The Anchors of Continuity:

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Abstract

In the light of the political turmoil that Argentina has recently undergone, most observers forecasted a deep transformation of its national party system. However, the two major parties have managed to keep their electoral strongholds and no third party has set foot as a potential electoral alternative. Displaying empirical evidence, this paper describes party system stability at the national level as a function of the multilevel nature of electoral competition and the strong partisan stability manifested in most provincial arenas. In so doing, it unmasks five fallacies that have frequently misled observers: a focus on votes (instead of seats), a focus on single elections (instead of trends), a fondness of prospective analysis (instead of ex-post), a one-level-of-competition spotlight (instead of multi-level), and an accent on intra-party dynamics (instead of inter-party).

NB: Work in progress. Please do not quote without consulting with the authors.

“Given such evidence of continuity, how is it that there exists such a widespread conviction that party alignments have changed, and that party systems are no longer frozen? What, in other words, sustains these myths of electoral change?”

Peter Mair (1997: 86)

Introduction

In the light of the political turmoil that Argentina has recently undergone, many observers believed they were witnessing a deep transformation of the national party system (Abal Medina and Suárez Cao 2003a, 2003b; Cheresky and Blanquer 2003, 2004). Some of them held such belief even long before (Di Tella 1986, 1998). They considered inter-party and intra-party fragmentation as a relentless trend and polarization as a likely consequence. Abal Medina and Suárez Cao (2003b: 17) explicitly stated that “the appearance of new political [forces] that obtained parliamentary representation and the increase in votes for traditional left-wing forces… seemed to [pave the way for] the configuration of a new system, more plural and possibly more oriented to the extremes… Interaction among a greater number of parties will take on different characteristics from the ones with which we are familiar.” However, the two traditional parties, i.e. the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR or Radicals) and the Partido Justicialista (PJ or Peronists), have eventually managed to keep their electoral strongholds and no third party has set foot as a potential electoral alternative. Displaying empirical evidence, this paper describes party system stability at the national level as a function of the multilevel nature of electoral competition and the strong partisan stability manifested in most provincial arenas. In so doing, it unmasks five fallacies that have frequently misled observers: a focus on votes (instead of seats), a focus on single elections (instead of trends), a fondness of prospective analysis (instead of ex-post), a one-level-of-competition spotlight (instead of multi-level), and an accent on intra-party dynamics (instead of inter-party).

The article proceeds as follows. First, it displays the main features of Argentine party politics in the last two decades. In so doing, it analyzes the characteristics of party interaction at four different tiers: presidential, Senate, Chamber of Deputies, and provincial governorships. Second, the article looks into the mechanisms that link the four tiers, creating a feedback loop that contributes to anchor and stabilize the systemic outcome. It highlights four of these mechanisms: two institutional (the electoral system and the electoral calendar/cycle) and two performative (the differential degrees of party nationalization and party competitiveness at every tier). Finally, we present the conclusions.

Evolution of Twenty-Seven Party Systems

Among the national cases that feature presidentialism, strong bicameralism and federalism (i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and the United States), Argentina is the only one that has developed significant provincial parties¹ which have not only managed to get elected for governorships but, more important, to influence national politics through their representatives in Congress. However, this paper does not deal with the impact of provincial party politics on national policy-making but with its role in shaping and

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¹ Provincial parties are those whose first election is contested only in one province and whose results in other provinces, if they later spread, remain negligible.
influencing the dynamics of the national party system (see Sartori, 1976, for a comprehensive typology of party systems). Our main goal is to describe and explain the operation of the national party system as a complex combination of three-plus-one party systems. The *three party systems* refer to the three autonomous arenas of national competition, i.e. the presidential, senatorial, and lower-house electoral levels; the *fourth, composite party system* refers to the aggregation and articulation of twenty-four provincial party systems. Although the understanding of a party system as a compound of two levels of interaction is not infrequent in the literature on the American and Canadian cases (see Katz 1999), three-level interaction has only been referred to in the embryonic case of the European Union (Bardi 1994; Hix and Lord 1997). The latter, however, cannot be considered a full-fledged party system (Malamud 1999). To the best of our knowledge, four-level interaction has never been reported before.

