

3 Argentina: Compromising on a Qualified Plurality System

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In 1994 Argentina shifted from the indirect election of presidents via an electoral college to a system of direct election by qualified plurality rule with few precedents. The new rule emerged as a byproduct of the short-term electoral expectations and relative strength of the main negotiators of the constitutional reform of 1994. The alternative thresholds of 45 per cent or 40 per cent with a difference of 10 points over the second most voted candidate were created as a compromise between the plurality system desired by the incumbent president of the Justicialist Party (PJ), Carlos Menem, and the majority runoff system demanded by Raúl Alfonsín, leader of the main party of the opposition, the Radical Civic Union (UCR). These rules were chosen with the aim of maintaining a two-party system with the PJ as the dominant party. Since 1995, however, the emergence of third forces has created a more uncertain scenario in which the outcome of elections is determined by the ability of incumbent parties to reach the minimum thresholds and the capacity of opposition parties to coordinate into a common alliance. In this context, the qualified plurality system created by self-interested actors is likely to lead to less arbitrary and more socially acceptable results than its main alternatives, plurality rule and majority runoff.

The initial rules: the Electoral College

Like many other Latin American constitutions during the nineteenth century, the Argentine constitution of 1853 adopted a system of indirect election of presidents by an Electoral College inspired by the precedent of the American constitution. Except for the elections of 1951 (plurality) and 1973 (majority runoff), this method basically determined the election of all presidents in Argentina until the reform of 1994.

The system established a three-stage process for the election of presidents. First, the citizens of each province and the capital (24 districts since 1983) would vote for electors for President and Vice-President in a number equal to double the number of deputies and senators each district sent to Congress. Second, the electors would meet in the capital of each province (meaning that the 'Electoral College' never

on separate ballots. Third, the Congress would meet in joint session to certify the number of votes cast for each candidate and proclaim winners those who received an absolute majority of the vote. Failing a majority for either President, Vice-President or both, Congress in joint session – with a qualified quorum of three-fourths of the totality of the members of both chambers – would decide between the two most voted candidates.

Two important features must be highlighted about the working of this system: first, the disproportionality it created between population size and number of electors per province; second, the way it worked as an effective plurality rule in spite of the majority principle that regulated the decisions of the Electoral College.

The requirement that each province would select a number of electors equal to double the number of senators (two) and deputies (variable according to population) sent to Congress meant in practice a minimum of six electors per province. This rule, clearly beneficial for small provinces, was reinforced after 1951 with the establishment of a minimum number of deputies, which was initially two in 1951 and five since 1983. As a result, no district (with the exception of Tierra del Fuego) sent less than 14 electors from 1983 to 1989. Due to this rule, winning in the largest districts, like the provinces and cities of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe, provided a considerable advantage but it was not sufficient to reach a majority of electors.

Although a majority of electors was required to win a presidential election, the system effectively worked under the effects of plurality rule. First, for most of the existence of the Electoral College until 1963, electors for President were selected by plurality rule from multi-member districts. The effect was that a candidate could obtain a majority of electors by simply winning a plurality of the total national vote. In 1922 and 1958, for instance, 49 per cent of the national vote was equivalent to 57 and 68 per cent of the total number of electors, as shown in Table 3.1. Second, when a plurality winner in popular votes did not get a majority of electors, the practice was to provide this candidate with a majority of votes in the Electoral College. This occurred twice using plurality rule and limited vote (1916 and 1931) and once (1963) using proportional representation (with d'Hondt formula) for the selection of electors. In particular, in 1916 additional support came from provincial parties that competed for electors but did not commit to vote for any particular candidate. Because of this practice, in no single instance was the intervention of Congress necessary to decide on the election of presidents. However, on two occasions (1854 and 1860) Congress did intervene to select a Vice-President.

