

# Winning Elections versus Governing: A Two-Tier Approach to Party Adaptation in Argentina, 1983-2003

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**Abstract:** Party adaptation is the response of party organization to environmental change. Environmental change may challenge either party success or party survival or both. However, most of the literature fails to distinguish properly between success and survival, taking the latter for granted. This paper contends that the reasons underlying such inadequate approach are the scarcity of broader cross-area comparison, as there is a wild contrast between those regions where lack of success does not usually threaten party survival (e.g. Europe) and those where lack of success frequently entails either extinction or irrelevance (e.g. Latin America). Hence, the paper develops a two-tier approach to party adaptation that distinguishes the capacity to adjust to electoral challenges from the capacity to adjust to government challenges. The approach is then applied to the two largest Argentine parties, the Peronists and the Radicals, in order to test the implications of their heterogeneous capacity for winning office and ruling the country.

**Keywords:** Political parties – Party organization – Strategic adaptation – Subnational politics – Argentina

# Winning Elections versus Governing: A Two-Tier Approach to Party Adaptation in Argentina, 1983-2003\*

## Introduction

Two parties have dominated most of Argentine politics during the twentieth century. Whereas the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR/Radicals) won all non-fraudulent national elections held between 1912 and 1946, the party representing the *Movimiento Peronista* (currently *Partido Justicialista* or PJ/Peronists)<sup>1</sup> won all national elections held between 1946 and 1983 in which it was allowed to compete. Since the re-democratizing elections held on October 30, 1983, both parties alternated in power giving way, for the first time, to a full-fledged polyarchic regime. During the following two decades, the PJ ruled the country for nearly twelve years while the UCR –alone or in coalition— ruled for about eight years. At present, the PJ holds the chief executive office again after receiving 60 percent of the vote –summing the totals of its three main candidates— in the last presidential election, held in 27 April 2003. In contrast, the single UCR candidate barely reached 2 percent of the vote,<sup>2</sup> making the party's prospects look rather bleak. This article analyzes the adaptive processes that led the two Argentine parties to the highest office and, thereafter, seem to have rewarded one of them with perpetual success and doomed the other to enduring failure.

Scholarly studies of political parties usually focus on one of three aspects: social base, ideological content, and organizational structure (Panebianco 1988). This article examines the organizational structure of the two main Argentine parties, and to that end it considers social base and ideological content as either conditions or instruments of party organization. The objective of the analysis is twofold. On the one hand, by reviewing the challenges faced by Radicals and Peronists during the most recent democratic period, it seeks to understand both the strategies they developed to cope with environmental change and the resulting outcomes. A two-tier approach is then advanced

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1940s, the party was successively called *Partido Laborista* (a precursor that did not yet encompassed the whole movement), *Partido Único de la Revolución Nacional* and *Partido Peronista*.

<sup>2</sup> Notably, two party splinters garnered 30 percent of the vote running under the banner of two newly created parties.

for comparing the outcomes obtained at the electoral and governmental levels by each party. On the other hand, the article makes critical use of the existing typologies of party organization (Alcántara and Espíndola, 2003; Gunther and Diamond 2003; Katz and Mair 1995; Levitsky 2003; Panebianco 1988) in order to determine which –if any— best explains the Argentine case. The article is divided in four sections. The first establishes the analytical framework and discusses the methodological issues. The second and third sections deal with the individual parties, the UCR and the PJ respectively. The last section carries out a comparison between the cases and appraises their correspondence with the reviewed models and theories.

### ***Analytical framework***

How do parties adapt to environmental change? What characteristics make parties abler to cope with such challenges? The first question refers to party strategy, the second to party organization. A central argument of this article is that strategy is substantially dependent on organization, as the latter determines the degree of rigidity or flexibility that a given party features and that may allow –or hamper— a successful adaptation (see, for Latin American studies, Burgess and Levitsky 2003; Corrales 2002; Roberts 1997).

Parties typically seek at least one of three goals: electoral votes, public office, and public policies (Strøm 1990; Wolinetz 2002). For the sake of brevity, an analysis of a moderate, two-party system, especially if embedded in a presidential regime, may assume that votes and office are one and the same objective. Therefore, in such a scenario parties can be plausibly seen as pursuing two different aims at two different moments: firstly, they intend to garner as many votes as necessary to win the highest public office; secondly, once in office they intend to carry out their preferred policies. This opens the door for a two-tier approach to party adaptation, as strategies and organizational features that are functional to one end (winning elections) need not necessarily be so for the other (governing a polity). Although these two tiers resemble somewhat the two main party functions as synthesized by Bartolini and Mair (2001) – i.e., the representative and institutional functions—, they do not fit exactly along the same lines. For example, parties *represent* through their candidates and officials, but they also do so through the content of their policies; reciprocally, a well-regarded governmental performance may translate into good electoral performance.

In order to evaluate how the Argentine parties have adapted to the challenges posed by the democratic stability and the economic crises set off as from the early 1980s, it is convenient to single out the dependent variable in the first place. In other words, it is necessary to define adaptive failure or success and to determine which one resulted in each case; only thereafter will be possible to analyze the strategy that each party chose and the organizational incentives that may have supported it –and discouraged its alternatives. Electoral success is defined here as the capacity of a given party to win over the presidency through national elections. Governmental success is defined as the capacity of a given party to finish the presidential term in office as established by the Constitution; therefore, the concept makes no reference to the quality of the implemented policies.