a) The National Level: Three Tiers

The first electoral tier is the presidential. In the period 1983-2003, five presidential elections were held: the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ or Peronists) won three of them—in the last one it split, running with three candidates—, whereas the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR or Radicals) won the other two—in 1999, in alliance with another party (Frente por un País Solidario or FREPASO). Victory has shifted over time, as no party won all the elections consecutively (see Figure 1). This means that the two parties have shown capacity to recover from defeat, maintaining themselves as credible contenders when out of power. This presidential duopoly cannot hide, however, that one of the parties has shown much higher electoral stability than the other: the PJ has never fallen below the 38% of the vote, while the UCR exhibited peaks of 52% and drops to 2%. Third parties have eventually made inroads, but they only garnered significant results in 1995, when FREPASO displaced the UCR from the second place. Next election both parties coalesced, but after winning two consecutive electoral victories they failed to complete a constitutional mandate and broke down. While FREPASO virtually disappeared, the UCR managed to survive—mainly to its provincial roots, as will be dealt with below. The 2003 presidential elections were atypical, as the PJ presented three simultaneous candidacies who together garnered 60% of the vote while the UCR reached its historical lowest. Although the degree of exceptionality of this election can only be tested by history, we present afterward some data that point in that direction.

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2 From now on, and for the sake of simplicity, we will use level when referring to the national or subnational (and even supranational) arenas, and tier when referring to arenas that belong to the same level (e.g., the presidential, senatorial and lower house, which in this article are analyzed at the national level).
NB: In this and the following figures, the “Third Party” is the party other than the PJ and UCR which won the largest percentage of the national vote in an election.


The second electoral tier is the senatorial. In the Senate, the mechanism of renewal by thirds every three years, in force between 1983 and 2001, led to eight different compositions in two decades. The constitutional reform of 1994 would raise the composition of the chamber—from 48 to 72—, modify the tenure of the senators—from nine to six years— and the renewal period—from three to two years—, the two latter to take effect as of 2001; but the mechanism of staggered elections did not change. In addition, the reform envisaged that the right to elect the senators would be transferred from the provincial legislatures to the people of each province from 2001 onwards. From 1995 onwards, two of the senators were to be elected by the party obtaining the first plurality, while the third would correspond to the runner up. Surprisingly, these significant changes—first increasing the number of representatives, later establishing their direct election—hardly altered the balance of power in the Senate: in all three constitutional stages, the PJ held between 50% and 60% of the seats—the only exception being the Alfonsín years (1983-1989), when it just had 45%. Furthermore, Peronists and Radicals consistently held together between 80% and 90% of the seats (see Figure 2). No other national party ever held more than one senator, and no third party ever held more than two. At this level, party duopoly has never developed into an alternating system but a predominant one.
The third tier is the one in which the chamber of deputies is elected. This level appears as slightly different from the two precedents. In the chamber, alternation of the majority was more common, absolute majorities were less frequent, and third parties got to make moderate inroads. Renewal by halves every two years produced eleven legislative periods and, therefore, eleven different compositions of the chamber. The PJ held an absolute majority in two periods and a relative majority (plurality) in five, while the UCR (in circumstances with its allies) held an absolute majority in three periods and a relative majority in one (see Figure 3). Throughout the two decades under analysis, five different parties or coalitions took turns to occupy the third place. The largest parliamentary group ever formed, apart from Peronists and Radicals, was the FREPASO in 1997 with almost 11% of the seats. Yet it would dilute itself into the parliamentary group of the ALIANZA two years later. After that, the relative size of the third party turned back to its more traditional average of 5%.

