



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The institutionalization of “serial personalization” in Argentina’s Peronist Party, 1983–2023

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Statement relating to ethics and integrity:

The authors want to inform that an earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the SPSA Conference, January 12–15, 2022, San Antonio Texas.

Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this article is to explain how Peronism, an allegedly personalist party, has managed to institutionalize its internal power struggles and its succession procedures since democratization in 1983.

Methods: The authors employ the common conceptual framework developed for this special issue. Evidence is drawn from public media, scholarly sources, and participant observation. A two-tier approach to party adaptation is developed to distinguish the capacity to adjust to electoral challenges from the capacity to adjust to governmental challenges.

Results and conclusion: The authors develop the concept of “serial personalization” to describe an informally routinized feature by which middle-rank and subnational leaders transfer their loyalty from one personalistic leader to another as long as he or she delivers the best possible electoral performance and, when in office, fiscal transferences.

This article deals with Argentina’s *Partido Justicialista* (PJ), the Peronist Party. Since its creation in 1946, the PJ has, together with the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), and the more recently created *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO), dominated Argentine politics. The PJ won every presidential election it competed in between 1946 and 1983, and 6 presidential elections of 10 since democratization in 1983. The party has provided Argentina with nine presidents. Due to its electoral success at the national and subnational levels and to its longevity, the PJ scores apparently high on most indicators for an institutionalized and established party. Yet, when Levitsky (2003) argued that the PJ was *not* a personalized party, his claims were controversial and are, to this day, not universally accepted. Indeed, Peronists themselves distinguish between the movement (as a community of belonging) and the party (as its electoral instrument, see Ladeux (2010)), explicitly downplaying the institutional dimension. As the party founder, Perón, used to say, “first come the motherland, then the movement, and only afterwards the individuals” (1950 [2017]), renegeing both institutionalization and personalization.

In this article, we discuss how PJ went from a strongly personalist party under Perón, through depersonalization and incipient institutionalization after democratization in 1983, and toward what we call serial

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personalization under Carlos Menem in the 1990s and the Kirchners in the 2000s. Although PJ attempted institutionalization and depersonalization, a proven strategy for survival of personalist parties that aim to survive its founder's death (Lioy 2023), we show that the party quickly abandoned this strategy in favor of personalizing the party around new leaders. Although the literature mainly sees institutionalization as key to the survival of personalist parties (Harmel and Svåsand 1993; Lioy 2023), this article shows that the personalization of a party around the leader itself may become an institutionalized or serial feature that generate success electorally and in government, and may secure party survival.

The federalist structure conditions the structure and organization of parties in Argentina. Therefore this article starts with a brief introduction to electoral federalism and follows with an assessment of the degree to which the PJ can be considered an institutionalized party after democratization. A condition for the personalization of an established party is a previous degree of institutionalization. Although we hold reservations as to calling the PJ in any period a fully institutionalized party, we show that on some dimensions the PJ shares traits with other established, institutionalized parties at least for some periods after democratization.

The article proceeds to analyze the sequence of personalized dynamics of the informally institutionalized PJ under the leadership and presidencies of Carlos Menem (1989–1999), the Kirchners (2003–2015), and Alberto Fernández (2019–2023).¹ We structure this part around the electoral and governmental challenges the PJ has faced since democratization. In discussing institutionalization and serial personalization, we focus on the nomination of presidential candidates and the party leaders since they vary across time, whereas other dimensions relevant for institutionalization to a larger extent are constant. We will show how Peronism's succession of leaders has been punctuated by institutionalized transitions, which were always different from each other. We call this a case of “serial personalization,” the interregnum being the opportunity in which the party resorts to very diverse institutional mechanisms to manage the succession problem.

ELECTORAL FEDERALISM IN ARGENTINA

The Argentine Constitution establishes a federal system and presidential government. The federal system's component units—the provinces—have autonomy to choose their own rulers and legislate, albeit subordinated to the federal legal framework. Federalism is a power-sharing arrangement that grants governors considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the national authorities. In Argentina, governors have traditionally controlled electoral politics in their provinces, including party machines and electoral nominations (Botana 1977; Calvo et al. 2001).

