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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.01.001>

The 2013 congressional elections in Argentina



Matthew M. Singer*

Department of Political Science, University of Connecticut, 365 Fairfield Way, U-1024, Storrs, CT 06269-1024, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 January 2014

Received in revised form 8 January 2014

Accepted 9 January 2014

1. Introduction

Argentina held midterm elections for its two legislative chambers in October 2013. The lower chamber, the Chamber of Deputies, consists of 257 members serving four-year terms, with half up for renewal every two years. The Senate consists of 72 members serving 6 year terms, with a third up for renewal every two years. Because the seats being renewed were filled at different points in the past, the dynamics of the two races were somewhat different. The Senators up for reelection had been elected during presidential elections in 2007 and thus, in the case of the ruling Victory Front Party (FPV by its initials in Spanish), they were candidates who had benefited from President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner's coattails in that race (Singer and Fara, 2008). In contrast, the 2009 midterm elections had been conducted against a backdrop of a slow economy and widespread social conflict over agricultural tax policy which led to a large drop in support for the FPV in that election (Lupu, 2010). Thus anything less than a dominant showing would result in a loss in ruling party representation in the Senate while anything other than a historically weak showing in the lower chamber

elections would not reduce the ruling party's representation in that chamber from the low baseline set in 2009.

Expectations for the ruling party were high after President Fernandez de Kirchner's reelection in 2011. Yet her popularity has fallen in the past 2 years as the economy has stumbled, inflation continues to be a problem, and crime remains high. Thus the campaign focused on alternatives to the FPV from within the Peronist tradition and without. The election resulted in a very small shift in the legislative balance of power; the FPV remains the largest party in both chambers and the most popular party nationally. Yet the ruling party lost in the largest districts and the election was widely perceived as a defeat for the incumbent. No clear alternative to the ruling party emerged out of a divided opposition, however, and thus the various factions have already begun jockeying for attention in what is likely to be a fragmented election for the presidency in two years.

2. Party system

The Argentine party system is fragmented and constantly shifting as parties are defined as much by specific candidates and their personal connections to various clientelist networks as by their programmatic appeals (see Levitsky, 2003; Levitsky and Murrillo, 2005 for a more extensive discussion). This tendency started in the 1980s as the economic collapse decimated the unions that had

* Tel.: +1 860 486 2615; fax: +1 860 486 3347.

E-mail address: Matthew.m.singer@uconn.edu.

formed the base of the leftist Justicialist Party (PJ, although it is more commonly referenced as the Peronist Party). The breakdown of programmatic party competition increased in the 2000s as the conservative Radical Civil Union (UCR) crumbled after the December 2001 economic crisis. In the absence of a conservative opposition, the Peronist movement also fragmented in the early 2000s, with recent elections often being contests between multiple Peronists who established their own party vehicle.

The largest political force in Argentina is President Fernandez de Kirchner's Victory Front (FPV). The FPV is a Peronist party that was formed by Nestor Kirchner to win the presidency in 2003. Mrs. Fernandez de Kirchner succeeded her husband as president in 2007 and was reelected in 2011. The FPV advocates an active role in managing the economy- for example in 2012 it partially renationalized the national energy company.

The economy was fairly stable during President Fernandez de Kirchner's first term as public investments helped drive growth. The cost, however, has been rising inflation; it is widely believed that the government is manipulating inflation indices and that inflation is well above 20 percent. The national economy has also slowed in recent months, and the government has responded by freezing exchange rates, leading to a growing black market for dollars. The government has also had to deal with persistently high levels of crime; roughly one third of Argentines reported having been a crime victim in 2012 (Singer et al., 2013). These challenges have resulted in a drop in Presidential popularity from its 2011 peak.

The FPV faces opposition from other factions within the broad Peronist tradition. In the 2013 midterm elections, the most visible Peronist opposition was an alliance spearheaded by Sergio Massa called the Renewal Front (FR). Massa had served as the head of the Social Security administration under Nestor Kirchner, spent 2 years as Fernandez de Kirchner's Cabinet head, and was twice elected mayor of Tigre, a small town just outside the Capital District, under the FPV label. Yet for the 2013 elections he broke with the FPV and formed his own alliance because of both political and personal differences with Fernandez de Kirchner. Politically, he is more pro-business and has criticized the government's pension policies and the under-reporting of official inflation data. He also emphasized his successes in fighting crime in the municipality of Tigre by investing in security cameras and police. Leading a successful electoral challenge would also help consolidate his position as a potential presidential candidate in 2015 as President Fernandez de Kirchner is term limited.

There is also a fragmented conservative opposition to the FPV. One prominent opposition movement in the 2013 elections was an alliance of the UCR, the conservative Civic Coalition and other parties who formed a joint Unity Front (Alianza UNEN) in the City of Buenos Aires with former presidential candidate Elissa Carrió at its head. The list advocates for increased support for small businesses, increased investment in fighting crime, and limits on executive decree authority. The same parties formed an alliance with the Socialist party in several provinces. In other districts these non-Peronist parties ran separately as rivals.

A second conservative opposition movement is led by the Republican Proposal (PRO), led by the Mayor of Buenos

Aires Mauricio Macri (although Macri did not run for the legislature himself). Macri has cut public employment in the city, claiming that many workers were patronage employees, and pushes for lower taxes across the board. This party is strongest in the Capital District. However, PRO did not run any candidates in the surrounding Buenos Aires province and early in the campaign Macri said that if he lived in the province he would vote for Massa's list.¹ Massa's RF subsequently distanced themselves from Macri's comments by noting that although some members of their proposed list were PRO members, their coalition did not formally include the PRO and they followed a "very different mode of thinking" than Macri does.²

While the FPV and other Peronist movements have their base among the poor segments of the country and generally advocate for leftist policies, there are several small leftist parties who win electoral support, including the Workers' Left Front (Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores). The worker's left front has promised to advocate for increased worker salaries and also for fewer regulations on abortion.

3. Electoral rules

Argentina uses closed-list PR for elections in both Chambers, with each of Argentina's 23 provinces and the Capital District serving as an electoral district. Provinces differ in their representation in the Chamber of Deputies according to their size, with 4 provinces each receiving only 2 seats while the province of Buenos Aires receives 35 seats. The average district magnitude is 5. Each province also elects 3 senators, with 2 going to the most popular party or alliance and the third going to the runner-up. In 2013 Senators faced reelection in the City of Buenos Aires and in the provinces of Chaco, Entre Ríos, Neuquén, Río Negro, Salta, Santiago del Estero, and Tierra del Fuego.

Argentina's election are held in two stages. In August, the country has a nationwide open primary. This election fulfills two purposes-it helps parties finalize the candidate slates while also narrowing the number of party offerings for the general election. Parties are required to participate in the primary election if they wish to contest the general election. Each party can put forward as many lists of candidates as they want to in any given district as long as each list contains candidates for each seat, does not have any overlap with the party's other lists, and fulfills the nation's gender quota. Yet parties do not need to nominate multiple lists; in 2013 only 24 percent of district-level parties did so while the rest put forward a pre-ordained candidate slate. Parties who choose to nominate multiple slates in one district are not compelled to nominate multiple lists other districts if the local nominating committee has consensus before the primary. On the day of the primary election, voters choose between all competing parties and cast a closed-list ballot for one list. The results are tabulated first at the party level and any party or alliance that does not receive

¹ <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1598465-mauricio-macri-votaria-por-sergio-massa>.

² <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1599099-mas-cruces-entre-el-masismo-y-el-pro-dario-giustozzi-dijo-que-no-votaria-a-mauricio-macri-y>.

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