

**Partisan Competition in Argentina.  
From Closed and Predictable to Open and Unpredictable**

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This article is an attempt to describe the relation between a stable pattern of political competition and a context of unstable polyarchy in Argentina. The consecutive breakdowns in the political system linked to the polarized nature of movementism helped bring about party system freeze. Thus, this stable party system became an obstacle to the consolidation of democracy. Because continuous breakdowns suspended all electoral competition, they prevented both political actors and voters from learning from previous behaviors and judging political parties' performance in office. Whereas the consolidation of democracy presents an open and unstable political game, political actors and parties cannot anticipate their future roles within the structure of party competition.

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the literature on party systems has connected recently democratized political regimes with party systems that were poorly structured, malleable (Sartori, 1976) and unstable (Mair, 1997). The consolidation of democratic regimes is accompanied by the progressive stabilization in the principles of party cooperation and competition. This report demonstrates that, at least in the case of Argentina, such a relationship is not observed, but rather the stability of democratic institutions has been accompanied by escalating destabilization in the rules of party interrelations.

Additionally, the Argentine case presents another scenario that is counterintuitive to prior ideologies: a highly institutionalized party system with political parties that were visibly less institutionalized, coexisting with intermittent periods of polyarchy. By party system we mean the principles of relationships among political parties, in other words, the standards of competition and cooperation among the units that constitute the system but that entail more than a sum of its parts. The concept of system must be studied separately from the parties that compose it. Therefore, when we speak of the configuration or format of a certain party system, we assume it may change without variations in their components and vice versa. Similarly, the problems of political parties are not necessarily reflected in a system's entirety and moreover the absence of relationship rules among parties does not negate their condition as such. To categorize an party system we applied four properties we consider of overall importance: (a) the number of parties (Blondel, 1968; Sartori, 1976), (b) the number of politically relevant thematic dimensions or *cleavage* (Lipset, 1960; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Luebbert, 1991; Schattschneider, 1960), (c) the ideological distance among leading parties (Downs, 1957; Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987; Sartori, 1976; Lipjhart, 1984; Kitschelt, 1994; Hubbert and Inglehart, 1995), and (d) the structure of competition (Mair, 1997; Dahl, 1966; Epstein, 1967; Sartori, 1976).

The guiding questions of this analysis focus on the latter, and are critical within Argentina's extreme institutional uncertainty which registered five interruptions of constitutional order during the XX century. How then, do these other institutions – namely parties and party systems - act within a particular institutional configuration? Moreover, is

it possible to find a pattern of behavior in a context as unstable as Argentina has been throughout its history?

Beginning with a case study (Lijphart, 1971) in comparative perspective we will present indicators of great stability in the party system within an extremely unstable institutional context. Likewise, these indicators have undergone a radical change since the process of democratic consolidation commenced in 1983, when party competition begins to gravitates towards open and unpredictable patterns of interaction.

## **I-Unstable political regime and stable party system**

### **The closed and predictable structure of the in party competition**

As mentioned above, during the XX century, Argentina had only three periods prior to 1983 with minimum conditions of polyarchy as defined by Dahl. Free elections with universal suffrage (only male vote until the presidential election of 1952) were held during the years 1916-1930, 1946-1955 and 1973-1976. In the last period mentioned, we believe it important to consider this a polyarchic regime until 1974, since in the eighteen later months after the death of President Juan Perón, until the coup d'état in 1976, widespread violence had removed all basic civil and political rights. That is, fairly free regimes were in effect for less than half of the century, and Argentina was later subjected to an assortment of non-democratic regimes, ranging from the competitive oligarchy of the beginning of the century, until the authoritarianism of 1966-1973 and principally for their terrorist characteristics, the authoritarianism of 1976-1983, visiting diverse forms of restricted democracies (1932-1943, 1958-1962 and 1963-1966) and other short-lived attempts to overthrow the government.

The Argentine case would seem to present a paradox of institutions that are not distinguished by inertia and regularity<sup>1</sup>. In this institutional context, many authors may rush to say it is inappropriate to speak of party systems. However, the fact that political parties existed, played an important role and were linked to each other in different ways, justifies

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<sup>1</sup> One of the main characteristics of institutions is its regularity. The actors know the guidelines and act in consequence with the outlook that this design will continue over time. Another core characteristic of institutions is inertia, institutions tend to remain over time. Many of them becomes principle due to their perdurability (O'Donnell, 1997).

our considering it essential to understand the manner in which these inter-party relationships were forged. What is more, we will maintain that these relationships, as well as its model of competition, did in fact preserve patterns of regularity, comparable to more consolidated and stable polyarchic systems.

