



## CASE STUDY

# Building a Party with Activists: The Case of the Uruguayan FA

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**A new political organization's leaders must decide whether  
and how to share power with its grassroots activists.**

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## **SNF Agora Case Studies**

The SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University offers a series of case studies that show how civic and political actors navigated real-life challenges related to democracy. Practitioners, teachers, organizational leaders, and trainers working with civic and political leaders, students, and trainees can use our case studies to deepen their skills, to develop insights about how to approach strategic choices and dilemmas, and to get to know each other better and work more effectively.

### **How to Use the Case**

Unlike many case studies, ours do not focus on individual leaders or other decision-makers. Instead, the SNF Agora case studies are about choices that groups make collectively. Therefore, these cases work well as prompts for group discussions. The basic question in each case is: “What would we do?”

After reading a case, some groups role-play the people who were actually involved in the situation, treating the discussion as a simulation. In other groups, the participants speak as themselves, discussing the strategies that they would advocate for the group described in the case. The person who assigns or organizes your discussion may want you to use the case in one of those ways.

When studying and discussing the choices made by real-life decision-makers (often under intense pressure), it is appropriate to exhibit some humility. You do not know as much about their communities and circumstances as they did, and you do not face the same risks. If you had the opportunity to meet these individuals, it might not be your place to give them advice. We are not asking you to second-guess their actual decisions as if you were wiser than they were.

However, you can exhibit appropriate respect for these decision-makers while also thinking hard about the possible choices that they could have made, weighing the pros and cons of each option, and seriously considering whether they made the best choices or should have acted differently. That is a powerful way of learning from their experience. Often the people described in our cases had reflected on previous examples, just as you can do by thinking about their situation.

### **This case study is appropriate for:**

- College students
- Grassroots activists
- Organizational leaders

**Keywords:** Grassroots activism, hierarchical vs. horizontal structure, organizational development, organizational structure, party decision-making, power sharing, relational participation

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Learning Objectives
- 2 Case Narrative
- 5 What Would You Do?
- 6 How It Turned Out
- 7 Conclusion
- 7 Notes

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## Introduction

**THIS IS A CASE ABOUT A POLITICAL PARTY, the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA<sup>1</sup>), in Uruguay. It developed an organizational structure that empowers grassroots activists.** In the 1960s and early 1970s, Latin America was a region plagued by

polarization and political violence. Uruguay, a small country in South America, was an egalitarian, relatively developed society, with a regime that was more stable and democratic than most others in Latin America. However, it also experienced its share of political turmoil. In this context, on February 5, 1971, a group of leaders from small leftist and center-left political organizations, together with progressive leaders who had split off from center-right parties, founded the Frente Amplio (Broad Front, FA). The FA was born as a coalition of 12 political groups that aimed to unify the political left and channel the political and social discontent that pervaded Uruguayan society. None of the constituent parties of the FA had a large organizational structure; in electoral terms, before 1971, leftist parties never obtained more than 10 percent of the total votes cast in a national election. Alongside this coalition of party organizations, a movement of FA grassroots activists emerged autonomously in an explosion of bottom-up enthusiasm for the potential for a unified political left (i.e., not as the result of any action or decision by party elites).

The FA was born as a coalition that aimed to unify the political left and channel the political and social discontent that pervaded Uruguayan society.

Leaders of the newly created FA had to decide what role the grassroots activists would have in the organizational structure of the party. They had two options: In the first option, the activists would have a direct influence in the organization's decision-making. In the second option, activists would be represented by leaders of the different political groups (i.e., the members of the coalition). The former approach would allow direct engagement of grassroots activists in the party's deliberation and decision-making, which implies greater sharing of power between party elites and activists. The latter, by contrast, would involve privileging the coalition's strategic electoral goals to maintain control of the party.

## Learning Objectives

### By the end of this case study, you should be able to:

1. Learn about different modes of structuring national political organizations, and the benefits and drawbacks of each.
2. Understand the dilemmas faced by political leaders who must decide between two competing goals of organizational development in a political organization's early stages: the goal of giving grassroots activists sufficient influence in the organization's decision-making and the goal of achieving and maintaining organizational discipline.
3. Understand the crucial role that formal organizational rules play in the reproduction of activism.
4. Appreciate the importance of relational environments for collective action.

