo 2022). However, when researchers have tested the relevance of ideology as a predictor of voting behavior, the evidence found indicates that ideology matters in Latin America (Singer 2002; Torcal and Mainwaring 2003). Nevertheless, this does not mean that voters are refined or consistent in their understanding of ideology (Arnold and Samuels 2011). On the contrary, symbolic ideology is the relevant determinant of voting behavior (Singer 2002; Zechmeister 2008).

There is also research that shows how policy stances are connected to electoral behavior and outcomes in Latin America. One example is the work done by Baker and Greene (2011), which is focused on Latin Americans' economic policy preferences and finds a moderate policy mandate against market reforms at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, their thesis has been debated and there is evidence that the movement to the left in Latin America was more driven by economic outcomes, mainly economic dissatisfaction, than policy conversion (Queirolo 2013; Roberts 2014).

To understand how electoral outcomes and policy preferences are related, we need a measure that allows us to fully understand how citizens' policy preferences change over time. Consequently, we rely on policy mood (Stimson 1999), an aggregate measure of policy preferences that cancels out individual-level random error, providing estimates with meaningful marginal changes. The concept of policy mood was developed by Stimson in his classic 1991 essay aimed at uncovering the movements of public opinion that, cumulatively over time, can change politics (p.5). To do so, Stimson defined and measured policy mood as the "general disposition" (20) of the public to policy issues. Broadly, it consists in an assessment of whether the public leans conservative or liberal on many public policy issues. The policy mood considers not individual preferences but aggregated ones, which is particularly important for observing changes over time. Stimson's estimation rests on the idea that the ratio between answers to the same question at two different time points can be understood as empirical evidence of change in a latent variable, i.e. policy mood (Stimson 2012).

The policy mood estimate is a summarized measure based on actual policy preferences and not on self-identification reports. To generate it, the input

data for policy mood are policy-related question marginals,⁴ with response categories coded as left or right. Thus, each administration of a given question has its unique score. The problem arises when combining these scores among different questions. Public opinion data is often irregular as questions are asked only a few times in a given period. To address this issue, Stimson uses the dyad-ratios algorithm which uses ratios between dyads of the same question at different times to generate a single index from multiple question series even when missing data exist (2012). Stimson's policy mood has become one of the most important variables in modern studies of dynamic representation and democracy.

Many researchers have worked on extrapolating the policy mood approach to a diversity of contexts, especially for European cases. For instance, Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda, and Stimson (2011) estimated the policy mood in Britain for 55 years (1950–2005) and found support for the thermostatic conception of public opinion. Other policy mood measures have been estimated for France (Stimson, Thiébaud, and Tiberj 2012), Spain (Bartle, Bosch, and Orriols 2020) and Italy (Bellucci and Pellegata 2017). In the case of Latin America, the evidence is limited. The most important research was conducted by Baker (2015), who estimated the Mexican policy mood for the period 1988–2012.

Most of these studies find two patterns of results. First, policy tends to reflect shifting public preferences via the two mechanisms described above: electoral turnover and policymakers shifting their positions to align with shifting public attitudes. Second, policy change tends to overshoot the public's ideal point, leading public attitudes to change course. Wlezien (1995) refers to this as "thermostatic" responsiveness.⁵ Like a person who turns on the air conditioner when it's hot, only to turn down the air conditioner when the room gets too cold, a government may implement more liberal policies in response to shifting public opinion, and then, when the policy shift is too great and the electorate moves to the conservative side, the government delivers more conservative policies. In this article, we take the opportunity to observe whether changes in the ideological sign of governments correspond to thermostatic movements in the electorate, but currently we lack sufficient data points test this hypothesis.

The crafting of a policy mood measure

Our first aim is to estimate the Uruguayan policy mood for the period 1993–2020. To achieve this, we utilize all available questions that relate to policy

⁴For instance, a question used in Stimson's original measure (1991) is *We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount.* Domains include cities, health, environment, education, etc. Pro-spending responses are coded as liberal or left and anti-spending responses as conservative or right.