In a first approach to our case study it is evident that, even during these brief moments of democratic institutionality, Argentine parties acted by denying the idea of system itself, failing to recognize their status as a mere part of a whole, deeming theirs the only legitimate position. This vision, which we shall call movementist (Alberti and Castiglioni, 1985), was clearly represented by the beliefs and practices of the supreme leaders of the two largest parties of modern Argentina, Hipólito Yrigoyen (Rock, 1975) and Juan Domingo Perón (Cavarozzi, 1989: 305 and Mc Guire, 1995:210 & 1997:59-66)<sup>2</sup>.

This meaningful characteristic, the constant negation of one's opponent, has led many important authors to affirm that there was no party system per se (Cavarozzi, 1989). On the contrary, we believe this same quality and factors associated to it are proof, not only of the existence of a party system, but of the permanency of the core elements of its configuration in the three terms prior to democratization in 1983. This perdurability makes the party system the most consolidated institution - in terms of its stability and predictability - of the Argentine political system.

If a party system is, as defined earlier, a pattern of relationships among parties, in Argentina, parties adhere to "patterns of competition and cooperation" (Ware, 1996:146) with surprising precision. The behavior rules among parties may not have been desirable, may have even conspired against the stability of the political system, but in no way does that imply that the system does not exist, but simply that it works with a rationale that tends to seek the uncertainty of a pluralistic political regime. In fact, the stability in the competitive patterns during most of the last century operates as a necessary condition - although not sufficient - to speak of the institutionalization of a party system.

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<sup>2</sup> "The UCR is not strictly a party (...) it is a conjunction of forces that has emerged from national opinion, born and associated in the heat of public vindication" (Yrigoyen, quoted in Rock, 1975:62) and "The UCR is the Nation itself" (Manifest of the UCR, March 30, 1916, quoted in Rock, 1975:64). "The Peronist movement is not a political party; it does not represent a political group (...) it is a national movement that represents only national interests" (Perón, quoted in McGuire, 1997:64)

By institutionalization we mean the process whereupon political parties or the party system acquire values and stability (Huntington, 1968). This concept also includes external dimensions relating to their surroundings, the autonomy of the state apparatus and other organizations of society. Hence we adopt a proposal (Abal Medina and Suárez Cao, 2002) of two heuristic dimensions to measure institutionalization from the standpoint of existing theories<sup>3</sup>. An internal dimension, associated with (i) acquiring values (Huntington, 1968) and (ii) the organization of its parts and the level of acceptance, knowledge and application of their regulated pattern of interactions (O'Donnell, 1997:310); and an external dimension, which refers to (i) the relationships with their surroundings and autonomy, and to (ii) the perception that one has of the system (Janda, 1980), how “reified in the public mind” (Randall and Svasand, 2002: 11).

Also, we should not overlook that often the level of institutionalization of political parties differs greatly from that of the party system, particularly in budding democracies (Randall and Svasand, 2002). In our case study, an institutionalized and very stable party system<sup>4</sup> coexisted with *movimientista* parties that were barely institutionalized, with a political game that found itself constantly censured.

The most important quality of a system, which helps distinguish it from others is “the structure of inter-party competition, particularly competition for government” (Mair, 1997:206). This is in fact the one structure that remains stable throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the case of Argentina, it is appropriate since the main parties are geared towards obtaining the indivisible prize of the Presidency and the government under clear, competitive conditions<sup>5</sup>.

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3 This is a reformulation of the classification of political parties proposed by Randall and Svasand (2002), that in our understanding, captures the characteristics of contemporary Latin American party systems with greater precision.

4 According to the aforementioned dimensions, the Argentine party system gets low marks in state autonomy, maintaining high marks in the other regards we mention.