When disaggregating its various dimensions, Argentina exhibits a two-party system at the presidential level, a predominant party system at the senatorial level, and a party system of limited pluralism at the deputy level. As a whole, though, the national party system displays a picture closer to concentration rather than fragmentation. Two parties alone, the PJ and the UCR, have alternated in the presidency while consistently accumulating more than 80% of the Senate seats and more than 70% of the lower house seats, albeit the PJ have scored more victories, obtained more seats, and registered a more stable performance. The electoral trends of the last two decades, which arguably point to increasing electoral volatility and wider dispersion of the vote, have not manifested so plainly in the institutional arena. The mechanisms that prevented the party system from defreezing are analyzed in depth in the second part of the paper.
b) The Subnational Level: Twenty-Four Provincial Arenas

The multi-tier analysis that has just been applied to the national party system may also be applied to each of the provincial party systems. For the sake of simplicity, however, we will not analyze here the distribution of parliamentary seats in every provincial legislature. Instead, we will use a single variable, party control of the governorship, as a proxy for classifying the provincial party systems. Henceforth, a province will be classified as featuring a predominant party system if one party has won at least five of the six gubernatorial elections held between 1983 and 2003; it will be considered as featuring a two-party system if two parties have alternated in power, each winning at least two terms throughout the same period; finally, it will be considered as featuring a limited-pluralist party system if more than two parties have either won a gubernatorial election or been included into an executive coalition.

In accordance with the criteria just laid down, the twenty-four provincial party systems in Argentina can be classified as follows: fourteen provinces feature a predominant party system, four feature a two-party system, and six feature a limited pluralist party system. Clearly, continuity is more frequent than alternation. More strikingly, in ten out of the fourteen provinces that feature a predominant party system

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3 With a few and temporary exceptions, governors are elected by plurality of popular votes. Further information is found in the next sections. For a deeper and more nuanced assessment of provincial party politics, the authors encourage the reader to directly contact them.

4 They are Buenos Aires, Formosa, Jujuy, Misiones, Neuquén, La Pampa, La Rioja, Río Negro, San Luis, Santa Fe, Santiago del Estero, Santa Cruz, Salta and Tucuman.

5 They are Chubut, Córdoba, Entre Ríos and Mendoza.

6 They are the Capital district, Catamarca, Chaco, Corrientes, San Juan and Tierra del Fuego.
turnover has never occurred, as the same party won all the gubernatorial elections since 1983.\textsuperscript{7}

Another constant of provincial politics is the predominance of the PJ: from 1983 to 2003, it never controlled less than half the governorships –i.e. twelve—, with an average of two thirds –as at the time of this writing, when it governs 16 provinces (see Figure 4).

\textbf{FIGURE 4}

\textit{Argentine governorships by party, 1983-2003}

\begin{figure}
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\textbf{SOURCE: own elaboration upon data from the National Electoral Direction.}

\textbf{Mechanisms of Interaction between the Different Tiers of the Party System}

There are four main factors linking the national and subnational levels of the party system: two are structural and have institutional roots, whereas the other two are performative and depends on the characteristics and interaction of the competing parties. The first institutional factor regards the partisan bias of electoral disproportionality, which is reliant on federalism and the electoral rules including the electoral formula, district magnitude and the degree of malapportionment –among other factors that are later developed. The second institutional factor regards the electoral cycle and calendar, and determines which the dominant constituency is –i.e. national or provincial. In turn, the first performative factor concerns the degree of nationalization of the parties and party system, whose scores cannot be inferred from the institutional framework but have a decisive influence upon the structure of competition. The second performative factor concerns the degree of competitiveness of each tier of the party system, as they may vary widely and the overall outcome is not necessarily the average.

\footnote{In a recent by-election, held in February 2005, the PJ lost Santiago del Estero to the UCR in a very similar way as it had previously lost Catamarca and Corrientes: a criminal scandal that involved the provincial authorities led to federal intervention, whose subsequent elections entailed the defeat of the ruling party.}

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Institutional Features

a) The Electoral System

We contend that the two main Argentine parties, PJ and UCR, have got and are likely to continue to get the large majority of seats in every tier of competition, and that no third party able to challenge their supremacy is likely to emerge and persist in the medium term. Our argument is that the complex set of electoral rules fosters a significant disproportionality whose effects are not neutral regarding the partisan distribution of seats. Rather, it generates a strong partisan bias that favors especially the PJ but also the UCR. At the same time, it discourages the emergence and consolidation of third national parties. Disproportionality may have at least three institutional sources: the effective threshold (i.e., the combination of the applied electoral formula with the median district magnitude), malapportionment, and the geographical distribution of the electorate (Grofman, Koetzle and Brunell 1997). Next we define these factors, just to thereafter explain how they affect party performance at each national tier of the party system.