⁵Also see Davis (1980).

preferences – 78 in total – that were asked at least two times during the period of analysis (See Supplementary Materials).⁶ Because the questions were repeated, we have a total of 295 survey questions in the data based on over 70,000 respondents. The data come from five prominent sources. First, we considered questions from three international public opinion projects: Americas Barometer (LAPOP), Latinobarometer, and World Value Survey (WVS). These are face-to-face surveys.⁷ We also included items from two national polling houses: *Cifra* and *Opción Consultores*. In the case of *Cifra*, we include data from 27 years of face-to-face and telephone interviews (landlines and cellphones). *Opción Consultores* data begin in 2012 and come from cellphone surveys.⁸

Most of our questions reflect scope-of-government considerations, such as support for government spending, whether services should be provided by the government or private firms, whether government should be responsible for individuals, tax attitudes, and support for unions (who advocate for left-leaning policies). These types of questions align with the typical conception of policy mood (Baker 2015; Bartle, Bosch, and Orriols 2020; Enns and Kellstedt 2008; Stimson 1991). We also include policy questions related to social, moral, and cultural issues, such as views toward abortion, same-sex marriage and cannabis legalization, as well as two foreign affairs issues that ask about the U.S. and Cuba. Finally, we include questions related to local controversies, such as opinions toward the prior military regime (1973–1985) during which human rights violations occurred.

While research in the U.S. and other advanced economies shows that support for different policies often ebb and flow together, creating a “policy mood” (Stimson 1991), public opinion concerning specific policies can also shift in distinct ways (Clements and Field 2014; Enns 2014; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Because we do not have strong priors about which Uruguayan policy preferences move together to constitute Uruguayan policy mood, we include all available policy-oriented survey questions. This approach parallels Stimson’s (1991) early work and offers multiple advantages. First, by not imposing a structure on policy preferences, we let the relationships in the data – if they exist – emerge. And there is little cost to including policy series that are not related to the underlying concept because, by definition, these will not relate to the other questions nor to

⁶Most of the questions have the exact same wording, with 9 questions in which we combine items with slightly different question wordings. In these cases, even though questions wordings and/or response categories are not strictly the same, we treat them as one unique variable as they refer to the same concept. All combined sources are detailed in the Supplementary Materials.

⁷Latinobarometer has the longest time series (21 years) and is our main source; 49% of our questions are from this survey.

⁸More details on our sources are presented in the Supplementary Materials. Following Stimson (1991), we calculate the $\frac{\% \text{Liberal}}{\% \text{Liberal} + \% \text{Conservative}}$ for each question.

the final measure. Finally, including all available questions improves our estimation given that longitudinal policy-related survey data is scarcer in Uruguay than in other contexts where the policy mood has been estimated.

After selecting our questions, we used Stimson's (1999) dyad-ratios algorithm to generate our measure of policy mood. The dyad-ratios algorithm is a common technique for estimating latent variables with applications beyond policy mood such as public attitudes toward criminal justice (Enns 2014), executive approval, and immigration attitudes (Van Hauwaert and English 2019). This algorithm uses a factor analytic approach to extract the common opinion change across all 78-question series in our data (Stimson 1991, 2018). From this perspective, a shift in policy preferences on each of the 78 questions in our data can be viewed as a potential indicator of a shift in policy mood. If Uruguayan policy preferences are not structured along a common dimension, no commonalities will emerge. By contrast, if, as we hypothesize, Uruguayans hold policy preferences that respond to government outputs, we expect policy preferences across different issues to shift in tandem, allowing us to measure whether the policy mood is becoming more leftist or rightist.⁶

To assess the robustness of the measure, we run a series of checks. First, to ensure that our measure of policy mood is not sensitive to the questions included, we estimated 78 separate versions of policy mood, each time dropping a different question. The strong parallelism across these 78 series (See Figure A-1 in Supplementary Materials) shows that our final estimate is not at all sensitive to which questions are included. Second, we calculate policy mood using an algorithm based on Item Response Theory (IRT) (McGann 2014). Like past work comparing IRT approaches with Stimson's Dyad-Ratio algorithm (McGann 2014; Stimson 2018), we find the two approaches yield nearly identical results (See Figure A-2 in Supplementary Materials).

To test our hypotheses, we also need a measure of self-reported ideology. To that end, we used data from *Cifra* for the period 1993–2020. During this period, ideology was assessed in 189 surveys, providing a comprehensive annual measure of Uruguayans' political ideology, with at least 2 questions asked per year.⁹ We calculated the percent of respondents who identified with the left over the percent of respondents who identified with the Left or the Right.¹⁰

⁹For surveys that did not include weights or were not self-weighted (mainly surveys from local firms *Cifra* and *Opción*), we created weights for each survey – using benchmarks for sex, age, education, region, and past vote – by raking using the *anesrake* R package.