5 The parties analyzed, UCR and PJ, are examples of actors that, when game rules allow, remain in the political market to obtain votes and to procure the government. The form of Presidential government generates an institutional framework that motivates certain types of party organization and behavior different from those in a parliamentary system. If we can categorize a party's behavior in three groups: (a) parties that pursue votes, (Downs 1957), (b) parties that pursue posts, as in Riker's response (1962) to Downs, and (c) parties that attempt to create policies (Axelrod 1970), presidentialism motivates the pursuance of votes in the electoral arena. Because of its condition as a unique and indivisible prize, the presidency represents the space to which one accedes by means of votes to control posts and implement policy (Samuels, 2000). Nevertheless, Argentine presidential parties have been historically structured in a system that was extremely predictable,

The structure of competition within a party system can be explained by three relevant factors: (a) alternating in government whether completely, partially or not at all; (b) the innovation or familiarity of government formulas put into practice; and (c) access to government restricted or not to some parties (Mair, 1997). The combination of these three criteria displays two contrasting patterns of party competition structure: closed and predictable or open and unpredictable. If competition is closed, one can predict the succession of alternations that will vie for government. Thus, the emergence of new parties is hindered, *ceteris paribus*, parties that are able to compete for the government. While in an open competition, the alternation is expectable although unpredictable, especially where new parties appear poised to comprise the government. Interestingly, although similarities may be drawn between the elections of closed competition and those of party systems with fewer important parties, or bipartyism, and between open competition and multiparty systems, this conclusion must not be construed, particularly in parliamentary or semi-presidential designs where competition for government may involve fewer parties than those that are relevant in the parliamentary arena.

In Argentina, we observe that the three periods of polyarchy exhibit the exact same structure of competition: closed with no alternation and absolute familiarity in government forms (parties always govern alone).

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closer to a parliamentarian party system than to the incentives that a presidential government system would contain.

**Table 1**  
**Structure of competition in three polyarchic periods**

Period	Election	Winner	Percentage of Win <sup>d</sup>	Government
1916-1930	1916	UCR	48%	UCR (alone)
	1922	UCR	55%	UCR (alone)
	1928	UCR	67%	UCR (alone)
1946-1955	1946	Peronism <sup>a</sup>	52%	Peronism (solo)
	1951	Peronism <sup>b</sup>	62%	Peronism (solo)
	1954 (vice-president)	Peronism <sup>b</sup>	63%	Peronism (solo)
1973-1974	Mar. 1973	Peronism <sup>c</sup>	50%	Peronism (solo)
	Sept. 1973	Peronism <sup>c</sup>	62%	Peronism (solo)

Sources: Adapted from data supplied by Cantón, 1973; Fraga, 1990 and Jackish, 1990.

Notes:

a Partido Laborista and Unión Cívica Radical Junta Renovadora.

b Partido Peronista.

c Frente Justicialista de Liberación (FREJULI) Partido Justicialista plus minor allies.

d Percentage of votes.

Besides structure of competition, the other three dimensions that we mentioned as being essential to the party system form (number of dimensions, parties and ideological distance) are also constant during these three periods. There was always a single outstanding political dimension that sets precedence above all others: first “Yrigoyenism / anti-Yrigoyenism” and later “Peronism / anti-Peronism”. Additionally the political and cultural chasm between leading parties is generally a large one and in all three cases became more marked in each period until the system became so polarized that conditions are created for its breakdown.

Lastly, the number of parties, as shown in Table 2, also demonstrates evident continuity, although the election of 1973 was an exception, since the application of a proportional electoral ballot allowed a greater number of parties to be represented in

Congress. In all legislatures, the ruling party obtained most seats and there was only one opposing party of importance.

**Table 2**  
**Effective number of parliamentary parties and percentage of seats of ruling party in three first polyarchic periods**