The effective threshold is the minimum percentage of the vote that a candidate or party must receive to obtain election. It is a composite of three main variables: electoral formula, district magnitudes and size of the assembly. It has a robust impact over the degree of proportionality of an electoral system.

Malapportionment is any distribution of seats that violate the principle of equal representation according to population. Depending on the electoral system, the value of votes in one or more constituency may differ from that in one or more other constituencies. Malapportionment is possible only in electoral systems with more than one electoral constituency.

The heterogeneous distribution of the electorate across the electoral districts may be the consequence of intentional attempts to influence the results (gerrymandering) or, simply, the combined effect of demography, geography and time. It may have a strong impact over the degree of proportionality of an electoral system, as spread preferences might obtain fewer seats than concentrated ones irrespective of the number of votes.

In Argentina, the president is elected by direct vote in a single, nation-wide district through a two-round ballot. Ideally, this would imply that voters have a chance to express their sincere preference in the first ballot before eventually casting a strategic preference in the second one, thus allowing for a certain degree of electoral fragmentation. However, the unconventional format of the Argentine runoff prevents it: in order to win the election, a candidate needs not to get 50% but 45% of the vote; moreover, 40% would suffice if the difference with the runner-up is larger than 10%. As a consequence, parties have the incentive to coalesce already at the first ballot, in order to either reach one of the thresholds in the first round or to prevent the best positioned from doing so (Castiglioni 1995). As a result, presidential elections have effectively operated as though there was a plurality system. Malapportionment and heterogeneous distribution of the electorate are nonexistent or have no effect due to the single constituency.

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8 This is formally so since the Constitutional reform of 1994, as before the president and vice-president were elected via electoral colleges independently constituted in each province. However, there was no practical effect: never in history did the electoral colleges bring together a majority different from the one decided by popular vote.
Senators are elected in multiple, provincial-wide districts running on multi-member lists –two per province until 1995 and three ever since. The national Constitution establishes an incomplete plurality system in equal, small-magnitude districts. The effective threshold varies according to performance, but due to the fixed features of the system always two, and only two parties obtain representation in each province.\(^9\) Malapportionment is another built-in characteristic of the Senate, as the chamber is intentionally designed to represent territorial units as opposed to population. As a consequence, each senator of Buenos Aires province represents about 4 million inhabitants while each senator from Tierra del Fuego represents 40 thousand. This factor gives the smaller provinces the same influence over the partisan distribution of power at the Senate as the larger ones—with the caveat that the smaller are much more. The distribution of the electorate is also vastly relevant at this tier: as the smaller districts are usually less competitive and more prone to vote for the PJ (as shown below, most of them are safe districts), this party obtains a highly disproportional share of the Senate with respect to its overall electoral share.

Deputies are also elected in multiple, provincial-wide districts running on multi-member lists. Differently from the Senate, however, the districts range from small (two members) to large (thirty-five members). The electoral regulation establishes proportional representation, applying the D’Hont formula with a low legal threshold of 3% of the registered voters in each district. This has led some authors to expect high levels of party fragmentation (McGuire 1995). Nonetheless, the effective threshold is notably higher, as variety regarding district magnitude hides the fact that twenty districts are low-sized, two are medium-sized and only two are high-sized: the consequence is that most districts feature a plurality system in practice (Cabrera 1993, 2001). Indeed, the average district magnitude is 5.3 but the median district magnitude is 3.25. Furthermore, malapportionment is also notably high and clearly favors the smaller districts: this means that the proportion of deputies who are elected through plurality is even higher, as the most “majoritarian” districts have a bonus over the most proportional ones (Calvo et al 2001; Reynoso 1999). Finally, several analyses of the distribution of the electorate show that most loyal voters concentrate in the smaller districts, whereas most volatile voters cluster in the bigger ones (Escolar, Calvo, Calcagno and Minvielle 2002; Escolar and Calvo 2003). This is commonly depicted as an advantage for the PJ (Calvo et al 2001), as its loyalists mostly cluster in the over-represented provinces, but it has also benefited the UCR, if not vis-à-vis the PJ, at least regarding all other national parties. Figure 5 shows the gap between fair proportionality and actual distribution of seats in the chamber (see also Samuels and Snyder 2001). Static malapportionment has dynamic effects when voters realize: as Benton (2005: 417) has recently found, “citizens punish incumbents by voting for established nonincumbents when electoral laws reduce opportunities available to small parties in the systems, even if nonincumbents have also been blamed for hard economic times”. This may be bad news for good governance but it certainly is a comfortable perspective for established parties.