**Table 1**  
**Presidential Terms Won and Completed, By Party Since 1916 (current democratic period is in bold)**

UCR	Presidential election won in	1916	1922	1928	1958 (UCRI)*	1963 (UCRP)*	<b>1983</b>	<b>1999 (in coalition)</b>
	Term completed	Yes	Yes	NO	NO	NO	<b>NO</b>	<b>NO</b>

  

PJ	Presidential election won in	1946	1952	1973a	1973b	<b>1989</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2002/3**</b>
	Term completed	Yes	NO	NO	NO	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>

REFERENCES:

\* In 1957, the UCR split in two factions that disagreed regarding the stance to adopt vis-à-vis Peronism. The UCRI (*Intransigente*), led by Arturo Frondizi, won the 1958 election; the UCRP (*del Pueblo*), led by Ricardo Balbín, won the 1963 election following a military coup and the proscription of the UCRI. The two factions never reunited afterwards.

\*\* In January 2002, Congress appointed PJ leader Eduardo Duhalde as a caretaker president in the wake of the resignation of the previous chief executives. Acting on a request by Duhalde, Congress shortened his mandate by six months and called early the presidential elections, which were won by PJ candidate Néstor Kirchner. He completed the tenure ending in December 2003, when his proper mandate started.

As shown in Table 1, both parties have been remarkably successful regarding the first dimension, as each has won seven presidential elections even in times of extreme instability. In contrast, a striking difference emerges on the second dimension: whereas, from 1983 on, the PJ has gained the capacity to run an administration until its scheduled end, the UCR has been unable to do so. What needs to be explained are the reasons why the two parties have successfully adapted to electoral politics in a stable

democracy but only one of them has managed to adapt to the challenge of governing. Most of such reasons may be found in the interior of each party, and they concern two main factors: the type (formal or informal) and degree (high or low) of party institutionalization, and the ideological stability and programmatic formalization of the party platform.

The following sections approach *party institutionalization* as a combination of three broad sub-components: party leadership, party financing, and candidate nomination. These sub-components are based on the six zones of organizational uncertainty defined by Panebianco (1988), but they are regrouped for the sake of parsimony. The *party leadership* category measures the persistence of recruitment rules, the stability of tenure and the bureaucratization of career paths. *Party financing* refers to the consistency of sources and the regularity of party revenue. Finally, *candidate nomination* comprises the routinization of internal electoral procedures and the frequency of incumbent re-election. The more routinized and autonomous the procedures for recruiting, promoting and selecting party leaders, for collecting revenues and for nominating candidates to public office, the more institutionalized the party.

The degree of *programmatic formalization* of a given party is usually linked to its degree of formal institutionalization. Therefore, it would be expected that a weakly institutionalized party possesses a poorly formalized program and viceversa. Yet, it may be the case that a high degree of programmatic formalization does not prevent a party from adopting striking programmatic shifts overtime. If this were the case, to assess the programmatic content of a given party it would be necessary not only to understand its formal structure (e.g., whether written or not, whether espoused by collective bodies or by the top leaders) but also to measure its stability in the medium- and long-run. In other words, a highly formalized program may be changed upside down into another equally formalized program, and this possible occurrence should be captured in the analysis. I propose to do so by adding the dimension of *programmatic stability* to that of programmatic formalization.

The analytical methodology employed in this article uncovers a four-stage causality process. The triggering variable is an environmental challenge, which is usually exogenous –e.g., re-democratization, the modification of electoral rules, deep economic crisis, working class decline— but could also be endogenous –e.g., the emergence or demise of a charismatic leader, implementation of party primaries (Alcántara and Espíndola, 2003). The challenge impacts upon a given party, whose

organizational characteristics are a main subject of this study. As a combined result of the nature of the challenge and the party's organizational capacities, the latter responds through the adoption of an adaptive strategy. Finally, the chosen strategy may succeed or fail, either overcoming the original challenge or aggravating it.

In order to persist and succeed, parties are said to require a blend of three qualities: organizational effectiveness, institutional autonomy, and political support (Randall 1990). If they happen to lack one or more thereof, they jeopardize not only success (be it electoral or governmental) but even survival, as Coppedge (2001) has shown happened in some Latin American cases. The two main Argentine parties have, so far, a long history of survival in the face adverse conditions, from fraud to proscription and from dictatorship to party splitting. The UCR was born between 1890 and 1891 and the PJ between 1945 and 1946, and their continued vitality demonstrates a distinguished score regarding adaptive capacities. Overtime, however, their organizational structures and programmatic goals have kept some of their original features, whereas many others have changed. As the most dramatic changes have taken place in the last two decades, we turn now to them.

## ***The UCR***

### ***Electoral challenge: 1983***

The UCR is a party of external creation. It originally rallied diverse social sectors unsatisfied with the oligarchic ruling system of the late nineteenth century and aimed to become, rather than an alternative political force, the real and single expression of the popular will. Its founders refused to identify themselves with any contemporary foreign parties, as they thought of the UCR as an all-encompassing national movement –as opposed to just another party (Escudero 2001). However, following a failed revolutionary attempt, in 1892 the party leaders relented and drafted organizational statutes in the path of early European mass parties, bestowing the UCR with a national, deliberative assembly (the *Convención Nacional*, the highest decisional body) and a federal central office (the *Comité Nacional*, the main executive body). The provincial party branches closely replicated the national scheme. Although the founding leaders and the events that gave birth to the party originated in the most populous and politically relevant province, Buenos Aires, and in the Federal Capital, the process of territorial penetration was rapid and effective. However, many provincial leaders would

soon develop a relative autonomy with regard to the central office, which would later lead to intermittent movements of indiscipline and even secession.