## Case Narrative

In 1971, thousands of FA grassroots activists gathered in local political committees, also known as “Base Committees,” in neighborhoods throughout Uruguay to organize the field activities of the party's electoral campaign. This involved designing, printing, and distributing campaign materials; developing intense canvassing schedules; organizing rallies and meetings with leaders; and raising funds for the campaign. Martín Ponce de León, an FA founder, claimed that 80 percent of the campaign funds raised for the 1971 national election were collected by the grassroots activists in Base Committees.<sup>2</sup>

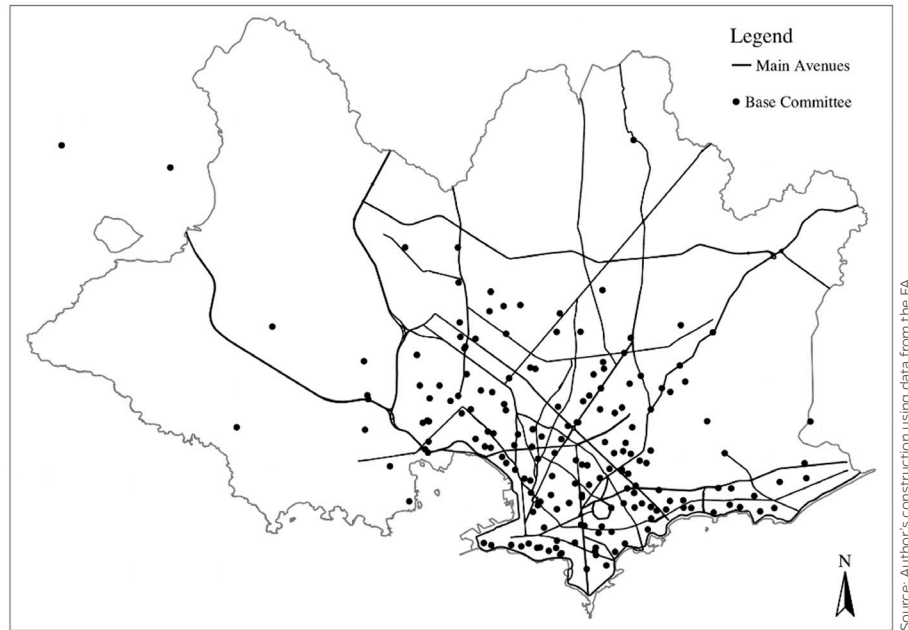
In Uruguay's capital city of Montevideo, which had a population of about 1.2 million people, there were 250 Base Committees. Their work expanded the reach of the center-left parties. Pedro Cribari, a

“There remained no area of the country, especially in the city . . . without a Base Committee . . . . There was no organization with such a widespread reach . . . .”

grassroots activist in 1971, said, “There remained no area of the country, especially in the city . . . without a Base Committee. . . . There was no organization with such a widespread reach, such capacity to generate and promote neighborhood engagement.”<sup>3</sup>

Base Committees were not hierarchically dependent on any local leader or candidate. They were horizontal organizational structures that brought together heterogeneous groups of people (e.g., students, intellectuals, blue- and

white-collar workers, retirees). The combination of the heightened role Base Committees played in the electoral fate of the FA and their non-hierarchical nature engendered a participatory environment that emphasized collective action and deliberation. Consequently, Base Committees were places where FA sympathizers were transformed into committed party activists. By the end of the 1971 electoral cam-



**Figure 1. Active Base Committees in Montevideo in 1971**

paign, the FA had formed itself into a political party with a significant number of grassroots activists organized in groups throughout the territory. Base Committee members had developed a strong collective FA identity that superseded the identity of the individual political party groups that had merged to form the FA. Above all, Base Committees transformed activists into stakeholders who pushed for an active role in party decision-making.