\(^9\) An exception occurs when a given party splits and presents two lists, each garnering more votes than the third party. The PJ has already carried the three senators of La Rioja with this strategy.
In sum, the combination of variable district magnitudes with legal regulations that establish high effective thresholds and deep malapportionment turns the electoral system into a complex continuum: presidential elections might be defined by plurality or majority depending on the distribution of the votes cast; senatorial elections are defined by plurality; and deputy elections rank from fair proportionality in the larger districts to sheer plurality in the smaller ones. As a result, the translation from votes to seats always manufactures majorities at the senatorial level and, sometimes, also at the other levels: at the presidential level, its doing so depends on the degree of voting fragmentation; at the deputy level, it depends on a combination of district magnitude, malapportionment and territorial concentration of the vote. Hence, the senatorial level provides a stable and predictable mechanism for allocating seats, while the other levels additionally rest on contingency (presidential) or demographic, geographic and districting factors (deputy). As will be seen in the section that analyzes the performative features of the party system, demography, geography and districting have systematically favored the PJ and the UCR.

b) The Electoral Calendar: Electoral Cycle and Dominant Constituency

There are three time-related factors that influence the electoral results in Argentina: the staggering of elections for renewing the national chambers, the concurrency or not of elections (both regarding different tiers at the national level and the two different levels, i.e., national and subnational), and the decoupling (desdoblamiento) of elections belonging to the same tier. The outcome of these combined factors is that coattail effects, i.e. the electoral impact of one tier over the others, is highly variable from one election to the other and depends on multiple actors, mainly the president and the governors.

Legislative elections are staggered for the two national chambers as well as for most of the provincial legislatures. The Senate renewed by thirds every three years until 2001, and since then renews by thirds every two years. The Chamber renews by halves.
every two years. Among the provinces, 14 currently feature staggered renewal, of which 9 are unicameral and 5 bicameral. The main consequence of staggered elections is inertia from the past: the composition of the chambers does not reflect the configuration of the electorate at the moment of the last election, but the combination of different configurations elapsed by years.

Due to the staggering of elections, concurrency is always partial: every time a president is to be elected, also half the House and one third of the Senate are picked. Most provinces present a very similar picture. As a result, concurrent elections –i.e. those in which executive officials are chosen— tend to concentrate the popular vote at the executive level and produce coattail effects at the legislative level, whereas non-concurrent (intermediate) elections tend to produce a more fragmented vote.

The third variable, decoupling, is a rarer phenomenon of which we have found no record elsewhere (Oliveros and Scherlis 2004). It may take two forms. One, the simplest, is the temporal des-concentration of the provincial elections into many different dates: this mechanism was usually resorted to by some governors in order to separate their fate from their national party candidates’, or by the national administration with the aim to produce a cumulative, snowball effect. Broadly applied since 1991, it is rooted in the federal nature of the country and fed by the increasing autonomy of the provincial party sections. The second form of decoupling consists of the dispersion over time of the elections to appoint a given assembly’s members. In Argentina this practice was widely used during the 90s and reached its peak 2003, when the deputies were elected in 11 different electoral dates along seven months, starting in April 27 and ending in November 23.