The majority or near majority support that on average presidents obtained in electors and (for the periods for which we have reliable data) in popular votes was only in part due to the incentives that the Electoral College may have provided to the formation of broad coalitions. Elections were hardly fair or competitive until the electoral reform of 1912. From then on, while the legal framework made possible an effective party competition, the political process prevented it, first, because the main democratic parties in the country, like the Radical Civic Union (UCR) from 1916 to 1928 and the Justicialist Party (PJ) from 1946 to 1952, emerged as dominant

Table 3.1 Argentina: Electoral College presidential elections, 1854–1989

Year	Winner		Runner-up		
	Popular votes %	Electors %	Votes in college %	Popular votes %	Votes in college %
1854	N/A	73	89	N/A	7
1860	N/A	56	58	N/A	37
1862	N/A	88	100	N/A	—
1868	N/A	52	60	N/A	20
1874	N/A	64	65	N/A	35
1880	N/A	68	69	N/A	31
1886	N/A	72	79	N/A	15
1892	N/A	91	95	N/A	2
1898	N/A	73	85	N/A	15
1904	N/A	81	81	N/A	11
1910	N/A	88	99	N/A	0.4
1916	47	44	51	13	35
1922	49	57	63	8	16
1928	62	66	65	10	19
1931	32	36	63	31	32
1937	56	66	65	42	34
1946	54	81	80	44	18
1958	49	68	68	32	29
1963	32	35	57	21	18
1983	52	53	57	40	43
1989	49	53	54	37	39

Note: Author's elaboration from data in Molinelli (1989) and Nohlen (1993).

Popular votes are proportions of valid and positive votes (excluding null and blank ballots), while electors and votes in college are proportions of the total number of electors (including absentees, abstentions and blank ballots).

proscription of one of these parties – the UCR during the 1930s and the PJ during the 1950s and 1960s. From this perspective, it has been only since 1983 that the country has experienced an open electoral competition in the context of a seemingly solid two-party system.

Compromising between plurality and majority rule

A failed attempt at constitutional reform during the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín of the UCR (1983–89) is the most immediate and important precursor of the reform that took place in 1994. In 1986 and 1987 a presidential commission produced a report on constitutional reform suggesting the convenience of replacing the existing presidential regime by a premier-presidential one. When in January 1988 president Alfonsín (UCR) initiated formal negotiations with the PJ, then the main

was the attempt to create a Prime Minister politically responsible to the Chamber of Deputies and the transformation of the Senate (where the PJ had a plurality) into a mere revising chamber on issues other than the distribution of territorial power.

But the report of the commission also included other areas of potential disagreement between the two main parties, such as the replacement of the Electoral College by a direct election by majority rule. The PJ rejected this method and favoured instead a popular election by plurality rule. According to one of the leading negotiators for the PJ, Alberto García Lema, the majority principle was inconvenient given the two-party system that prevailed in Argentina. In his view, in case neither the UCR nor the PJ reached the threshold of 50 per cent of the vote, a second round would give undue weight to small third parties, situated to the left or to the right of the two main contenders (García Lema, 1994: 184–5). The position of the PJ, however, is better understood by taking into account the electoral expectations of this party.

Since its creation in the mid-1940s the PJ, led by Juan D. Perón, became a majority party, winning every presidential and congressional election where it was allowed to participate (the party was banned from 1955 to 1973). In this historical context, the success of the UCR in the presidential elections of 1983 and in the midterm legislative elections of 1985 was somewhat exceptional, related to the levels of political violence and mismanagement that most voters associated with the last Perón government. By 1987, however, the electoral trend was once again reversed in favour of the PJ.

In the midst of a deep economic crisis, the PJ defeated the UCR in the midterm elections of August 1987, depriving the latter of the absolute majority it had in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition, the PJ won the elections for governor in 17 out of 22 provinces, making predictable a majority of this party in the Senate by 1989. In this electoral context it was obviously not in the interest of the negotiators of the PJ to accept an electoral reform that would damage its chances to win the presidential elections of 1989, much less when by June 1988 the PJ's candidate, Carlos Menem, showed in most polls as the most likely winner.