Two decades after its founding, the UCR institutional structure was as clearly formalized as its programmatic goals were cloudy and vague. Its two first and, most venerated leaders, Leandro Alem and Hipólito Yrigoyen, conceived of their political mission as a crusade on moral values and administrative transparency rather than as the pursuit of substantive policies. Although they underscored the primacy of the have-nots (*'desposeídos'*) as constitutive of the party nature, Yrigoyen himself affirmed that his political platform was no other than the national Constitution (Del Mazo 1984). This can hardly be said to constitute an elaborated party program, less so an ideological manifesto. Only in 1928, in the aftermath of the presidency of the ideologically moderate Marcelo de Alvear, did the UCR incorporate substantive references in its program, campaigning on nationalistic issues such as Latin American integration, economic independence, the nationalization of petroleum, and university reform (Escudero 2001). In the following decades, the official party discourse would differ little from that of such populist Latin American parties as Peru's APRA, Venezuela's ADECO or even Argentina's PJ.

When Raúl Alfonsín took over control of the party, between 1982 and 1983, he was consciously carrying out a sweeping renovation of the national leadership for the second time in history.<sup>3</sup> This infrequent event was paired by two other political novelties: Peronism would contest an election for the first time after its creator passed away, and the military were definitely returning to their barracks after a disastrous administration and a lost war. Alfonsín took advantage of this window of opportunity and improved his room for maneuver by designing a clever electoral strategy: he associated his opponents, both Peronism and the military, with the past, and presented himself as herald of a better future. The result was a landslide victory, which further increased his internal room for maneuver. He used this capacity to a limited extent: although he overwhelmed his adversaries in the 1983 party primaries, he offered them as many top public offices as he handed to his own internal grouping, *Renovación y Cambio*. Hence, both rival presidential hopefuls, Fernando de la Rúa and Luis León, were granted a seat in the Senate; Antonio Tróccoli, the main supporter of De la Rúa in Buenos Aires province, was appointed as interior minister; and former Balbinist Juan

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<sup>3</sup> The previous one had taken place under the first Peronist government, when *Intransigencia y Renovación*, led by Ricardo Balbín and Arturo Frondizi, displaced the Alvearist old guard.

Carlos Pugliese was nominated as speaker of the Chamber of Deputies. As far as career path concerns, the UCR had never been fond of house-cleaning practices, and Alfonsín did not change this tradition, notwithstanding his enormous legitimacy.

The mechanisms of party financing did not undergo drastic changes either. A liberal party relying primarily on the support of individual affiliates, the UCR never enjoyed any significant corporate support. True, diverse sectors of the middle class as well as many small-to-large businesses cooperated to fund the party's campaigns, but party activists and supporters carried out most of the campaign activities. Collective incentives were highly effective in the golden times of re-democratization. Later on, public patronage would gradually substitute for the declining capacity of devotee's fundraising to keep the party's coffers full.

As to the mechanisms of candidate nomination, they were accomplished through a double track: formally, each provincial branch held an election to choose party authorities and, sometimes, candidates to public office; informally, the presence of Alfonsín generated coattail effects that swept the country favoring those who sympathized with the new leader. Once party officials had been elected, they usually appointed the candidates to public office by means of elite arrangement (De Luca, Jones and Tula 2002). In short, Alfonsín and his followers took the party and shook it hard, but they respected most of the formal and informal practices that had long characterized it. They opened the party to fresh blood and renewed its links with the civil society, although they did not undertake major transformations regarding party organization. Their moves successfully prepared the party for the electoral challenge of 1983, but they failed to prepare it for the subsequent task of governing.

### *Government challenge: 1983-1989*

Once in office, the UCR administration evolved in two well-differentiated stages. In the first one, running from 1983 to 1985, Alfonsín packed his cabinet with traditional party leaders and implemented a traditional gradual and semi-autarchic economic policy. After failing to tame inflation and restart economic growth, he turned towards more modern-minded technicians and better-crafted heterodox policies of stabilization. They worked initially well, but were later overwhelmed by sectoral and distributive pressure and by the incapacity of the administration to stick to its austerity plan. In any event, the transition from one stage to the other was traumatic for the crystallized party doctrine, which had been traditionally at odds with cosmopolitanism



and modern management. Although the UCR rank-and-file and its electoral coalition were more conservative than the party leadership (Mora y Araujo 1985; Raimondo and Soukiassian 1989), the hegemonic party discourse continued to be social democratic and to identify itself with a state-led model. Therefore, the need for economic adjustment and public utility privatization was never fully swallowed by many party members, and even some government officials never wholeheartedly supported such goals. Alfonsín made an attempt to formalize programmatic modernization through a presidential speech that came to be called '*Discurso de Parque Norte*', given before a party assembly in 1985. Written by a group of prestigious, left-to-the-center, intellectuals it laid down the triangle on which the party expected to legitimate its mandate: modernization, participation, and solidarity. In spite of its public repercussion, the *Discurso* never managed to permeate the hard but hollow cover of the UCR ideological structure.

Throughout Alfonsín's tenure, the UCR also underwent minor institutional changes. The most important were carried out at the very beginning of his mandate, and consisted of reforming the party charter in order to allow an affiliate who became President of the Republic to also be the 'natural party president' as long as he kept office. This clause was crafted in order for Alfonsín to keep hold on the party, although it contradicted the arguments that the UCR had raised against the same practice when it was Perón who implemented it. The accumulation of such slight programmatic and organizational turnarounds never seriously compromised the strong leadership of the president, but it contributed to turning the party into a less useful instrument for policy-making. In the end, the incapacity of the UCR to manage the economy resulted in Alfonsín's early resignation (De Riz and Feldman 1991).

After renewing itself, the UCR had managed to get back to power by beating Peronism in clean elections for the first time in history. Once in office, however, the party failed to adapt to the requirements of government and was badly displaced in 1989, having previously lost all but two provincial governorships in the 1987 mid-term elections. Its future prospects did not look good, and they would get worse in the coming years.