The outcomes of these three factors, when combined, are multiple, but inertia and governors’ control over the electoral calendar –and therefore over coattail effects, be it to produce or to prevent them— stand out. The crucial matter is that these effects benefit the incumbents, and thus the traditional parties. Furthermore, the timing and sequence of the elections held at the subnational level have contributed to reduce the effective number of parties at the national level (Jones 1997b). As governors (or provincial party leaders) command not only the nomination and electoral processes but also the behavior of the national legislators of their provinces, provincial politics further influence policy-making besides electoral politics (De Luca et al 2002; Jones et al 2002). Different from other polities, Argentine elections are neither candidate-centered nor (national)party–centered (Jones 2002): it is provincial-party-centered. This fact has an enduring impact upon the stability of the national party system.

Performative Features

a) Degree of Nationalization of the Parties and Party System

Nationalization can be defined as “the extent to which a party receives similar levels of electoral support throughout the country” (Jones and Mainwaring 2003: 139). Political parties and party systems may each exhibit varying degrees of nationalization. Jones and Mainwaring (2003) rank Argentina as a “low nationalization country” regarding both categories. Of the seventeen party systems of the Americas they analyze, Argentina’s appears as the fourth least nationalized, only behind Ecuador, Brazil and Peru. A similar, low record is displayed concerning the degree of party nationalization. Presented in this way, these data are as reliable as they are misleading: the low degree of nationalization of both the average party and the party system in Argentina does not
weight differences from party to party. These differences are, at the same time, huge and significant.

The differences are huge because the degree of nationalization of the best-scoring parties doubles and even triples that of the worst-scoring (see Figure 6). Moreover, differences are significant because the most nationalized parties are the two traditional ones, whereas the least nationalized are all the rest. The party that is most homogeneously distributed across the electoral districts, and over time, is the PJ, whose degree of nationalization has always scored between 80% and 90%. The UCR scores only slightly lower and exhibits a little more heterogeneity across elections, with a degree ranging from 75% to slightly over 90%. In contrast, all other parties are far less nationalized, what explains the overall low average of the party system. This is due to the fact that third parties are of one of two types: either they are provincial –so they are territorially limited by definition— or they aim to be national but cannot spread farther from their original strongholds –alternatively the Federal district, Buenos Aires or Santa Fe. The result is that third parties are territorially concentrated, most usually in malapportioned districts that under-represent them at the legislative level, what further undermines their capacity to increase visibility and gain access to official resources.

**FIGURE 6**

Degree of Party Nationalization, 1983-2001

Territorial dispersion of third parties’ electoral bases magnifies the adverse effect of malapportionment and staggered elections on the share of elected officials. This phenomenon is less visible when the main parties are well established and electoral challengers do not purport significant threats, as in the United States, or when most relevant parties all have territorial strongholds, i.e. a similar (lower) degree of nationalization, as in Brazil. In these cases, low nationalization is not supposed to have meaningful dynamic effects, as would-be voters of parties that are small at the national level know that their votes count –they do elect representatives. On the contrary, in

most Argentine provinces strategic voting is stimulated by the repeated experience of third parties failing to get their candidates elected—or worse, failing to influence policy later given their reduced legislative contingents.

A process of party nationalization is a long one. Historical opportunities may be better or worse seized, but they cannot be created at will. Parties that were not present when such opportunities arouse might never find a similar chance; those that were there and managed to seize the opportunity may turn it into an endurable asset, provided that the contextual framework is tilted towards inertia. As Leiras (2004: 20) put it, “Argentine political history allowed the larger parties to consolidate their organizations in every province and every town. Argentine political rules induce them to preserve such organizations.”

b) Degree of Competitiveness of the Provincial Party Systems (and National Tiers)

As mentioned above, the degree of competitiveness of the provincial party systems varies widely. Four out of the six largest and richest provinces (Córdoba, the Capital district, Mendoza and Entre Ríos) feature competitive party systems, together with the smaller Chaco, Corrientes, San Juan, Catamarca and Tierra del Fuego. Buenos Aires, the largest one, and Santa Fe are notable outliers, as they have predominant party systems resembling those of smaller and less developed provinces. In the fourteen provinces with such a system, the PJ governs twelve, the UCR one (Río Negro) and a provincial party the remaining (Neuquén). The solid hold that the PJ keeps on almost half the Argentine provinces confers it a series of national advantages: first, a stable electoral support that guarantees it a regular performance, acting as a buffer that prevents sharp declines in bad times; second, the control of the Senate, whose members are elected on a provincial basis; third, vital resources for party financing and campaigning. If the main region under Peronist control was once termed “the Solid Northwest”, paraphrasing the Democratic control of the Solid South in the US, recent Radical inroads have somewhat scattered the Peronist territorial domination. This phenomenon has a facet worth remarking: whenever Peronism was endurably displaced of some of its historical strongholds, it was the UCR rather than third parties that did it.