The current formula of presidential elections emerged in 1993 as a result of the second round of negotiations on constitutional reform that took place between the new president, Carlos Menem, and former president Alfonsín, still principal leader of the UCR. The process started in 1992, when in the context of a stabilized economy that led to rising levels of approval for his government, Menem proposed a constitutional reform whose main intention was to remove the existing proscription of immediate presidential re-election. The proposal included few other issues, but among them was the direct election of the President by plurality for four years. As was to be expected, the UCR rejected the reform.

Given this opposition, Menem faced two serious obstacles to pass the reform. In the first place, he needed a two-thirds majority in both chambers and, at least in the Chamber of Deputies, it could not obtain that qualified majority without the support of the UCR.¹ This meant that he could not risk a breakdown of negotiations without jeopardizing the possibility of being re-elected. Second, time was not in

1994, before the PJ started its own internal competition among potential presidential candidates. As a consequence, the UCR could delay negotiations in order to frustrate Menem's re-election or, exploiting his impatience, obtain greater concessions in exchange for it.

But Menem was not powerless. He counted on a growing popular support that he could use to undermine the capacity of the opposition to hold out or eventually reject negotiations altogether. His bargaining strategy consisted then of making credible two complementary threats. The first was to call a plebiscite on the issue of his re-election, which he did right after winning the midterm elections of October 1993. Since the plebiscite was non-binding, Menem also issued another threat in case the plebiscite was successful: passing the reform in an irregular manner, without the support of the UCR. Specifically, the threat consisted of passing the reform by surprise, counting the required two-thirds majority over the present (rather than over the total) number of deputies. With polls showing more than 60 per cent of approval for Menem's re-election, Alfonsín, as the representative of the UCR, decided to accept the re-election if he obtained something in exchange for his party.

Along with other demands aimed at improving the institutional and political position of the UCR, Alfonsín required a reduction of the presidential term from six to four years and the direct election of the President by majority runoff. Menem accepted these demands only in part. In particular, he accepted the possibility of a second round of presidential elections only if the threshold to win in the first round was lower than 50 per cent. The latter was in fact one of the most controversial issues of the negotiation and the last to be defined. Both the agreement of 14 November (the so-called 'Pacto de Olivos') and the document signed on 1 December 1993, established that the President would be elected in two possible rounds but without defining a specific threshold to win in the first round.

The negotiation about the threshold evolved as follows. Initially, the UCR demanded a threshold of 50 per cent, while the PJ stuck to a floor of no more than 40 per cent. Between late November and early December, negotiators from both parties agreed to 'split the difference'. The UCR accepted a lowering of the minimum threshold from 50 to 45 per cent. The PJ agreed but only if an alternative rule was also established: that a candidate could still win with 40 per cent of popular votes if a significant difference separated the front-runner from the runner-up (*La Nación*, 28 November 1993). While there was some discussion about the exact percentage of votes that should separate both candidates, by 13 December a final document set the difference at 10 per cent. In addition, it was established that all percentages should be counted over 'affirmative valid votes', that is excluding not only null but also blank votes.

The new formula thus emerged. A single ticket for President and Vice-President could win the election in the first round in two alternative ways: either by obtaining more than 45 per cent of affirmative valid votes, or at least 40 per cent with an advantage of more than 10 percentage points over the second most voted candidacy. In case no candidate reached these thresholds, a second round between the two

of a Constituent Convention, which produced a new constitution in 1994, the new rules were incorporated in articles 94 to 98. The new formula was then a mid-way solution, a compromise between the plurality rule desired by Menem and the majority runoff supported by Alfonsín. These preferences did not derive from the influence of foreign models or expert advice but from the actors' expectations on voters' support, based on the recent and previous electoral performance of their parties.

The minimum threshold of 40 per cent to win a presidential election certainly had some precedents, such as in Costa Rica in 1936 or in the proposals for constitutional reform of presidential elections considered in the United States in 1969 and 1977 (as mentioned by García Lema, 1994: 185–6). However, it is apparent that this threshold was primarily chosen by looking at the electoral performance of the PJ from 1983 to 1993. The average support for the PJ in the elections for deputies was 41 per cent. In the more polarized presidential elections the range of support for the PJ fluctuated between a minimum of 40 in 1983 to a maximum of 49 per cent in 1989. Obviously, 40 per cent was the safest choice because it was the 'floor' of votes for the party over ten years. Accepting a difference of 10 percentage points between the first and the second most voted candidacies was also a calculated choice, since in the last two legislative elections the difference between the PJ and UCR was, respectively, 11 and 12 per cent.