¹⁰The exact wording of the question is: "According to your political opinions, if the Left is 1 and the Right is 10, and the intermediate points are positions between Left and Right, where would you place yourself?" We coded values from 1 to 4 as *left* and values from 7 to 10 as *right*.

Results

Our analysis centers on mapping important features of the policy mood in our case-study to elucidate the dynamics of policy preferences outside the – more commonly studied – pool of developed countries. In doing this, a first valuable addition to the literature is the opportunity to calculate a measure of policy mood. Such measures, because of the data requirements they impose, have only been calculated in a handful of countries: United States, Britain, Scotland, Spain, France, Italy, and Mexico. Few of these cases have been able to combine data from comparative databases with local public opinion surveys.

Our measure of policy mood includes 78 different questions asked repeatedly from 1993 to 2020. To get an initial sense of which questions most contribute to the resulting measure of policy mood, in [Table 1](#) we present the items that were asked at least four times and received loadings greater than or equal to 0.5. These loadings reflect the correlation between the individual question series and the resulting measure of policy mood.

About 53 per cent of all variance in the measured preferences is common to a latent dimension, our measure of policy mood. The commonalities that emerged from our policy mood measure suggest that Uruguayans' policy preferences are structured along a common dimension. With evidence that our measure of policy mood reflects shifting public preferences across a range of policies, we present the measure in [Figure 1](#). Higher values indicate a more liberal public. Vertical lines indicate electoral years.

The dynamics of policy mood

Overall, in most of the years, the Uruguayan policy mood falls on the liberal side of the continuum, which is consistent with measures of policy mood in the US (Ellis and Stimson [2012](#)), UK (Bartle, Avellaneda, and McGann [2019](#)), Spain (Bartle, Bosch, and Orriols [2020](#)) and Italy (Bellucci and Pellegata [2017](#)).

Table 1. Item loadings of policy mood 1993–2020.

Topic	Loading	N
Abortion justification	0.89	7
Electric services should be run by the state or private firms	0.87	4
Opinion on USA	0.84	12
Hard work brings success	0.82	6
Homosexuality justification	0.74	7
Keep a factory that pollutes open or close it and lose jobs	0.74	5
A market economy is the only system with which Uruguay can become a developed country	0.72	13
Should the government support workers or companies	0.6	6
Private firms are important for Uruguay's development	0.57	6
Should the government prioritize environmental protection or economic development	0.54	6

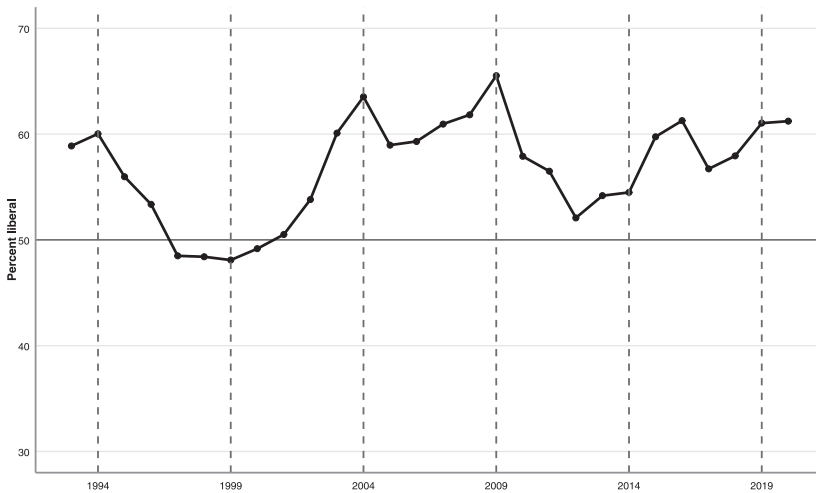


Figure 1. Uruguayan policy mood 1993–2020.

Our measure of Uruguayans' preferences starts off relatively liberal in 1993 and moves in a conservative direction until 1999. Eight years before, in 1985, a 13-year breakdown in democratic rule had come to an end. The transition to democracy might have pushed policy preferences to the liberal side. In Latin America, the 1990s were the years of the neoliberal reforms guided by the Washington Consensus. In Uruguay, these reforms translated, with some nuances, into a plan for price stabilization, greater flexibility in the labor market and a concern for fiscal discipline. However, these reforms did not have the same success in Uruguay that they had in the rest of region, especially regarding privatization of public companies. Uruguay, among the Latin American countries, is considered a "gradual reformer," because it started early but the economic reforms were milder and were carried out more gradually than in other countries in the region (Edwards 1994; Lora 2001).