Not only do traditional parties control most national and provincial offices but they also hold most local municipalities. Between 1983 and 2003, the PJ and the UCR have never got less than 42% and 33% respectively—and 84% altogether—of all Argentine mayors. This is still another source of party system stability, but we will not develop it further here. It will suffice to remark that mayors’ have a similar survival rate to governors, with party swing being little frequent and reelection rates quite high (De Luca 2004).

Party fragmentation is reduced at the subnational level as a consequence of similar institutional and performative conditions as those existing at the national level. As Föhrig (2004: 26) notes, “most provincial electoral systems have built in incentives to produce unified government at the provincial level.” The main incentive is the combination of majority formulas with small effective district magnitude (Calvo et al 2001: 75). Furthermore, the series of constitutional reforms that took place since the 1983 democratization has only deepened these features, as provincial legislatures systematically approved pro-majoritarian reforms (Corbacho 1998). Additionally, the implementation of the multiple simultaneous vote (ley de lemas) in up to 11 provinces had the successful objective of preventing dissidents from leaving their parties, allowing them to run on ballots that were different from other party comrades’ while keeping
them all under the party umbrella (Tula 1997). This mechanism had three main consequences: first, it helped the incumbent party (without exception, the PJ) to maintain many governorships despite harsh internal quarrels; second, it prevented challenger parties from getting to power no matter how good electoral results they got short of absolute majority; third, albeit divisive regarding provincial politics, it contributed to sending a majority of Peronists to the national congress, as Lemas decompressed party quarrels at the bottom but did not apply to the national ballot, which usually united all the provincial factions after one common list.

Conclusions

After the political collapse of December 2001, conventional political analyses held that the widespread popular rejection to the established political elite would entail the end of the traditional parties. Yet, at the time of this writing, the PJ holds again the presidential office, 57% of the Senate, 51% of the lower house, and 66% of the provincial governorships. The second party, the UCR, keeps 28% of the Senate, 17% of the lower house, and 25% of the provincial governorships. After them there is an abyss. The party labels that scored better than the UCR in the 2003 presidential election, namely RECREAR and ARI, have no senator, no governor, and only 4% (ARI) or 1% (RECREAR) of the Chamber of Deputies. In twenty years, third parties have sporadically made electoral inroads but have never managed to consolidate; in contrast, the two traditional parties have shown stronger—if uneven—resilience than many had thought. Although the electoral results have varied more than the institutional distribution of power shows, the insight of Mair (1996: 99-100) proves right once again: “massive shifts at the level of the electorate and at the level of the format of the party system could yet end up in a party system that reflected more continuity than change.”

In order to establish whether a given structure of competition is open or close, Mair considers three dimensions: the pattern of alternation, the type of governing formulas, and the access to government office. In 2005 Argentina, the pattern of alternation (among two parties) remains unchanged at all the four tiers; the type of governing formula (one-party government) underwent a temporary shock in 1999 but the new formula (coalition government) was rapidly aborted; finally, access to executive office shows no changes at any level: only the PJ and the UCR can make it up to the top.

As Mair (1996: 97) also notes, electoral stability (or change) may be related to party system stability (or change) but they are not mutually equivalent. This means that electoral realignment or higher electoral volatility do not necessarily affect the structure of competition. We contend this is the case in Argentina: electoral change was territorially limited and temporally ephemeral, partly because the electoral institutions are strongly tilted toward incumbents, partly because the established parties are homogeneously rooted but, at the same time, flexible enough to adapt themselves to the electoral changes in order to keep the structure of competition untouched.
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