Something similar could be said of the preferences of the UCR's negotiators. While the majority formula was initially proposed by an impartial commission of experts, it is clear that Alfonsín's insistence on a threshold of 50 per cent was also related to the electoral experience of the main parties. In both legislative and presidential elections the maximum of votes obtained by the PJ, including the 1989 presidential election, was below 50 per cent. With the PJ situated since 1983 in a centre-right position, the leader of the centrist UCR could expect that in a second round his party could obtain the support of left and centre-left parties and some centrist provincial parties closer to the UCR than to the PJ. To be sure, given the bargaining strength of the incumbent president during the negotiations, Alfonsín had no other choice but to accept a lower threshold of 45 per cent and the alternative rule of 40 per cent with a difference of 10 points. Nevertheless, it was still a better option than a mere 40 per cent without considering the difference with the runner-up.

Given the experience of ten years of electoral competition both parties rationally expected to concentrate together (albeit unevenly) the largest share of votes and maintain themselves as the main political options in coming presidential elections. No third party had up till then obtained more than 7 per cent of the vote in a presidential election. But, as we will see, these expectations were based on certain characteristics of the party system that did not hold in the medium term.

The new formula

The electoral formula created in 1994 presents two important features that are crucial

The first, perhaps obvious, characteristic is that by replacing the Electoral College it eliminates the disproportionate weight that electorates and parties of small provinces had under the previous system. Now winning in large districts, such as the city of Buenos Aires and the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santa Fe, which gather 66 per cent of the registered voters in the country, becomes crucial to decide a national election.

A second, most important feature of the new system is the way in which the alternative thresholds work. Just like pure plurality in a multi-candidate competition, it does not eliminate the possibility of a very narrow winner. Since the difference of 10 percentage points is only required when the front-runner obtains more than 40 but less than 45 per cent of popular votes, then, in the case of a polarized election between two blocs, it is possible to win by a margin of 45 to 44. The qualified plurality formula, however, is not likely to produce winners with a very small share of votes, as simple plurality systems might in a multi-party competition.

Also similar to plurality, the new formula does not prevent a winner who is in fact rejected by a majority of voters. This could happen, for instance, if a front-runner with 40 per cent of the votes is the last preference of those who voted for second and third alternatives (each with, say, 30 per cent of support). But the minimum margin of 10 percentage points makes this outcome less likely than under simple plurality rule because it would require high fragmentation among politically close losing candidates. If no candidate reaches the minimum margin or the minimum threshold to win in the first round, the Argentine formula would prevent a 'Condorcet-loser' from becoming president.

Apart from the obvious similarities between qualified plurality and majority runoff when a second round is needed to decide the election, the main difference between both formulas must be found in the different incentives they provide for coalition-making among parties before the election. In this sense, qualified plurality rule induces the formation of broad coalitions in support of a relatively low number of candidates less effectively than simple plurality but more effectively than majority runoff. Specifically, whenever one candidate (particularly from the incumbent party) is likely to get more than 40 per cent of the vote, opposing parties may have an incentive to coalesce before the election, either to reach the minimum share of 45 per cent and win in the first round or to force a runoff by reducing the winning margin of the front-runner. This would certainly occur less often with a threshold of 50 per cent which may induce different opposition parties to coalesce after the first round.

Political consequences

The analysis of the actual consequences of the new formula is based on a rather small number of observations: the presidential elections of 1995 and 1999. But even if limited, these two cases provide enough material to understand the logic of the formula, particularly in comparison with the results of the presidential elections

Table 3.2 Argentina: presidential elections, 1983–99

Year	Winner	% votes	Runner-up	% votes	Third	% votes	Other %
1983	Alfoncín UCR	51	Luder PJ	40	Allende PJ	2	7
1989	Menem PJ	49	Angeloz UCR	37	Alsogaray AC	7	7
1995	Menem PJ	50	Bordón Frepaso	29	Massaccesi UCR	17	4
1999	De la Rúa UCR-Frepaso	48	Duhalde PJ	38	Cavallo AR	10	4

Note: Author's elaboration from data in Molinelli, Palanza and Sin (1999).

