

Long-conservative Latin America is turning liberal

LOOKING AT LATIN AMERICA ON SEVERAL SOCIAL FRONTS

Latin America, a long-time bastion of religious, conservative social mores, has seen a change of late. Uruguay is leading the way, passing laws legalizing gay marriage and abortion, as well as a first-of-its-kind law legalizing marijuana from production to consumption, but they're not alone. Here's a look at other countries that have approved the contentious issues in recent years:

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Alan Gomez and Karl Gelles, USA TODAY



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(Photo: Pablo Bielli, AFP, for USA TODAY)

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay — Just a couple of years ago, this tiny country that's squeezed between Brazil and Argentina found itself in the same position as so many of its Latin-American neighbors. Abortion was illegal. Gay marriage was illegal. Marijuana was not tolerated.

In two quick years, all that has changed. Today, Uruguay finds itself leading a slow but steady movement that is changing the makeup of a region long considered a bastion of conservative social mores.

"The changes ... have been incredible," said Giuliana Rodriguez, 20, a psychology major at a Montevideo university. "The ability to respect others is something that makes me proud."

Uruguay is the only country to adopt laws approving all three issues, sparking a broader regional debate that is increasingly being won by progressive Latin Americans. From Mexico to Argentina, Colombia to Peru, more countries are debating and approving changes that grant wider abortion rights, more expansive protections for same-sex couples and the decriminalization of marijuana.

The shifts resonate far from Latin America. One-quarter of the 473,000 green cards issued in the U.S. in 2013 went to people from Central and South America, and the vast majority of undocumented immigrants come from there, so those immigrants are playing an increasingly larger role in shaping public opinion in the U.S.

That can change the way American political parties shape their campaigns targeting Hispanics, how businesses advertise to them and how the federal government and states deal with the ongoing debates over gay marriage and marijuana legalization.

For example, Gary Segura of LatinoDecisions, a firm that polls Hispanic voters, said Republicans have incorrectly assumed that Hispanics were all die-hard social conservatives and Democrats have been too hesitant to express their liberal social views while courting the fast-growing demographic.

"The Republicans are already barking up the wrong tree," he said. "And Democrats can be a little less cautious about the things they believe."



Uruguay President Jose Mujica arrives at a polling station in his Volkswagen Beetle to cast his vote on Oct. 26, 2014. (Photo: Natacha Pisarenko, AP)

Uruguay's president, José Mujica, says it's a bit easier to take such leaps in his country, one of the first in the region to officially separate its government from the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1900s. The former guerrilla, who spent more than a decade in prison, says he feels it is his responsibility to take chances on what he calls "social experiments."

"Human beings have a conservative attitude of permanently defending the status quo, but life is always about change," Mujica said in an interview with USA TODAY. "Instead of modifying our laws so people can live, we try to change how they live. It's like fighting against the wind — it's useless."

Some Uruguayans are shocked at how quickly things have changed. And many, echoing the voices of so many around Latin America, are sickened by it.

"It's a horror," said Mercedes Arcos, 66, who volunteers to help young women get educated and employed. "We've lost God in this country. We've removed God and inserted ourselves."

While that hesitance abounds throughout Latin America, Argentina and Brazil have adopted gay marriage in the past five years. Abortion is now legal in three Mexican states, and Bolivian women no longer need a judge's permission to get one in some cases. And Colombia, Mexico and Argentina have lowered penalties on marijuana users.

Elizabeth Zechmeister, the director of Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project, says some of those changes are coming from liberal government leaders, like those in Ecuador, making changes despite widespread opposition from their populations. She says the rise of ultra-conservative evangelical and protestant movements in the region are also keeping people from shifting too far too quickly.

But she says it's now impossible to ignore what has become a verifiable shift toward more liberalized views throughout the region.

"It's something new that we're seeing, in both the legislation and an identifiable shift in public opinion," she said.

There are many factors that contribute to that change.

From 1910 to 2010, the percentage of Latin Americans who identify as Catholic dropped from 90% to 72%, [according to \(http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/18/latin-americas-catholics-in-the-spotlight-as-pope-francis-is-installed/\)](http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/18/latin-americas-catholics-in-the-spotlight-as-pope-francis-is-installed/) the Pew Research Center. Zechmeister says a growing shift toward urban living, where people are exposed to different cultures and beliefs, has contributed. And Zechmeister says the barrage of progressive sentiments broadcast by the entertainment industry and some media outlets, both of which have become more accessible to more Latin Americans, has combined to contribute to a new way of thinking.

GAY MARRIAGE

When Andrés Scagliola left his native Uruguay in 2002 to live and study in Spain, he said he had never seriously thought about coming out of the closet.