Year	Peronism	UCR <sup>d</sup>	Left-wing <sup>e</sup>	Center <sup>f</sup>	Right-wing <sup>g</sup>	Others/Provincial <sup>h</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup> . Party plus 2 <sup>nd</sup> party	Total in chamber <sup>j</sup>	Number of Parties <sup>k</sup>
1916		48 (41%)	9	8	45	6	80%	116	2.98
1918		64 (56%)	6	14	30	1	82%	115	2.53
1920		94 (63%)	10	19	21	6	77%	152	2.30
1922		101 (67%)	10	14	19	6	80%	150	2.07
1924		89 (59%)	18	14	23	8	79%	153	2.56
1926		87 (58%)	19	9	27	9	75%	151	2.58
1928		111 (70%)	4	6	37	0	98%	156	1.82
1930		109 (71%)	1	18	26	0	88%	154	1.84
Average <sup>a</sup>		<b>60.53%</b>					<b>81%</b>		<b>2.34</b>
1946	106 (68%)	49	0	0	0	0	100%	155	1.76
1948	109 (70%)	45	2	0	0	0	99%	158	1.79
1950 <sup>b</sup>	100 (76%)	30	2	0	0	0	98%	155	1.60
1952	135 (91%)	14	0	0	0	0	100%	149	1.20
1954	141 (91%)	14	0	0	0	0	100%	155	1.19
Average <sup>a</sup>	<b>79%</b>					<b>0</b>	<b>99.4%</b>		<b>1.63</b>
1973 <sup>c</sup>	123 (51%)	51	13	22	20	18	72%	243	3.09

Sources: Adapted from data supplied by *Dirección de Información Parlamentaria, Honorable Cámara de Diputados de la Nación* and Canton, 1973.

Notes:

a Average of compositions of Chamber during the period.

b 23 empty seats that were not claimed by their occupants.

c Distributed by system of proportional representation using D'Hont's formula.

d UCR tally includes so-called dissident deputies during first term. Dissidents numbered 27 in 1926 due to disputes within governing party.

e Left-wing: Until 1973, only *Partido Socialista*.

f Center: Until 1973, *Partido Demócrata Progresista*. In 1928, 1930 and 1932 also *Partido Socialista Independiente*.

g Right-wing: *Partido Conservador* and conservative provincial parties such as the two from Corrientes, the *Unión Provincial of Salta* and the *Partido Demócrata of Mendoza*.

h Others / Provincial: Until 1926: *Unión Comercio y Producción*, *Concentración Popular*, *Concentración Cívica*, *Unión Democrática*, *Liga Sur* and independents. In 1973, provincial parties formed with right-wing factions that split from UCR and PJ.

i Parliamentary bipartyism index, or percentage of deputies that belong to the two major parties.

j Totals are variable, considering they do not include vacancies nor deputies not sworn in.

k Effective number of parliamentarian parties according to the Laakso and Taagepera index. These calculations are not entirely accurate since “parties” is meant to include what are actually groups of local parties. They cannot be analyzed otherwise, since these local parties, especially those labeled “right-wing”, are not really autonomous parties but rather part of an indeterminate national conservative confederation, similar to the confederation that went by the name of *Partido Nacional Autonomista* prior to 1916.

By analyzing the four dimensions we have determined to be crucial, it is concluded that the configuration which the Argentine party system assumed at the onset and maintained throughout two subsequent democratic periods was a predominating and polarized biparty system, in which the political rationale is a movementist pattern of disregarding opponents, particularly the opposition. The political and cultural gap between parties and the polarization this brings about affects the entire political scene.

## **II - Stable political regime and unstable party system**

### **The open and unpredictable structure of partisan competition**

Of the various characteristics common to the political game in each period we have analyzed so far, the one meriting the most attention is the surprising regularity of their core components: a party wins the election with close to fifty percent of the votes, obtains most seats in the Chamber of Deputies and retains them, even increasing them, throughout the whole period. In the following elections the ruling party becomes stronger at the polls while the opposition radicalizes its protests. The system becomes more and more polarized until a military *coup d'état*, supported by opposing parties, ousts the ruling party from the government. Thus, we adopt Huntington's (1968) concept of praetorian society: a praetorian society is one in which levels of institutionalization are low, participation is high, surpassing the former. Institutions cannot meet the demands of the society and so social forces act “naked”, without institutional mediation. The weakness of political

organizations, together with politicization of the military - one of the groups most affected by modernization – bring about the intervention of the armed forces in the political sphere<sup>6</sup>.

As far as the party system is concerned, the structure of competition was distinctly “closed and predictable”: no surprises at the polls, easily anticipated results, the same as the logic behind successive competition. As stated by Botana “there was no alternation, strictly speaking, among government parties and the opposition that rotated peacefully in the exercise of presidential power. The alternation was imposed by a coup d'état, whether overt or concealed” (1985:19). Three acts of the same drama that seem to mimic each other: surprising stability in the conditions of relations among parties that led to chronic uncertainty in the democratic regime.