Percentages of votes include all parties supporting the candidate.

AC: Alliance of Center; AR: Action for the Republic; Frepaso: Front Solidarity Country; PJ: Intransigent Party; PJ: Justicialist Party; UCR: Radical Civic Union.

An important aspect of the presidential election of 1995 revealing the structure of incentives created by the new formula is the fact that no major alliances were formed. Moreover, besides the three relevant candidacies of the PJ, the UCR and the Frepaso (Front Solidarity Country, a recently created centre-left coalition), there was an increase in the number of small parties (most of them from the city of Buenos Aires) with individual candidates obtaining less than 2 per cent of the vote each. In total, there were eleven such candidacies in 1995, compared to six in 1989 and nine in 1983. What explains this absence of alliance-building among opposition forces?

As mentioned in the previous section, the new formula makes more likely than majority rule the coalescence of parties opposed to the candidacy of the expected front-runner but in no way guarantees this result. With simple plurality, leaders of opposition parties have a strong incentive to coalesce whenever the candidate of the incumbent party is expected to be the front-runner, whatever the proportion of votes expected. But with the Argentine formula this incentive may exist only as long as the candidate of the incumbent party is expected to obtain more than 40 per cent and maintain the margin required or else surpass the barrier of 45 per cent.

Even if coalition-building among opposition parties becomes necessary to prevent a winner at the first round, those parties may still fail to coordinate as a single political force. This could happen when opposition parties are ideologically distant from each other. An ideologically disparate coalition is not likely to gather together the votes of the partners, which may also face an important loss in their future electoral base. Opposition parties must also be able to overcome the coordination problem represented in the selection of a single presidential candidate, particularly if each of these parties has a strong candidate for the election.

The absence of an alliance between the centrist UCR and the centre-left Frepaso

election of 1995. In the congressional elections of April 1994 the PJ and the UCR obtained, respectively, 38 and 20 per cent of the national vote, while the Grand Front (FG, antecessor of Frepaso) obtained 13 per cent. These results suggested that the dominance of the PJ was no longer assured, thus making the main opposition parties expect to obtain more benefits by running alone in the first round of the presidential election than by making a coalition with the other.

By August 1994, when opposition parties initiated the process of candidate selection, polls were giving Menem 36 per cent of electoral preferences, followed by Carlos Alvarez, the potential presidential candidate of the Frepaso, with 24 per cent (Novaro y Palermo, 1996: 451). It was precisely during that month that leaders of the Frepaso and UCR met to explore the possibility of an alliance but, not surprisingly, this possibility was soon abandoned by both parties. Menem finally won in the first round by almost 50 per cent, followed by Bordón (Frepaso) with 29 per cent and Massaccesi (UCR) with 17 per cent of the vote. But no one could predict this result based on the most recent electoral performance of the PJ.

Compared to the 1995 election, the most salient aspect of the 1999 election was the emergence of an Alliance among opposition parties recreating a pattern of competition between two blocs. In coincidence with this concentration of the vote between two main national candidates, there was also a decrease from eleven to six in the number of small parties (all of them from the city of Buenos Aires) presenting individual candidacies. No provincial parties ran alone this time.

This realignment of the party system in two blocs began in 1997, when the UCR and Frepaso ran together at the legislative elections of that year. The unification of the two major opposition forces into a single coalition was no doubt induced by the results of the presidential election of 1995, which updated the beliefs of opposition parties about their slender chances of defeating the PJ without mutual support. The success of the alliance in the legislative elections of 1997 reinforced these beliefs and paved the way for the coordination of UCR and Frepaso in presenting a single candidacy to compete against the PJ in the presidential elections of 1999.