The high level of mobilization that the FA achieved throughout the campaign led party adherents to expect a comparably high level of electoral success. However, even though the FA achieved an historic result for the left in the national elections of November 1971 (18.9 percent of the votes at the national level and 30.1 in Montevideo), it did not win the election. The party's disappointing performance at the polls—relative to expectations—engendered a generalized feeling of despair. Also, throughout the 1971 electoral campaign and after the election, various conflicts and tensions about the FA's political strategy erupted between leaders of the coalition. The presidential candidate and FA leader Líber Seregni believed that the Base Committee movement was critical for the unity and continuity of the new party. Therefore, immediately following the elections, he convened the Base Committees on December 17-18, 1971 at a gathering that brought together Base Committee delegates from all over the country. One of the main goals of the meeting was to discuss the political role of Base Committees in the FA decision-making structure going forward.

Above all, Base Committees transformed activists into stakeholders who pushed for an active role in party decision-making.

The leaders of the political groups that formed the coalition were hesitant about strengthening the autonomous Base Committee structure of the FA, which existed outside the structures of the parties that composed the coalition. They were also skeptical of the wisdom of granting a political role—beyond an advisory one—to Base Committees’ grassroots activists in the decision-making of the FA. Nevertheless, in 1972, after a process of debate, the leaders of the different members of the coalition signed a document that became known as the *Compromiso Político* (Political Commitment), in which the FA leaders pledged to grant Base Committees a formal role in the party’s decision-making structure. This process was interrupted by the 1973 coup and the ensuing authoritarian regime that lasted until 1985. During those years, FA leaders and activists were imprisoned, tortured, and forced into exile. The FA only operated underground.

Subsequent processes of political liberalization and transition to democracy in the early 1980s enabled the Base Committees to blossom and again play a significant role in the 1984 national election campaign. After the election, internal debates about party statutes and structure again featured prominently in the political agenda of the FA. A commission discussed a proposal regarding how to structure the organization. Most moderate members of the coalition, who had received a significant share of the electoral support and seats in Parliament, relative to the rest of the FA, opposed the inclusion of Base Committees’ delegates in the decision-making structure. By contrast, *Liber Seregni*, the leader of the FA, and more leftist groups favored granting a formal role in decision-making to grassroots activists.

Granting a formal role to grassroots delegates in the FA decision-making structure implied that lead-

Leaders of moderate groups were especially concerned about the political implications of conceding power to grassroots activists.

ers of the different parties and groups that coalesced in the FA would have to share power with the Base Committees’ movement. Leaders of moderate groups were especially concerned about the political implications of conceding power to grassroots activists. They thought that this inclusion would indirectly give more power to more ideologically extreme groups and, by pushing the party further to the left, would adversely affect the FA’s electoral prospects. Some leaders were also concerned about the political capacity

of grassroots delegates to participate in the decision-making. The FA and its different members thus faced a political dilemma. On the one hand, the FA could decide to build a party in the traditional fashion, where power is concentrated in the leaders of the party. Under this structure, political participation on the part of grassroots activists would be channeled through the competition among the constituent groups and their representative leaders. Alternatively, the FA could innovate by creating a new type of political party that gave direct political voice to grassroots activists, who could operate autonomously from leaders and their electoral fate.

## What Would You Do?

- How would you sustain activism?
- What type of role would you grant to grassroots activists in the party's political structure?  
Advisory only? Decision-making? Why?
- If you granted grassroots activists a decision-making role, would it be direct or representative or something else? Why?
- If you opt for shared decision-making, how would you strike a balance between the voice of activists and leaders in the party's political structure?
- If you were a leader in the FA, would you seek to avoid risk and privilege electoral growth, or would you take on the risk of giving grassroots activists a role in the decision-making structure of the party?