The party system of the democratic period initiated in 1983 and still in effect today, is entirely different from that of previous periods in key aspects. Firstly, the ideological distance has shrunk a great deal and the system lost its polarized nature and now behaves as a typical moderate system: centripetal competition, absence of anti-system parties, etc. Secondly, the system has become more complex, there is no longer one single conflict that imprints its logic on all others. Also, the effective number of parties changes qualitatively as significant “third” parties emerge. Indeed, in 1995, one such party, the *Frente Grande*/FREPASO, was able to displace one of the two historical parties to an unprecedented third place.

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<sup>6</sup> See Rouquié, 1983.

**Table 3**  
**Effective number of parliamentary parties and percentage of government after democratization**

Year	Peronism	UCR	FG / FREPA SO	ARI <sup>a</sup>	Left-wing <sup>b</sup>	Center <sup>c</sup>	Right-wing <sup>d</sup>	Provincial <sup>e</sup>	PJ + UCR	Total in chamber	Number of Parties <sup>f</sup>
1983	111	129 (51%)	0	0	3	1	2	8	94%	254	2.22
1985	101	129 (51%)	0	0	6	4	3	11	91%	254	2.39
1987	104	115 (41%)	0	0	6	6	7	16	86%	254	2.64
1989	120 (47%)	90	0	0	6	7	12	18	83%	254	2.79
1991	120 (47%)	84	0	0	11	6	14	22	79%	257	2.96
1993	126 (49%)	85	3	0	4	3	12	23	82%	257	2.75
1995	129 (50%)	68	23	0	2	7	8	20	76%	257	2.96
1997	119 (46%)	66	38	0	0	5	6	23	73%	257	3.21
1999	101	84 122 (48%)	38	0	0	3	17	14	72%	254 <sup>g</sup>	3.39
2001	119	66 84 (33%)	18	16	8	4	14	12	72%	257	3.40
<b>Average of party in power 46%</b>											
NEP Average 2.90											

Sources: Adapted from the data supplied by *Dirección Nacional Electoral (DINE)*, *Ministerio del Interior* and *Dirección de Información Parlamentaria, H. Congreso de la Nación*.

Notes:

a ARI: *Alternativa por una República de Iguales*, party created by factions separating from the Alianza, principally FREPASO.

b Left-wing parties: *Partido Socialista Popular* and *Partido Socialista Democrático* only until 1995, later join FREPASO. *Partido Intransigente*, *Partido Comunista*, *Movimiento al Socialismo*, *Corriente Grande*, *Grupo de los Ocho*. In the 2001 election, *Izquierda Unida*, *Autodeterminación y Libertad*, *Polo Social* and *Frente para el Cambio*.

c Center parties: *Partidos Demócrata Progresista*, *Partidos Demócrata Cristiano*, *PAIS*.

d Right-wing parties: *UceDe*, *Fuerza Republicana*, *Acción Por la República*, *Modin*, *Partido Demócrata*, *Partido Unidad Federalista*.

e Provincial parties: various parties that ran in only one provincial district.

f Effective number of parliamentary parties according to the Laakso and Taagepera index. These calculations are not entirely accurate since “parties” is meant to include what are actually groups of local parties that formed unified parliamentary blocs for some periods. The exact amount is virtually impossible to calculate due to the complexities inherent to some parties in the first democratic period (1916-1930). (Please see points h and k in Table 2.) Of course, were the ENP expanded to include electoral parties, it would be higher.

g Not included: three provincial legislators from Jujuy province.

Lastly, as shown in Table 4, the structure of competition itself underwent radical change. The UCR won the first two elections (in 1983 and 1985), and lost the third to PJ which prevailed in the five that follow (1987, 1989, 1991, 1993 and 1995), losing to an electoral alliance between the UCR and a new party, FREPASO, in both 1997 and 1999, though it recovers and succeeds in the last elections of 2001.

Absolute majorities in Chamber of Deputies that ruling parties had obtained in these three earlier terms is now an exception and not the norm<sup>7</sup>. Alternation goes from being nonexistent to absolute (UCR/PJ/PJ/UCR-FREPASO), meanwhile the country was in the unique situation of being governed by a coalition of parties from 1999 to late 2001. Finally, the resignation of the elected president in 1999 culminated in a new government elected by Congress by an bizarre parliamentary coalition of PJ, UCR and sectors of FREPASO.