Giuliana Rodríguez, 20, a psychology major at a university in Montevideo, Uruguay, supports the social changes that have swept through her country, including a law legalizing gay marriage. (Photo: Alan Gomez, USA TODAY)

"It was still very homophobic," he said. "The thinking here was, 'Do what you will in your house, but don't make me see it.' "

After he returned to Uruguay in 2008 and became the government's national director of social policies, he felt a different vibe on the streets. The government had approved civil unions for gay couples. Social advocates had built larger coalitions. People around him were more welcoming, more open.

On Nov. 11, 2011, Scagliola announced in a local publication that he was gay, becoming the highest-ranking government official to do so. In 2013, the country's parliament voted to legalize gay marriage.

In Mexico, three states approved gay marriage as early as 2009. Argentina followed in 2010 and Brazil in 2013. Colombia and Ecuador have approved same-sex unions, and several other countries — including Chile and Peru — are debating similar changes.

"Fifteen years ago, that would've been impossible," Scagliola said.

ABORTION

Oscar and Graciela Varela call it the worst night of their lives.

Twenty years ago, the Uruguayan couple, already struggling to feed their two children, got pregnant again. With abortion illegal at the time, they went to a clandestine abortion clinic to do the procedure.



Oscar and Graciela Varela have been married for 33 years and don't agree on much. But after the Montevideo, Uruguay, couple decided to have an abortion 20 years ago, they saw the horrible conditions young women were forced into and now both of them support the country's law legalizing abortions. (Photo: Alan Gomez, USA TODAY)

What they saw shocked them. Young women huddled in corners, nervously awaiting the emotional, sometimes dangerous procedure alone. They were all driven to a clinic on the outskirts of the city to ensure secrecy. Afterward, even though the procedures were done in the middle of the night, the clinic workers wouldn't even take the women home, instead dumping them on the streets of Montevideo to find their way home.

The Varelas, now married 22 years, have had four children since Graciela's abortion, but they remember that night as a glaring reminder of why abortions should be legal.

"Many times, men would leave them, and they were completely alone. These were kids who were left on the street," Graciela Varela, 53, said. "In that case, the best thing is to have a safe environment to do it."

Of all the changes in Latin America, abortion is the one that has met the most resistance. The region is home to three of the four countries in the world that bar abortions in all circumstances — Chile, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Zechmeister says public opinion has shifted slowest in this area.

Abortions are now possible in some corners of the region, including Mexico City, and Honduras recently eased restrictions for women seeking abortions in cases of rape and incest. But most people remain hesitant.

Maria Jose Gamboa, 34, an architect in Montevideo, happily supports her country's decision to legalize gay marriage and decriminalize marijuana. But like so many other Latin Americans, she gets stuck when asked about legal abortions.

"In a way, the government is fomenting irresponsibility," she said. "They're not saying, 'First, take care of yourself and then, if something happens.' But at the same time, in extreme cases, I can understand that."

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

MARIJUANA

Andres Echeverria's eyes brighten when asked about the country's new marijuana law, a first-of-its-kind plan that legalizes the drug from planting to consumption.

"I've been smoking marijuana for 20 years, so I think it's spectacular," said Echeverria, 36, a bank courier.

Starting this year, Uruguayans can grow up to six plants at home, more if they join a collective. Starting next year, they will be able to buy up to 40 grams a month at a pharmacy. Marijuana won't be available to tourists, as is the case in Amsterdam, but residents say police have already started looking the other way when they're smoking around town.

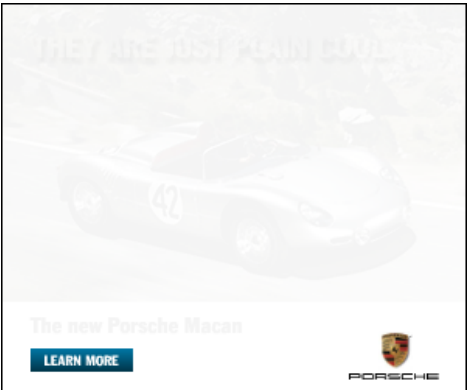
Although no other country has gone as far as Uruguay, other countries such as Colombia, Mexico and Argentina have decriminalized the drug in an attempt to reduce prison populations and as a strategy to combat the profits reaped by narco-traffickers. Mujica and other Latin American leaders say it's the only way to cut into the profits of drug gangs and reduce the violence that they bring.

The change is upsetting for many Latin Americans who have to confront marijuana smokers more frequently and say they're now struggling to teach their children to avoid drug use. For some, like Luisa Thera, a Montevideo house cleaner with six daughters, the changes to marijuana, abortion and gay marriage laws are making it harder for them to teach their children right from wrong.

"What do I tell them now?" said Thera, 48. "I'll be sitting on a park bench and someone will sit next to me and start smoking. It's so hard to understand. You can bang your head against the wall trying to figure it out, but you can't."



Uruguayan President Jose Mujica carries his dog, Manuela, in Montevideo on Sept. 18. (Photo: AFP/Getty Images)



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