As the chief executive in the provinces, the governors are after the president and sometimes the Minister of Finance, the most powerful politicians in the country due to their control over institutional resources, regional politicians, and budgets. Even though the governors' influence correlates with the economic importance, and electoral size of their province, it has been governors from smaller provinces, such as Menem (La Rioja) and Kirchner (Santa Cruz) who have won the presidency at the loss of theoretically more important governors (Gibson and Suárez Cao 2010).

In practice, governors are not only the regional chief executives and heads of the regional public administration, they are also key party leaders. Together with other provincial leaders and, above all, the president, they exert a strong influence over political recruitment and career paths even when their protégés are federal legislators, since the latter's ability to run for reelection depends not on their performance but on the will of their party bosses (Cherny, Figueroa, and Scherlis 2018).

Gubernatorial term limits are regulated by the provinces' constitutions. While the 4-year terms and first past the postelections have been the rules for governors' elections for about 9 of 10 of the provinces since 1983, the key to personal dominance at the regional level can be found in the rules regulating term

¹ We use “the Kirchners” when referring to both Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and “kirchnerismo” when referring to the faction they led or to the period either of them controlled the party.

TABLE 1 UCR and PJ: Compared institutionalization.

Dimension	Indicators	UCR	PJ
Objective durability	Longevity	High	High (electoral and governing)
	Adaptability	Medium	High (electoral and governing)
External institutionalization	Perceived lasting power and relevance	Medium	High
Internal institutionalization	Value infusion	High (believing)	High (belonging)
	Routinization	High (formal)	Medium (informal: behavior, unwritten rules)

Abbreviations: PJ, *Partido Justicialista*, UCR, *Unión Cívica Radical*.

Source: Own elaboration.

limits. In 1983, right after democratization, the federal constitution and all provincial constitutions prohibited immediate reelection for the president and governors. But in the following years, governors pushed successfully for the relaxation of term limits to allow for their own immediate reelection (Almaraz 2010; Cardarello 2011). Consequently, of the 24 electoral districts/provinces, in 2023 only Mendoza and Santa Fe prohibit immediate reelection of governors.² Of the remaining 22, 17 allow for one immediate reelection (like the U.S. system), 2 allow two immediate reelections (San Juan and Salta), and the last 3 allow for indefinite reelection (Catamarca, Formosa, and Santa Cruz).

The incumbency advantage, one of the “laws” of political science (Cuzán 2015, 2019), has been strong in Latin America, but even stronger in Argentine provinces. Since 1983, governors with an option to get reelected who opted for reelection, have won 90 percent of the time. The prospect of immediate reelection, together with the high likelihood of success, have strengthened the power of governors. Being a governor has become the most solid stepping stone for a presidential candidacy. Among the national political parties, PJ has a greater advantage. Since 1983, PJ has always held the governorships of more than half the provinces, while its main competitor, UCR, has won only 20 percent of the governor races.

PARTIDO JUSTICIALISTA: AN INSTITUTIONALIZED PARTY?

This volume follows Harmel, Svåsand, and Mjelde (2018) and Harmel and Svåsand (2019b) in its approach to party institutionalization. Although not radically different from classical approaches such as Huntington (1968), Janda (1980), or Panebianco (1988), it is worth briefly repeating the dimensions of party institutionalization. The three dimensions of an institutionalized party are (a) internal institutionalization meaning routinization of rules or behavior, and internal value infusion meaning that a party is valued for itself beyond an original leader or goal; (b) external institutionalization meaning that a party is perceived by externals as a relevant and lasting institution; and (c) objective durability, which following Gurr (1974) means longevity and adaptability. In this article, we start with the latter dimension and proceed in reverse order, and in Table 1 we summarize and compare PJ’s institutionalization with that of the other traditional party, the UCR.