**Table 4**  
**Structure of competition in latest period of democracy**

Period	Election	Winner	Results of win	Government
1983 to present	1983	UCR	51.75%	UCR (alone)
	1989	PJ	47.89%	PJ (alone)
	1995	PJ	49.89%	PJ (alone)
	1999	UCR-FREPASO	48.37%	UCR-FREPASO Coalition
		PJ <sup>a</sup> (2002)	Parliamentary appointments (81%) <sup>b</sup>	PJ with parliamentary and ministry support from UCR and factions of FREPASO

Sources: Adapted from data supplied by *Dirección Nacional Electoral* (DINE), *Ministerio del Interior* and the *Honorable Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, Argentina*.

Notes:

a PJ candidate Eduardo Duhalde obtained the majority of the votes in the Legislative Assembly and was appointed president as stated in the Constitution (art. 75) and Law 20.972 for acephalous government.

b In Legislative Assembly, Duhalde was elected by 262 votes out of a total of 324 deputies and senators.

The economic collapse seen with the end the peg of the Argentine peso to the dollar, growing inflation in a period of recession (which brought unemployment, poverty and

<sup>7</sup> Except in the first Legislature of polyarchic period of 1916-1918, see Chart 2.

indigence rates to an all-time high in Argentina) accentuated the aversion of society towards its political class, increasingly perceived as associated with corrupt and selfish behavior. The parties themselves and their capacity to govern are called into question at a national level, even more so in the case of radicalism inasmuch as their last two administrations ended traumatically. On the other hand, subnational level party systems, because of the more structured rules of competition they preserve, even consolidate, earn a different social perception about the parties' performance in office. It is probably at this level where we can still find strong party organizations, such as the various provincial PJ organizations who fulfill the hybrid definition of Under-institutionalized Mass Party (Levitsky, 1998). Additionally, the national organization is beginning to resemble a confederation of strong district parties, out of which leading names are exported, currently the most outstanding candidacies vying for the 2003 elections. It is becoming more and more evident that parties are unable to control the candidacies and to punish its separatists (Lowi, 1985). If we underestimate this new weakness of the PJ - which reveals much on their growing deinstitutionalization - we will mistakenly assess that the party has emerged unscathed from the destructuring upheaval within the party system. The accurate definition of PJ's capacity to adapt "...facilitated by a distinctive configuration of organizational features: an underinstitutionalized party hierarchy and an entrenched mass base." (Levitsky, 1998: 445) holds true in those years, but decidedly becomes a weakness when disciplining their own ranks.

Although it is typical of a moderate multiparty configuration to have alternation in the government among parties and coalitions which share the ideological center of the political spectrum and wield similar political programs, the uncertainty set in the structure of interparty competition since the return of democracy cautions us to examine this attentively in the future. Particularly given the frailty the coalition in power has shown and growing social disfavor with the Argentine political class in its entirety<sup>8</sup>.

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8 Although to forecast the system's future evolution is very difficult within a context such as this, it is interesting to note that some recent elements may possibly suggest a "normalization" in the party system, in the sense that it resembles the traditional organization of consolidated democratic systems, with a defining "left / right"-type axis. That is, a system that offers a central option, the alternative of a defined right and a center-left option with nuances of social democracy. These last two are led by politicians from the three main

**Table 5**  
**Comparison of elections for national deputies of 1999 and 2001**  
**(Percentage of votes)**

Party	1999 Election	2001 Election	Difference
PJ	33.01	37.4	+4.39
<i>Alianza</i> (UCR-FREPASO)	40.54	23.1	-17.44
ARI	-	7.2	+7.2
Left-Wing <sup>a</sup>	2.4	12.2	+9.8
Right-Wing <sup>b</sup>	10.17	7	-3.17
Invalid votes (blank and void)	7.5	21.1	+13.6
Abstentions	7.59	27.2	+19.61

Sources: Adapted from data obtained from *Dirección Nacional Electoral (DINE)*, *Ministerio del Interior*, Argentina and *Political Data Base of the Americas*. Legislative Elections of 1999 and 2001 [Internet]. Georgetown University and Organization of American States. See: <http://www.georgetown.edu/pdba/Elecdata/Arg>

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> Left-wing Parties: *Polo Social*, *Izquierda Unida*, *Autodeterminación y Libertad*, *Partido Humanista*, *Partido Obrero*, *Partido de los Trabajadores y el Socialismo*, *Movimiento al Socialismo*.