### *Electoral challenge: 1999*

Between 1989 and 1995, the UCR went through a steady period of electoral failure. Peronism consistently defeated it in five straight national elections: two

presidential, two mid-term, and one constituent ballot. This drove many Radical leaders to despair: although long periods in the opposition are usual in consolidated democracies, Argentine politicians were not used to regime stability and were prone to short term calculations. However, the UCR performance was not homogeneously poor: indeed, by 1993 the party had reversed its declining electoral trend and had recovered two provincial governorships along with some significant municipalities. The improving perspectives fostered a process of renovation, but the aspiring leaders were unable to take this process of renovation to its logical conclusion and were overwhelmed by the old guard. I contend that renovation failure was due to two main reasons: the first one was the incapacity of the new leaders to take control of the party machine in Buenos Aires province; the second was an erroneous interpretation of the 1993 election (Malamud 1994).

In Buenos Aires there had been two main internal groups since 1983: the *Movimiento de Renovación y Cambio* (MRC) led by Alfonsín and seconded by Leopoldo Moreau and Juan Manuel Casella, and the *Junta Coordinadora Nacional* (JCN), a leftist wing led by Federico Storani. In 1992 the MRC split, and Casella aligned with Storani. The ensuing primary elections signaled the confrontation between the remaining of MRC and the new alliance, called *Convergencia*, with Alfonsín and Casella leading contending ballots and aiming to become the national party president. Although *Convergencia* won by a small margin, the control that Alfonsín retained over the machine permitted his followers to manipulate the returns wherever the contending faction was not able to monitor the electoral process.<sup>4</sup> In order not to hurt the party image, Casella did not dispute the outcome and Alfonsín eventually became the party president. In the meantime, he secretly negotiated a pact with President Menem that would open the door for constitutional reform and presidential re-election. Alfonsín's about face<sup>5</sup> was induced by the electoral results of 1993, in which the party improved its national results but performed disappointingly in Buenos Aires province and lost the Federal Capital. A nation-wide perspective might have shown better perspectives for the party, but a vision limited to the two largest districts saw no alternative to surrender. However, it is worth underlining that some Radical governors had also voiced their

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<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with key participants from both sectors who preferred not to be mentioned, throughout 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Alfonsín had firmly and publicly opposed reelection before signing the so-called *Pacto de Olivos* with Menem.

support for constitutional reform, in opposition to the national party stance. There were two reasons for it: on the one hand, they were hoping to obtain their own re-election, which required the reform of the respective provincial constitutions; on the other, the provincial finances were highly dependent on the national government so it seemed unwise to confront Menem. Finding himself between Menem's pressure from above and the Radical governors' pressure from below, Alfonsín interpreted the 1993 electoral defeat as a call for retreat, not strengthening the party's oppositional status.

As a consequence of the party self-displacement out of the opposition space, new parties grew up to fill this vacuum. For the first time in history, the 1995 presidential election found the UCR relegated to third place, behind the PJ and the newly born left-of-center *Frente del País Solidario* (FREPASO). Early in 1997, polls indicated that the party's chance could only worsen in the upcoming midterm elections, as the list headed by Alfonsín in Buenos Aires was trailing badly behind the first two candidates, the wife of the powerful provincial governor, Hilda Duhalde (PJ), and the flamboyant new political leader, Graciela Fernández Meijide (FREPASO). Showing once again his political skills (and his absolute control over the party), Alfonsín accepted an alliance with FREPASO (an alliance he had long opposed) and withdrew from the race in favor of Fernández Meijide. The subsequent electoral success, beating the so far unbeatable Duhalde machine, convinced the Radical leaders to maintain the alliance, and after a primary contest between the two parties that was won by UCR's De la Rúa in 1998, the party returned to the presidency in 1999 by defeating the PJ's Duhalde.

The decade spent out of power had changed some party features: above all, it was now less reluctant to engage in political pacts or electoral alliances. However, two things had not altered: firstly, the party machine was alive and its control was essential in order to secure internal power through managing career promotion and candidate nomination.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, a sound party tradition was still intact: Radical leaders never lose party control while alive. So it had been with Alem, Yrigoyen and Balbín, and so would be with Alfonsín. Such persistence could only spell trouble for a Radical president who was not the party leader.

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<sup>6</sup> The rise of newcomer Rodolfo Terragno to the head of the National Committee, by the mid 1990s, was a rare exception in a party that made internal careerism a proof of doctrinal purity. However, Terragno never controlled the party machine, and most Radical leaders scorned him overtly or covertly.

### *Government challenge: 1999-2001*

The *Alianza* that won the 1999 election was far from balanced. Whereas the UCR was the major partner in almost all the provinces in which the coalition was formed, FREPASO only led in two districts. To be sure, these were the largest ones (i.e. Buenos Aires and the Federal Capital); but FREPASO's advantage was based on the image of its two charismatic leaders, Carlos 'Chacho' Álvarez and Fernández Meijide, and not on any social rootedness or political structure. Indeed, once these leaders started to fade away and lastly eclipsed, FREPASO lost any significant hold and fragmented into multiple splinters. By 2003, it was hard to believe that the virtually demised party had won a third of the national vote just a few years before. The political consistency of the *Alianza* turned out to be as feeble as its programmatic manifesto, the *Carta a los Argentinos*. This was a rather vague catalog of intentions, which had been drafted after the work of a myriad of technical committees and participatory assemblies.