## How it Turned Out

In 1986, after a year of intense debate regarding the organizational rules, leaders of the political groups that formed the coalition, FA leader Líber Seregni, and grassroots delegates agreed to have a dual structure comprising the coalition (political groups) and the movement (Base Committees). Each branch of the structure would have representation on the decision-making bodies of the FA. Members of the coalition would have two-thirds of the positions, and delegates from the movement would have the remaining third. In 1993, a reform of the FA statutes reinforced this dual structure and, especially, the role of the movement. This statute granted Base Committee delegates half of the positions in the decision-making bodies, including every commission or task force that the FA decides to create on an ad hoc basis.

By granting direct mechanisms for party activists to have voice within the organization, the organizational structure promoted the permanent engagement of activists, not just during elections but also between elections. In addition, the Base Committees continued to operate as open spaces where any person who wants to engage with the FA can join. Their horizontal structure affords individuals the opportunity to have a voice in political discourse and a role in party activities at the local or national level. Thus, Base Committees build relational participatory environments, a feature associated with the reproduction of activism.<sup>4</sup>

Having spaces that foster permanent participation within the party at the local level provided the FA with a high degree of rootedness in society. Party activists linked the party with other organizations in a given neighborhood. Party activists also participated in labor unions, parent-teacher associations, and in neighborhood associations such as social or sport clubs. In an online survey of party adherents conducted in 2017, 33 percent of Base Committee attendees reported participating in unions, and 42 percent reported participating in neighborhood associations.<sup>5</sup>

Leaders' concerns about the potentially adverse effect of involving grassroots activists in strategic decisions (i.e., that they would make decisions that would hurt the FA's electoral prospects) proved to be unfounded. During the period that followed adoption of the 1986 and 1993 statutes, the party's electoral performance improved in every election. In 2004, the FA won the national elections and obtained an absolute majority in Congress. The FA also went on to win the two subsequent elections. During its three terms in government, the FA introduced a progressive tax reform, established a national health care system with universal coverage, advanced labor rights, and legalized abortion, same sex marriage, and recreational marijuana use. All these reforms were introduced without affecting the country's macroeconomic stability and economic growth. Therefore, the FA's peculiar party structure proved not to hinder either its electoral success or its ability to govern.

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## Conclusion

Political parties lately have been suffering crises of legitimacy; in democracies throughout the world, many parties have become organizationally weak and, more critically, individuals' level of engagement with party activities outside of elections is in decline. Many political parties in the world have formal membership as a core element of the party organization. The distinctive trait of the FA lies in the number of its formal members who are grassroots activists and, more significantly, the organizational structure and rules that grant these activists a significant influence in the decision-making of the party.

The FA is an anomalous outlier compared to other Latin American leftist parties that were born as mass organizations. The Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party, PT), for example, is a case of failure to create an organizational setting that promotes and ensures the ongoing engagement of local grassroots activists in a party's membership. Even though the PT improved its electoral performance and grew its number of adherents in the 2000s, the party's internal transformations (i.e., the concentration of power in party elites) account for the professionalization of its structures and the loss of its grassroots activists.

The FA shows that, beyond the fluctuations in the number of activists attributable to different political contexts (i.e., polarized elections), it is possible to sustain and reproduce permanent party activism in the twenty-first century and remain an effective political organization that is perceived as legitimate among its adherents. The secret to achieving this, in Uruguay and perhaps elsewhere, seems to lie in sharing power and providing opportunities for consequential participation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The evidence for this case study comes from a previous in-depth study of the reproduction of activism in the FA. The details of this research can be found in Verónica Pérez Bentancur, Rafael Piñeiro Rodríguez, and Fernando Rosenblatt, *How Party Activism Survives: Uruguay's Frente Amplio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Martín Ponce de León.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Pedro Cribari.

<sup>4</sup> Han, Hahrie, "The Organizational Roots of Political Activism: Field Experiments on Creating a Relational Context," *American Political Science Review*, 110, no. 2 (2016): 296-307. For another example of relational participation, see Elizabeth McKenna's and Peter Levine's SNF Agora Case Study, "[The ISAI AH Trash Referendum](#)."

<sup>5</sup> For further details about this survey and more information about the characteristics of grassroots activists in the FA, see Pérez Bentancur, Piñeiro Rodríguez, and Rosenblatt (2020).