Throughout the 1990s, a preference for leftist policies gradually decreased. From 1997 to 2000, the value of the policy mood measure remained below 50 percent, meaning that right-oriented preferences were slightly predominant. At this point, the mood reached its nadir of the whole period, after which the trend reversed and the policy mood became increasingly left leaning between 2000 and 2004, a shift that was also reflected in the electoral results. The 2004 election represented a milestone in the country's political history: For the first time, a left-wing party – Frente Amplio – won the national election. From 2005 to 2009, during the implementation of redistributive policy reforms, the mood remained relatively stable and left leaning. After a mini peak in 2009, Uruguayans'

policy preferences then shifted toward the right between 2010 and 2014. After a mild move towards the left in 2015, the final years of the series mostly reflect stability with possible evidence of a slight movement towards the right.

Disentangling operational and symbolic ideology

We have argued that despite the emphasis on valence issues and symbolic (self-identified) political ideology in past research, there is reason to believe the Latin American public have meaningful and electorally important policy preferences. To begin to evaluate this claim, we compare our measure of the Uruguayan policy mood with the measure of symbolic ideology described above. In other words, constructing a measure of policy mood allows us to disentangle operational from symbolic ideology.

In the U.S. context, Stimson's policy mood (1999) and Ellis and Stimson's (2012) symbolic ideology correlate at $r = 0.65$ from 1993 to 2012 (the years closest in time to our analysis for which both series are available).¹¹ Given this relationship, we expect a moderate correlation in the Uruguayan context. A correlation much greater than $r = 0.65$ would imply that the Uruguayan policy mood and ideology are not as distinct as we expect. By contrast, a negative or a near-zero correlation would cast doubt on the validity of our policy measure.

Figure 2 plots both symbolic (self-reported) and operational (policy mood) ideology for the 1993–2020 period in Uruguay. The series shows both coincidences and divergences. During the first years of the period, symbolic and operational ideology trended in opposite directions. However, from the year 2000 to 2015, they seem to largely move in tandem. The correlation between the two series is positive and significant ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$). Both series exhibit a sharp shift towards the left at the beginning of the century followed by moderate changes in tendency with an overall mild movement to the right, which is clearer in the symbolic ideology series.

The series show little overlap between operational and symbolic ideology for most of the period, while the operational ideology series is more liberal than the symbolic one. This is similar to the findings of Ellis and Stimson (2012), although the gap between the two elements of ideology is, on average, much smaller than in the United States; Americans are predominantly liberal in their policy preferences and conservative in their self-identification, Uruguayans are predominantly leftist in their preferences while their self-identification oscillates between the Left and the Right.

Overall, our results support the postulate that operational and symbolic ideology are correlated but do not measure the same phenomena. For

¹¹Data from <https://stimson.web.unc.edu/data/> (accessed 9/19/21).

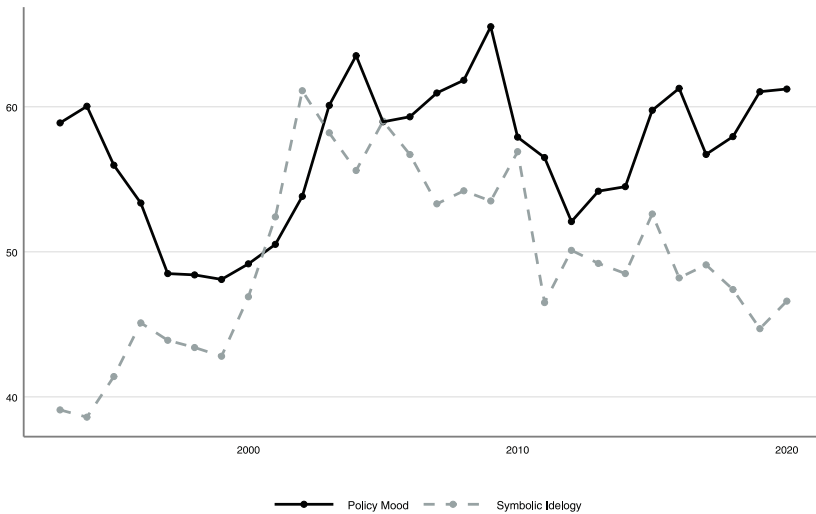


Figure 2. Policy mood and symbolic ideology in Uruguay (1993–2020). Symbolic ideology (self-reported) is shown as the % of respondents who identify as liberal over the % of respondents who identify as liberal or conservative.