Within the *Alianza*, the weakness of FREPASO was manifested not only at the electoral level, but especially at the governmental level. The party lacked both technical teams and top politicians that could occupy highest cabinet offices. Hence, only two out of twelve cabinet posts were initially given to FREPASO, and even such poor figures would decrease over time (Abal Medina 2002). Although the UCR was not institutionally responsible for cabinet appointments and De la Rúa showed certain degree of autonomy, many ministers in his administration were top party leaders. Nonetheless, the presidential autonomy was patent in the nomination of his confidants and of technocrats close to Domingo Cavallo, who would eventually become the economy minister in 2001. It was the third time in history that a UCR President was not the party leader. Just as Alvear and Illia had not broken with either Yrigoyen or Balbín, neither did De la Rúa with Alfonsín. However, the former president was openly displeased by many decisions of his successor, and this fact alienated much of the support the administration badly needed from within the party ranks.

The short presidency of De la Rúa could be divided into three parts. The first one went since the inauguration until the resignation of vice-president Álvarez ten months later, claiming that the government had not supported his fight against corruption. The second part, of about half a year, went until the appointment of Cavallo following a turbulent transition. The third part lasts until the events of December 19-20, 2001, when the President De la Rúa resigned due to violent street protests and political turmoil. Public policies oscillated markedly throughout the two years. Initially aiming to

balance the fiscal deficit by restricting spending and increasing revenues, when failure was evident there was an attempt at implementing a further economic adjustment. After social reaction and political contestation made such an attempt unfeasible, heterodoxy was brought back in with Cavallo, only to turn again into adjustment when the economic situation kept worsening. This process can be hardly seen as one of programmatic reorientation, as every shift was made out of desperation rather than planning or ideology. However, many party leaders saw these actions as nothing short of surrender to the 'neoliberal model,' and clashed often and bitterly with the government. Alfonsín, allegedly the legitimate mediator and custodian of the party's ideological purity, played an ambiguous role. Hence, the UCR influence on, and support provided to its government declined as the three phases unfolded. When De la Rúa finally fell, the party was in absolute confusion and, still, Alfonsín's followers managed to keep control over the ensuing nomination process and official program. This, however, was but a formal shell: the party performance at the 2003 presidential election plummeted to 2 percent, exposing that most of the Radical voters chose to penalize the UCR by migrating to party splinters. Unfortunately for the UCR, the historical record indicates that those leaders who broke away from the party never return.

The UCR's failure to adapt to the challenges of government has been a historical constant, as it was born as an instrument to check power –not to hold it. However, until 1983 its administrations had only been removed by military means; since then, they would fall out of its own incapacity to handle public office, without any mediating military intervention. The party that had kept massive popular support through two century-turns was now to lose it not because of electoral failure, but because of administrative incompetence. Modern management requires modern managers, and most Radical leaders had remained entrenched in obsolete ideologies and dysfunctional party structures.

## ***The PJ***

### ***Electoral challenge: 1989***

The PJ is a party created from above. Its founder was Juan Perón, a military officer who, holding a key executive office, attempted to build a popular base of support to promote his political goals. Consequently, the party doctrine, language, and organization were pervaded by a hierarchical disposition. Just like a military-minded

organization, its leaders have been traditionally used to thinking of victory as the only acceptable outcome of a confrontation.

It is no surprise that the electoral defeat of 1983 came as a bucket of cold water to a party that had never lost a free and fair election. The PJ had undergone a series of traumatic shocks in the preceding decade, including the death of its founding leader, an armed confrontation between internal factions that resulted in hundreds of violent deaths, a traumatic ousting from power after a chaotic administration, and a brutal persecution by the ensuing dictatorship. Furthermore, the society had changed a great deal in the meantime, featuring declining levels of industrialization and the increasing ascension of middle class sectors and self-employee workers (Mora y Araujo 1991). All this notwithstanding, the party leadership faced the transition as though nothing had been altered: the PJ campaigned on past ideas, past leaders and inward-looking images, and took victory for granted (Waisbord 1995).

After the electoral failure, moves towards renovation started in different provinces. The process that eventually led to the 1989 victory comprised two stages: the first one ran between 1985 and 1988, when a new internal sector, the *Renovación*, displaced the old guard Orthodox faction and modernized the party image and its dominant coalition. The second stage was triggered when Antonio Cafiero, who had led the renovation, lost the presidential candidacy to Carlos Menem, who had been part of the process without severing ties with the previous dominant sectors, e.g. the unions and the provincial caudillos (McGuire 1997; Mustapic 2002). Despite the renovators' defeat, two significant transformations had definitely taken place within the PJ. Firstly, the party had become consistently pro-democracy, as it manifestly aligned with the Radical administration when it faced a series of armed rebellions in 1987 and 1988. For the first time since 1930, the military rebels found that the two main parties jointly supported the democratic regime, thus leaving no room for an alternative order. Secondly, the party managed to cut off the informal, but strong, links that united it with the unions. Henceforth, the PJ would still keep the substantial support of working- and lower-class voters, but it would become a patronage-based rather than a labor-based party (Levitsky 2003). This transformation was particularly significant in urban areas, since patronage had traditionally been stronger than unionism in small towns and the countryside. Whereas the democratic shift and simultaneous de-unionization of Peronism took place while in opposition, they would have momentous consequences once the PJ got back to power.

In order to carry out its metamorphosis, Peronism resorted to two consecutive electoral strategies. The first can be seen as an outcome of a decision made by the Renovators –mainly Cafiero— in 1985, which consisted of splitting the party and running on a different list just to thereafter (once the official party list had been beaten) return to the party and take control using their newly electoral legitimacy. This could be done because the Peronist tradition considered the party as just the electoral instrument of the *Movimiento*, therefore allowing for party splitting as long as broader loyalty to the movement was maintained. The second strategy was instrumented in 1988, also by the renovators, and consisted of calling (for the first time) a party primary to choose the presidential candidate. This time, however, the strategists miscalculated and the result benefited their opponent, Menem. Both strategies would be subsequently used at the provincial and municipal levels every time the Peronist leaders were unable to reach an agreement and nominate their candidates without elections. However, once in government, a new possibility would arise: the manipulation of the electoral rules and the transfer of the Peronist internal struggle onto the public arena.