<sup>b</sup> Right-wing parties: *UceDe*, *Fuerza Republicana*, *Acción Por la República*, *Partido de Unidad Federalista*.

### III - Conclusions: democracy and uncertainty

Our readers may be surprised by our contention that a stable party system is able to exist in a highly unstable political system. However, we believe that this analysis strengthens the hypothesis and should not come as a surprise to specialists accustomed to seeing extraordinary continuity in behaviors of competition and cooperation among parties within contexts other than that of Argentina.

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parties of the 1990s: PJ, UCR and FREPASO. This hypothesis was sustained by one of the authors of this paper in his articles (Abal Medina, 1994 and 1995) and by Torcuato di Tella at several junctures (see, for example, di Tella, 1998:193-197). The level of social dissatisfaction with today's politicians may be what will define the system's characteristics in the near future. If this discontent continues, it is to be expected that political options in the form of new personalities will be constituted, similar to the situation in Italy or even Venezuela.

As Mair has asserted, (1997:15) *stasis* is the norm for institutional frameworks. Some analysts overlook the fact that parties have the ability to limit the options of voters, who are not merely the objects of political activity, but also the subjects. (Sartori, 1969). Although political parties tend to adapt to institutional modifications as much as individual political actors do, their status as subjects of institutional structure should not be forgotten.

Once the parties are there, they establish a rough equilibrium, the laws of inertia are put in place and the system freezes itself. Parties set the agenda for competition and determine “the terms of reference whereby we, as voters and citizens, comprehend and decipher the political world” (Mair, 1997:9).

Paradoxically, in the Argentine case, it may have been the institutional interruption of polyarchy itself- fostered by its very movementist and polarized nature - that was a factor in freezing the system and an obstacle for the regime to move forward to more democratic forms. By banning all partisan activity, not only did these authoritarian interregna prevent the actors from modifying their actions through trial and error, but also precluded voters judging the performance of their party of choice over longer periods of time. After all, we are analyzing periods of electoral predominance of under fourteen years, when in many European countries a single party may be in office for longer. As a result, the freeze in the Argentine case is so evident, as the experience of consolidated democracies teaches in spite of what is set forth by Lipset and Rokkan’s freeze hypothesis, often times we need “certain flexibility and plasticity for the system itself to remain the same” (Mair, 1997:16).

This observation is even more relevant if we consider that these patterns remain independent of any changes in the electoral system. Theory is abundant with studies of the influence of electoral systems on parties and their systems, on format as well as the resulting competition (Duverger, 1992; Sartori, 1994; Cox, 1997). Elections for national deputies in Argentina were regulated by a system of open lists<sup>9</sup> from 1916 to 1950; and later a plurality system in single-member districts was adopted in 1952 and 1954; and

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<sup>9</sup> Law 8871, better known as the Sáenz Peña Law, specified - among other regulations - the open list system as follows: ballots being presented must include 2/3 of the positions at stake in the district. Two thirds of the seats were assigned to the winning list, the remaining third went to the list that followed in number of votes.

finally, a D'Hondt formula of proportional representation was opted for in districts of variable magnitude (the average of effective magnitude currently ranges between 4.9 and 5.7), in 1973 and again in 1983 to date. The presidential electoral system has also undergone significant modifications. In the presidential elections of 1916, 1922, 1928 and 1946, elections were carried out indirectly through an Electoral College made up of representatives elected through a closed list system; while the election of 1952 was decided directly by a simple plurality of votes. Later on, a system of absolute majority was adopted with two rounds for the 1973 election. With the return of the democracy in 1983, the use of indirect elections was restored but this time with proportional representation to choose the Electoral College. Following the Constitutional Reform of 1994, a particular run-off system was designed (Castiglioni, 1994) which requires a percentage of votes greater than 45% or 40% plus 10 percentage points over the nearest competitor in the first round.

So in the case of Argentina, the influence of the electoral systems on partisan competition would seem to be less significant as specified by political institutions theorists, at least until the 1994 reform, when the party system changed its competition pattern completely.