instance, evidence suggests that the increase in the left-wing Frente Amplio vote share before the 2004 election – the most relevant change in Uruguayans’ political preferences in the period under study – is reflected in both ideological series showing a sharp leftward shift. However, the last years of the series show a certain divergence, with symbolic ideology moving towards the right (in line with the 2019 national election results), a trend not followed by operational ideology. This is relevant as it shows that a change in symbolic ideology does not necessarily mean a change in policy preferences. This difference underlines the importance of improving our policy-based measures of preferences and adds new understanding to the Latin American context, a region where voters are often depicted as outcome-oriented rather than policy-oriented when voting (Queirolo 2013; Stokes 2001).

A thermostatic model

In line with previous research (Bartle, Bosch, and Orriols 2020; Bartle, Dellepiane-Avellaneda, and Stimson 2011; Stimson, Thiébaud, and Tiberj 2012; Wlezien 1995), Uruguayan preferences seem to behave thermostatically, at least for four out of the five government administration periods covered by our estimation. The main idea in Wlezien’s (1995) model is that citizens behave as a thermostat to balance policy making, and demand policies that are more leftist or rightist as a reaction to what authorities decide

(Soroka and Wlezien 2005; Wlezien 1995). For instance, after periods when left-wing policies have been implemented, the public will demand the opposite, asking for less state presence, and vice versa.

Uruguay comports with this pattern of pendulum-like movements. Figure 3 shows the changes in Uruguayans' policy preferences and in government ideology in Uruguay for the last five administrations. Policy preferences are measured as the variation in policy mood from the year before the beginning of each president's administration and its final year. Government ideology is measured as the variation in the ideology of the previous to the current President, using data from the Parliamentary Elites of Latin America Survey (PELA) project.¹² PELA has conducted a Deputies survey, one per period, in 18 Latin American countries since 1994. For Uruguay, the data cover the period from 1995 to 2020. The survey includes a question about the ideological placement of the most important political leaders, including the president, using a scale from 1 to 10. Mean scores were used to estimate the ideological variation between presidents.

The presidency of Julio María Sanguinetti (1995–1999) implied a marked shift to the center after Luis Alberto Lacalle's administration, which had implemented strong economic liberalization policies. As shown in Figure 3, in line with theoretical expectations, during Sanguinetti's presidency, the public's policy preferences moved in a conservative direction (negative values in Figure 3). Similarly, even when the Partido Colorado was victorious in the 1999 elections, President Jorge Batlle (2000–2004) belonged to the liberal fraction within the party. Although the combined effects of the

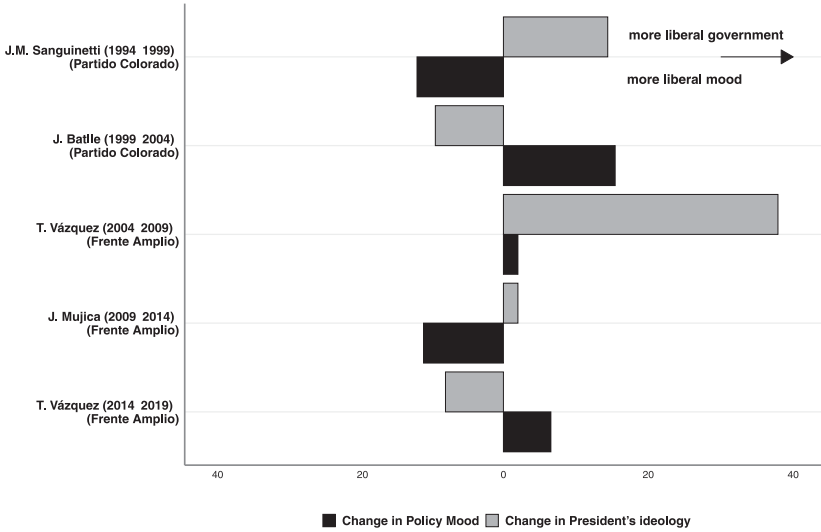


Figure 3. Change in policy mood by presidential term.

Argentinean Peso crisis and a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak disrupted the government's electoral agenda, Batlle's term was marked by an explicit agenda for boosting exports. His government also broke diplomatic relationships with Cuba. This shift from a more state-centered profile in the previous Colorado administration is reflected by the PELA scores that show a –25% conservative shift. As in the thermostatic model, during this period, preferences shifted sharply more liberal (positive values in Figure 3).