#### *Government challenge: 1989-1999*

Some PJ activists usually complain that Menem turned Peronism upside down, sweeping its nationalist and autarkic doctrine into a neoliberal one and abandoning its traditional working-class base in favor of a coalition with the upper classes.<sup>7</sup> The initial appointment as economy minister of a representative of the largest Argentine multinational firm, Bunge y Born, and the later nomination of Cavallo to the same office ran contrary to the traditional party stance. However, the possibility to carry out such a sweeping transformation was already built up in the party structure. Unlike most social democratic and former communist parties, the PJ is characterized by a flexible organization. This led Levitsky (2003: 23) to define it as a mass populist party, meaning the combination of strong societal rootedness with high internal fluidity. Such a combination bestowed the party with a remarkable adaptive capacity, as it could change in response to new challenges without alienating its core electorate.

The PJ internal fluidity results from its open career paths and changing procedures of leadership selection. In Levitsky's terms, 'Peronism lacks a bureaucratic hierarchy or stable career paths, and as a result, movement into, up, and out of the party

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, what Menem accomplished was not abandonment but the construction of a new coalition between upper and lower classes (Gervasoni 1997; Levitsky 2003).

hierarchy is fluid' (2003: 79). Hence, 'the party hierarchy lacks secure tenure patterns and routinized career paths' (2003: 158), providing no solid ground or calculable perspectives to party officials. To be sure, career paths are not completely absent; but they are much more uncertain than in the UCR. Contempt adds to uncertainty: Peronist leaders mostly disregard the importance of party office and prefer to occupy public office. This factor may be attributed to the power-seeking culture of the party, but also to the requirements of a patronage-based machine. The direct and strong link between party finances and public office ties the party prospects to the support of its elected or otherwise appointed leaders. This is especially so since no dues are demanded from party members in Argentina, and economic scarcity intensified after the unions were replaced by territorial-based *agrupaciones* as the main party organizations (Levitsky 2003: 110).

As to the processes of candidate nomination and electoral engineering, the PJ is probably the most resourceful party in Latin America. De Luca et al. (2002) describe the two most widely used mechanisms for internal selection in Argentina; one formal –i.e. primary elections or ballot box— and other informal –i.e. elite arrangement or 'back room'. The latter case includes three subtypes: direct appointment by the supreme leader, direct negotiations among a few top leaders, or a decision by a party assembly made up of elected representatives. Mustapic (2002: 160) describes a third mechanism for selecting candidates for public office that consists of allowing many candidates to run along in general elections. To be sure, such permission is not usually formalized, but it is rooted on the fact that nobody is ever expelled from Peronism as long as the movement is allegedly larger than the party and may thus present diverse candidacies. As the PJ structure has no reentry costs, it is possible –and quite usual— to challenge the official party list in one or more elections and return to the party afterwards. A fourth mechanism is usually applied when the PJ is in power, and consists of manipulating the electoral rules –such as gerrymandering, implementing the Lemas system<sup>8</sup> or rescheduling the electoral calendar— in order to favor certain party candidates against others –and, besides, against other parties. In all, four broad types of candidate selection are so depicted: informal from within (elite arrangement), formal

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<sup>8</sup> The so-called *Ley de Lemas* is a mechanism that allows parties to present more than one list (or candidate) in a general election. The winner is the most voted list (or candidate) of the most voted party; this is why the system is usually described as 'multiple' and 'cumulative.'



from within (primaries), informal from outside (party splitting), and formal from outside (manipulation of electoral rules).

The internal fluidity of Peronism produced at least two significant outcomes in the 1990s. On the one hand, it permitted the successful candidacy of a handful of outsiders within the party lists, such as the elected governors of Santa Fe and Tucumán.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, it facilitated the programmatic shift undertaken by the Menem government (Corrales 2002). This was due to the tendency of the Peronist bosses to bandwagon towards office-holding leaders (Levitsky 2003: 144): as the authority of the party bodies is rarely taken seriously, ‘control of the state means control of the party’ (Levitsky 2003: 161). Since patronage-based organizations tend to be more pragmatic than ideological, and given that the hub-and-spokes nature of Argentine federal politics prevented horizontal anti-Menemist coalitions, the party programmatic about-face seemed complete. As would soon become apparent, it was not: the same party flexibility would allow for a rapid reversal to a nationalist, populist and anti-neoliberal program.

#### *Electoral challenge: 2001/2003*

After the 1999 defeat, there was a leadership struggle within Peronism between former president Menem and failed presidential candidate Duhalde. The attribution and duration of party tenures were among the main issues at stake, as Menem allegedly was the Council chair and Duhalde held the same position in the party Congress. The debate overtly exposed that formal institutionalization had not taken place in spite of the new environmental conditions such as democratic stability and government turnover. However, the PJ would not need to re-adapt to its opposition status: the disastrous mismanagement of the ruling *Alianza* resulted in a presidential vacancy only two years later, albeit not before a mid-term election had been carried out. As a result, in December 2001 Peronism held a comfortable majority in Congress and was able to control the process of presidential succession. In fact, the PJ senators had wisely appointed one of their own as the leader of the Senate, thus placing him in the line of succession should a presidential vacancy occur. When De la Rúa eventually resigned, it took only 10 days of internal turmoil and institutional crisis until Duhalde was appointed with multiparty congressional support. The PJ was back in power, not through presidential elections but by means of a victorious parliamentary election and

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<sup>9</sup> However, the significance of the outsiders should not be magnified: as Jones (2001) demonstrates, most national legislators in this period had strong party careers as background.

the subsequent endorsement of Congress. And still, the internal transfer of leadership was not over.