One should observe, however, that the process of coalition-building that took place before the election did not lead to a perfect bi-party competition. A third candidate, Domingo Cavallo, Menem's former Secretary of Economy who was now running for a recently created centre-right party, Action for the Republic (AR), won 10 per cent of the vote, thus playing a significant role in the election. While this party was ideologically close to the incumbent party, and at several times the candidate of the PJ, Eduardo Duhalde, invited its candidate to form an alliance before the election, Cavallo decided to run alone. Given that most polls persistently indicated the candidate of the Alliance UCR-Frepaso, Fernando De la Rúa, as the virtual winner in the first round, this decision was a dominant strategy for the candidate of AR. If, as expected, Duhalde were defeated in the first round, Cavallo could exploit the concurrence of legislative elections to increase the congressional slate of his party in the Chamber of Deputies. If, against forecasts, a runoff was necessary, he could then support Duhalde, but, of course, after obtaining political

in 1999 with more than 48 per cent of the vote, against 38 per cent for Duhalde and 10 per cent for Cavallo.

Further developments include the forced resignation of president De la Rúa on December 2001 in the midst of violent protests against his government. The party system in Argentina initiated a process of accelerated fragmentation: the Alliance between Frepaso and UCR was dismantled, several candidates of the PJ ran separately for president in 2003 and new parties emerged.

In a context of high party fragmentation the compromise reached by Menem and Alfonsín in 1994 was more likely to produce better and less arbitrary outcomes than any of the alternatives considered at the time. A majority runoff system, like the one supported by Alfonsín, would have contained less effectively the process of party fragmentation in the country. The simple plurality rule proposed by Menem could lead to the selection of presidents with only a small share of popular support. This shows that while neither efficiency nor legitimacy may constitute the primary goals of political actors devising institutions, inclusive agreements, even if self-interested, may lead to better results than rules imposed unilaterally by the stronger actor.

Note

1. The PJ was close to that majority in the Senate (it had 30 out of the 32 votes required) but not in the Chamber of Deputies. From a total of 257, the PJ had 117 deputies and the UCR 84. In other words, it needed exactly 54 votes to achieve the two-thirds (171) required by the existing constitution. Even after the incorporation of 9 deputies for the PJ in December 1993 and counting with the support of its most likely allies, centre-right parties like the provincial parties and the UCEDE and rightist parties like MODIN, the PJ would not reach the necessary majority.

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4 Brazil: Democratizing with Majority Runoff

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Two aspects of the Brazilian electoral system stand out: the first refers to a set of singular features in the operation of the proportional representation system for the election of the Chamber of Deputies. The other concerns the effects of the majority system at the presidential elections – contrary to expectations, the system has not provided an incentive for many parties to present candidates in the presidential elections, producing instead a concentration of the dispute among a reduced number of competitors. The purpose of this paper is to analyse both these dimensions of the Brazilian representative system: proportional representation for the Lower House and the two-round majority election for President.

Presently, Brazil uses a majority system with second-round runoff to elect the President. The 513 representatives of the various states or electoral districts in the Chamber of Deputies are chosen by proportional representation – Brazil is the largest democracy in the world using proportional representation. Both the President and Representatives are elected for a four-year term. In addition, there is an Upper House (the Senate), with strong legislative powers, whose members are elected by plurality rule; each state elects three Senators alternately (two at one election and the third at the next) for an eight-year mandate.

Voters elect by majority rule with a second-round runoff the governors of the 27 units of the Federation, that is the 26 states and the Federal District. The members of the state legislatures are elected under the same system, using the same rules as the Chamber of Deputies. The 5,559 Brazilian municipalities are also governed by elected mayors, but only cities with more than 200,000 voters use the two-round majority system. All other towns use plurality rule. Each municipality has a legislative branch (municipal chamber) whose members are chosen by proportional representation – 60,277 city-council representatives are elected.

In the almost two decades of the present democratic cycle, there has been practically no conflict between the executive and the legislature in Brazil, notwithstanding the fact that the country uses a combination which had been condemned in certain literature on political institutions as the worst possible: proportional representation for the lower house and majority election for the president. The 'efficient secret' of the Brazilian representative system should perhaps be sought in the nature of