**Table 6**  
**Configuration of parties in the four periods analyzed**

Period	Structure of competition			Number of parties	Number of dimensions of political conflict	Polarization of system (ideological distance between main parties)	Configuration of party system
	Alternation in the government	Innovation or familiarity in candidates	Access to government restricted or not to some parties				
1 <sup>st</sup> 1916 to 1930	Closed and predictable Nonexistent	predictable Familiarity	Yes	Weak and predominating Bipartyism	One	Yes	Predominating and polarized Bipartyism
2 <sup>nd</sup> 1946 to 1955	Closed and predictable Nonexistent	predictable Familiarity	Yes	Strong and predominating Bipartyism	One	Yes	Predominating and polarized Bipartyism
3 <sup>rd</sup> 1973 to 1974	Closed and predictable Nonexistent	predictable Familiarity	Yes	Weak and predominating Bipartyism	One	Yes	Predominating and polarized Bipartyism
4 <sup>th</sup> 1983 through present	Open and unpredictable Complete	unpredictable Innovation	No	First strong Bipartyism and later Pluriparty	More than one	No	Moderate Bipartyism Moderate Pluriparty

Sources: *Dirección Nacional Electoral (DINE), Ministerio del Interior, Argentina.*

In Table 6, we can observe all democratic periods in Argentine history and their corresponding partisan configurations. Periods 1, 2 and 3 show the same basic features that we call “predominant and polarized biparty.” The only important difference among these periods is their number of parties: in periods 1 and 3, the fragmentation of the opposition is much greater than in period 2.

The fourth period shows a completely different situation in the main dimensions, and at least two different party configurations are visible: one, from 1983 to 1995, is distinct traditional bipartyism and the other, moderate pluripartyism. Today this tendency seems to be consolidating since the midterm elections of October 2001. The Argentine party system becomes more dissipated, and is rapidly abandoning the intense concentration of the past, obtaining the highest levels of abstentionism and negative votes (blank or void) ever in the history of Argentine democracy. Among other factors, the appearance of new political spaces that obtained parliamentary representation and the increase in votes for traditional left-wing forces (which had never been historically remarkable) seemed to seek the configuration of a new system, more plural and possibly more oriented to the extremes. The increase in the number of parties does not necessarily indicate polarization of the competition, “... the fragmentation in the party system may reflect a situation of segmentation or polarization, in other words, ideological distance.” (Sartori, [1976] 1987:159). Interaction among a greater number of parties will take on different characteristics from the ones with which we are familiar.

Few days before of the next presidential election of April the 27<sup>th</sup>, the electoral scenary still appears with a great level of uncertainty. For the first time in history, the PJ did not select an unified ballot, allowing thus the running of three peronist formulas to the general election; one headed by former president Menem, another by Nestor Kirchner –who is supported by Duhalde administration-; and a third one that postulates Adolfo Rodriguez Saa -who held office as president for one week during 2001 institutional crisis-. The other traditional party, the UCR, had to carry out primaries twice due to accusations of fraud and intervention of justice. The winning formula, headed by the national deputy Leopoldo Moreau, does not find a great number of followers and it is located in the surveys of

opinion with a little percentage of vote intention (much inferior to 10%). Smaller, by the way, than the vote intention showed by other two formulas composed by ex- members of the UCR, the one of the ARI (Elisa Carrió) and the one headed by the former De la Rúa minister (Ricardo Lopez Murphy). The current state of uncertainty makes the statistical forecasts of the surveys difficult since they locate the candidates in struggle to distances smaller than those of the error margin. The only fact that seems clear is that, for the first time in their history, the Argentineans will have to wait for the accomplishment of run-off to know the name of their next president. The 2003 thus seems to come to verify the central hypothesis of our work.

The consolidation of the democracy brought an open and unpredictable political game to Argentina in which none of the actors can anticipate the place they will occupy within the competition structure. Much of this weakening and destructurization in the party system is probably due to the poor performance of Argentine parties in a government capacity (Abal Medina and Suárez Cao, 2002). Although during the initial years of transition a bad administration did not necessarily reflect badly on the democratic system, a succession of differently hued governments that proved unable to satisfy civic expectations favors an increase in the delegitimization of the regime *in toto* (Torre: 1991). As has been pointed out in our discipline many times, in this case we can affirm that democracy and uncertainty go hand in hand. Yet, in a historically unstable political system we should not disregard the havoc this Damocles sword of growing uncertainty could wreak on a democracy as vulnerable as that of Argentina.

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