The fragmentation of the party and the inconclusiveness of the struggle for supremacy left the PJ leaders with difficult dilemmas. Duhalde had ascended to the presidency by promising his supporters –and aspiring successors— that he would not run in the subsequent election. Moreover, he knew that breaking his promise might have jeopardized the precarious economic stability achieved by his administration. In a bicephalous party, the exclusion of one leader would leave the other with the upper hand, and Duhalde understood that Menem would win an internal election against any other candidate. Lacking the power to appoint his successor and painfully aware of his incapacity to win a primary, he decided to implement a strategy already followed in many provinces where the PJ ruled –albeit with some differences: his administration allowed parties to present more than one presidential candidate, thus transferring the final decision to the general electorate. This mechanism did not replicate exactly the Lemas system, as votes were not cumulative, but it was thought to work in a similar way provided that the two most voted candidates were Peronist –and so it was termed ‘*neolemas*.’ As expected, two Peronists finished in the top two first. Menem finished first with 24 percent of the vote, but after public opinion polls predicted a landslide defeat for him against Duhalde’s candidate Néstor Kirchner, who had received 22 percent as runner up, he declined to participate in the second round. Thus, Kirchner became the new president after an election in which the Peronist candidates won in every province,<sup>10</sup> and the three Peronist contenders combined won more than 60 percent of the national vote. The strategy of *(auto)-divide and rule* had served the party again. A geographical analysis of the returns inspires two further reflections: first, the PJ is more firmly and homogeneously rooted, and more resilient, than the depth of the political crisis had induced to believe; second, notwithstanding its social rootedness, it is largely a patronage-based party, as each Peronist candidate won almost exclusively in the provinces in which he had the support of the Peronist governor or, alternatively, in those that bordered his own so he had been able to publicize his own administration as governor.

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<sup>10</sup> The PJ only lost in the Capital city.

### *Government challenge: 2001/2003*

The return of the PJ to the national government was far from smooth, and its exercise would be far from coherent. Indeed, the two Peronists that presided over the 2001-2003 period had different origins and ideological backgrounds. Whereas Duhalde was a typical machine boss, whose formative experience went back to the national-populist, unionized, party of the 1970s, Kirchner had been a left-of-center activist in the radicalized Peronism of the same decade. However, they shared a common trait: both had built up a powerful party machine in their respective provinces, which they governed without credible challengers, whether internal or external. The ambition to defeat Menem brought them closer, and the informally routinized structure of the party facilitated their unexpected convergence.

In spite of their different trajectories and ideological discourse, Duhalde and Kirchner agreed on their rejection of the neoliberal policies implemented by Menem. Relying on the PJ historical traditions, they managed to bring about a sweeping programmatic turnabout, the second in slightly more than a decade, which reverted to most of the positions that the last Peronist administration had abandoned. As soon as Menem left the scene, bandwagoning tactics started working and Kirchner rapidly capitalized on them, accentuating his alliance with Duhalde aimed at taking control over the party. Most party leaders that previously had supported Menem readily realigned with the new president. As a consequence, the new administration was able to overturn relevant Menemist policies with the support of the same legislators that had previously endorsed them.

Alcántara and Espíndola (2003) locate the PJ among the Latin American parties that exhibit a high degree of programmatic formalization. However, the rapid, sweeping, and conflicting turns mentioned above raise doubts about this categorization. It could be argued that it is possible for a party to change a highly formalized manifesto into another equally formalized but substantially different one. This was not the case, however: despite a handful of appealing proclamations, the Duhalde-Kirchner administrations have been erratic and lacking of any programmatic manifesto, except for public speeches that broadly indicated a rough ideological orientation. The PJ program has been neither stable nor formalized in the last decades.

By 2003, the PJ had survived persecution, proscription, and electoral defeat along with, when in government, the paramount crises of hyperinflation (1989-90) and global collapse (2001-2002). Moreover, it had even resisted two across-the-board

programmatic and coalitional twists in a decade without losing its electoral base or its organizational power. The social rootedness that permits many people *to be Peronist* instead of just *voting for Peronism* (Ostiguy 1998), combined with an outstanding degree of institutional flexibility, turned out to be a successful formula for adapting to hard times.

## **Conclusion**

Of the five presidential elections held between 1983 and 2003, the UCR has won two and the PJ three. However, the former has been unable to finish any of its mandates, while the latter has not only completed its own but also those of its rival. The different performances of Argentina's two main parties show that both have successfully adapted to the challenge of winning elections, but only one of them has been capable of coping with the challenge of government. There are two plausible interpretations for the repeated failure of the UCR: one is external and emphasizes the institutional structure that persistently over-represents the PJ and grants it a majority in the Senate and the provincial governorships (Calvo, Szwarberg, Micozzi and Labanca 2001); the other is internal and puts the accent on the UCR's adaptive incapacity (Malamud 1994, 1997). I contend that the two interpretations are complementary.

