

Uruguay guarantees public water supply

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Uruguay, which elected its first left-leaning President Sunday, also became the first country in Latin America to enshrine the right to drinking water and sewage services in its constitution.

Voters approved a plebiscite that would give the state exclusive control over water and sanitation and make access to them fundamental human rights, after a concerted campaign by grassroots water activists, including Canada's Maude Barlow.

While Tabare Vazquez, a 64-year-old cancer specialist and the former mayor of Montevideo, won the presidency with 51 per cent of the vote, the water plebiscite was approved by two-thirds of voters.

"Having this amendment enacted in the constitution we will have a much better possibility to stand against the free-trade agreement of the Americas on services that cannot be sold off," Alberto Villarreal of Friends of the Earth Uruguay said in an interview from Montevideo.

"This water campaign was run by social movements and the public workers union. We also had a lot of support from Canada, the U.S. and Europe. The Council of Canadians and Maude Barlow were one of our best supporters."

Mr. Vazquez, who supported the referendum, is with the Progressive-Encounter-Broad-Front-New-Majority and the first left-leaning candidate in 170 years to win the Uruguayan presidency. The new President's coalition includes former Tupamaro guerrillas.

Uruguay, a country of 3.3 million, has long been one of South America's most stable economies. But it is emerging from a slump after economic growth shrank by 11 per cent in 2002, in part as a result of the Argentine economic crisis. Two-thirds of Uruguayans live below the poverty line and 100,000 have emigrated to Spain and Argentina.

Ms. Barlow called water reform a victory for the "international grassroots water movement," while Mr. Vazquez's opponents said it would scare off foreign investors.