The 2004 election became a watershed in Uruguayan politics, with the inaugural term of the left-of-center Frente Amplio party who had secured a 50.4% of the vote. The elected president Tabaré Vázquez quickly implemented a set of redistributive policies (Castiglioni 2010; Pribble 2013). The policy mood did not reverse during this period. A thermostatic response would have implied policy preferences shifting more conservative. This exception is by no means surprising given that Vázquez's government was itself an outlier. Vázquez carried out several crucial reforms and received the highest average presidential approval recorded in Uruguay since public opinion data has been available, which could have mitigated the desire for less leftist policies.

Mujica's term (2010–2014) saw an additional liberal shift in his government ideology, though less pronounced. While roughly maintaining the economic policies of the preceding Vázquez administration, Mujica's administration followed a much more liberal social agenda that included legalizing abortion (2012), gay marriage (2013) and cannabis regulation (2013). The policy mood, consequently, shifted more conservative by more than 10 percentage points. Finally, during Vázquez's second term (2015–2019) and, again, in line with the thermostatic response model, Uruguayans' policy preferences shifted in the opposite direction, with the policy mood estimate finishing above 60%. In the 2019 national election, a newly formed coalition of right and center-right parties (led by the Partido Nacional with participation of the Partido Colorado, Cábildo Abierto and other smaller political parties) won the run-off.¹³

In addition to Figure 3, a bivariate regression analysis also suggests that policy mood reacts thermostatically to changes in the government's ideology. The test supports a rejection of the null hypothesis, i.e. that the events are uncorrelated, with $\alpha = 0.05$ and $\beta = -1.08$. Our small sample of 26 data points and the measure of public policy by administration do not allow us to assess causality. We hope future research develops annual measures of Uruguayan policy liberalism. Such a measure would allow a more

¹²We multiplied the expert ideological government ratings by 10, so the maximum theoretical value for policy mood and government ideological ratings are equivalent. **Figure 3.** Change in policy mood by presidential term.

¹³The coalition *Coalición Multicolor* obtained 48.9% of valid votes and the FA obtained 47.4%.

direct assessment of the thermostatic hypothesis as well as tests of if and how government ideology reacts to the evolution of policy mood. We have shown the prerequisites of dynamic representation exist (i.e. structured policy preferences that shift systematically) and we hope others can use our measure of Uruguayan policy mood to evaluate potential policy responsiveness.

Discussion

This paper is a first attempt to study the thermostatic model in Uruguay and to estimate Uruguay's policy mood. Following Stimson (1999), we estimated the Uruguayan policy mood for the period 1993–2020. Our results show that Uruguayans' policy preferences are structured along a common dimension that can be measured and interpreted in meaningful ways. The distinction between the evolution of symbolic and operational ideology during the period of study deserves attention. While the policy mood in the country has become more leftist over time and shows that citizens' policy preferences are unquestionably leftist, self-identification with the Left has diminished.

In line with studies for the U.S., Mexico, and some European countries, Uruguay's public opinion shows evidence of thermostatic behavior. While left-oriented governments ruled, preferences for policies shifted rightward. These results show that the potential for dynamic representation exists in Latin America, and citizens have the capacity to react when policies do not go in the direction they want. However, the thermostatic reaction does not necessarily lead to electoral turnover. A change in mood may or may not lead to a change in government. Whether it does so would depend on the country's party system (two party system or multiparty system) or its electoral design (PR system, run-off, etc.). Alternatively, it may be that Uruguayan citizens' preferences became more leftist over the study period, and as Atkinson et al. (2021) suggest, certain cleavages – such as gender or LGBTQI issues – transcend partisanship. In this article, we do not test whether policy mood has an impact on electoral turnover, but we show that citizens' policy preferences and governments move in tandem.

Finally, this paper allows us to reflect on the necessity of measuring Latin Americans' policy preferences in a systematic way and through time. National pollsters mostly include questions requested by their clients, and international public opinion projects mainly have focused their questionnaires on support for democracy, trust in institutions, a small group of valence issues, and symbolic ideology. We recognize the valuable work these pollsters have done, but we also suggest that it is not enough to understand the preferred policies in the region. Policy preferences are important not only for citizens in the developed world. Consistent with Baker (2015), this article shows that when one can obtain good measures of policy preferences, and can test

their impact, these preferences appear to challenge the dominant view of Latin America as a region in which only outcomes matter.

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Data availability statement

Data and replication materials are available at: <https://github.com/martinopertti/policy-mood-replication>.

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