As to the external interpretation, it is widely accepted today that 'the locus of partisan politics in Argentina is the province' (Jones and Hwang 2003: 4; De Luca et al. 2002; Jones, Saiegh, Spiller and Tommasi 2002). Frequently, 'a single person or small group of politicians [...] dominates political parties at the provincial level,' basing their dominance on 'patronage, pork-barrel politics, and clientelism' (Jones and Hwang 2003: 5). However, not all parties are equally equipped to take advantage of these resources: as Calvo and Murillo (2003) convincingly argue, Peronism has a comparative advantage with respect to Radicalism in winning and retaining provincial and local governments. This partisan advantage 'is based on differentials regarding both access to public monies and electoral returns from expending public resources' (Calvo and Murillo 2003: 1). Once Peronism translates this advantage into institutional seats, it is able either to govern alone or to prevent others from governing. This may explain some of the difficulties the Radical presidents had to confront, but it is not enough to account for global government failure: in fact, both Alfonsín and De la Rúa were able to build coalitions broader than their own party and to get most of their agenda through Congress or via decree, at least before the lame duck phases that followed their mid-

term electoral defeats. But they were not able either to strike a consistent policy direction –given his ideological restrictions, in the case of Alfonsín— or to get enough party unity and strategic coordination after a defined course of action –given his lack of party control, in the case of De la Rúa. Whereas Alfonsín fell short of party program, De la Rúa fell short of party structure.

Table 2 displays synthetically the main challenges faced, the adaptive strategies adopted, and the outcomes attained by the UCR and the PJ in the last two decades. It becomes clear that Peronism is the party that changed the most in order to overcome shifting conditions both at the electoral and governmental tier, while Radicalism did so successfully only at the electoral tier.

**Table 2**  
**Argentine Parties: Challenge, Adaptive Strategy and Outcome, 1983-2003**

CANDIDATE / PRESIDENT	ADAPTIVE TIER	PARTY OR COALITION LEADERSHIP	CHALLENGE	STRATEGY*	OUTCOME
Alfonsín (UCR)	Election	Alfonsín	Defeat Peronism	Primaries, party mobilization, ideological renovation (1983)	Success
	Government	Alfonsín	Achieve economic stability and growth	Wavering, changing. Party discipline	Failure
Menem (PJ)	Election	First Cafiero, then Menem	Return to power after first defeat ever	First splitting (1985), later closed primaries (1988), then charismatic leadership	Success
	Government	Menem	Achieve economic stability and growth	Ideological turn: pro-market policies, currency board. Party discipline	Success
De la Rúa (UCR-Alianza)	Election	De la Rúa, Alfonsín, Álvarez	Defeat Peronism (nicknamed <i>Menemism</i> )	Coalition building, first back room (1997), later open primaries (1999)	Success
	Government	De la Rúa, Alfonsín	Generate growth, fight corruption and unemployment	Wavering, changing. Party and coalition conflict	Failure
Duhalde-Kirchner (PJ)	Election	Duhalde, Kirchner	Return to power after defeat and against Menem	First congressional agreement (2001), then <i>neolemas</i> (2003)	Success
	Government	Duhalde, Kirchner	Achieve economic stability and growth	Heterodox measures, gradualism. Party discipline	Success (so far)

\* The strategy may consist of either a planned party decision or a resulting equilibrium of multiple internal strategies –such as the PJ splitting in 1985.

The different adaptive performance of the two parties can be attributed to one main reason: the different degree of party institutionalization. Levitsky (2003: 15-18)

describes three different dimensions of institutionalization: stability, value infusion, and routinization. Roughly, the first item refers to persistence, the second to organizational autonomy, and the third to procedure. In turn, each item may be divided into internal (to the party) and external (relative to the general electorate), as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
**UCR and PJ: Compared Institutionalization**

DIMENSION	SCOPE	UCR	PJ
Stability	Internal (dominant coalition)	High	Low
	External (electoral)	Medium	High
Value infusion	Internal (activists)	High (purist)	High (pragmatic)
	External (electorate)	Medium (identity)	High (identity)
Routinization	Internal (procedures)	High (formal)	Low (informal)
	External (campaigning)	Variable	Medium (informal)

Two main findings are synthesized in the table: one reveals that the UCR is more strongly institutionalized than the PJ concerning at least two dimensions: stability and routinization. The other finding reveals that the UCR is more strongly institutionalized internally than externally, whereas in the PJ the opposite holds. Consequently, the UCR is considerably more rigid than the PJ. Proof is that, in the last twenty years, the PJ has had four different dominant coalitions, each involving very dissimilar programs and coalitions: orthodox, renovators, Menemists, and post-Menemists. In contrast, the UCR has not changed its effective top leadership since 1982. Partly due to its organizational stability, the UCR can be classified using most party typologies –although never close to the ideal types. In contrast, the PJ presents a much harder analytical challenge. For instance, the typology proposed by Gunther and Diamond (2003: 172) classifies parties into five broad types<sup>11</sup> that are further disaggregated in fifteen subtypes or *species*, which are ideally exhaustive and not overlapping. However, as many as four species would be necessary wholly to account for the Peronist phenomenon: the class-mass, pluralist-nationalist, personalistic, and catch-all ones. Instead, Levitsky's above-mentioned definition as a mass-populist party seems both more accurate and more parsimonious –albeit his typology is less encompassing.

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<sup>11</sup> The five types are: elite-based parties, mass-based parties, ethnicity-based parties, electoralist parties and movement parties.

After the political-economic collapse of 2001-2002, Argentina seems to be slowly recovering. Its main parties are to be acknowledged for rebuilding a democratic regime after half a century of instability, but they are also to be blamed for having left the country bankrupt. They have performed their electoral-representative functions much better than their governmental-institutional ones. In the future, it is hard to see how they may reconvert their patronage-based machines, well suited for winning elections, into political instruments that are also effective for the tasks of governing. The PJ seems to be better equipped to preserve stability, but it has never presided over a period of sustainable growth. The prospects for the UCR are even less bright, as its last administrations have all ended up in political turmoil and economic decay. Much effort will be required from its leaders not to become another victim of Latin American political Darwinism, a risk that the PJ does not appear to face. However, only time will tell; both parties have exhibited a remarkable capacity to endure that may continue to amaze those who continue to forecast their demise.

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