The PJ was created from above in 1946.³ Its founder was Perón, a military officer who, holding executive office, attempted to build a popular base of support to promote his political goals. Consequently, the party doctrine, language, and organization were pervaded by a hierarchical disposition. Just like a military-minded organization, its leaders have been used to thinking of victory as the only acceptable outcome of a confrontation. The party has demonstrated objective durability through longevity and its adaptability

² Immediate presidential reelection was introduced through constitutional reform in 1994 during Menem’s first period.

³ For an overview of the formal PJ organization, see Marcuzzi (2019, p. 146).

demonstrated through its many electoral successes at the national and subnational level. Since 1946, PJ has won 10 presidential elections, six of which since democratization in 1983. PJ has also demonstrated governmental success in completing all presidential terms since 1983, showing a high adaptive capability in switching from the goals of winning votes to holding (and keeping) public office (Strøm 1990). Further, the party has been successful in adapting to external shocks such as the death of Perón in 1974, several authoritarian regimes, in addition to surviving and even implementing neoliberal reforms (Levitsky 2003). The party therefore scores high on objective durability with 75 years of existence and considerable electoral and governmental success, made possible by a capacity to adapt to external shocks and varying regime circumstances.

External perceptions of the PJ as a “lasting power” and as “relevant” is closely connected to the PJ’s electoral and governmental success, in addition to its adaptability to changing surroundings. Voters have supported the PJ regardless of who has been party leader, and whether the party has implemented neoliberal policies (under Menem) or promoted state-oriented policies (under the Kirchners). The lack of programmatic formalization seems not to have affected PJ’s external institutionalization negatively, as the party successfully (in terms of government survival) governed through economic crises of the 1990s and 2000s. PJ scores high on external institutionalization.

The final, and for this article, most controversial dimension is the degree to which PJ was ever internally institutionalized. Levitsky’s (2003) analysis of the PJ has had immense influence on the literature on party institutionalization, to the extent that this dimension in the literature now not only focuses on written rules as an indicator for institutionalization but also actual behavior if formalized, written rules are lacking. If not formally institutionalized internally, Levitsky held that PJ was “organised disorganisation” or “informally organised and weakly routinised” (Levitsky 2003, p. 58). In 2005, Levitsky concluded the PJ was weakly institutionalized but had a strong organization (Levitsky 2005), a combination which has given the party or its leaders of the day, a strong adaptive capacity. Although the *Renovación* period (1985–1988) we discuss next, can be seen as a first attempt to institutionalize the party and its leadership selection procedures, the process was cut short with the election of Carlos Menem as presidential candidate for the 1989 election. Rules were therefore never routinized. What kept the organization strong, even though weakly institutionalized, was patronage rather than rule- or ideology-based behavior combined with strong internal value infusion or loyalty connected with the Peronist movement, rather than the PJ.

CARLOS MENEM AND THE BEGINNING OF SERIAL PERSONALIZATION OF PERONISM

This section presents the electoral and governmental challenges the PJ faced from 1983 until 2023, the party’s adaptive strategies, and the degree of personalization versus institutionalization of nomination procedures of the presidential candidates. The findings are summarized and compared in Table 2.

The electoral defeat of 1983 came as a bucket of cold water to a party that had never lost a free and fair election. The PJ had undergone a series of traumatic shocks in the preceding decade, including the death of its founding leader in 1974, an armed confrontation between internal factions that resulted in hundreds of violent deaths, a traumatic ousting from power after a chaotic administration, and a brutal persecution by the ensuing dictatorship (1976–1983). Furthermore, society had changed a great deal in the meantime, featuring declining levels of industrialization and the increasing ascension of middle-class sectors and self-employed workers (Mora y Araujo 1991). All these notwithstanding, the party leadership faced the transition as though nothing had been altered: the PJ campaigned on past ideas, past leaders, and inward-looking images, and took victory for granted (Waisboard 1995).

Electoral challenge: 1989

After the electoral failure of 1983, moves toward renovation of the party started in different provinces. The process that eventually led to the 1989 victory comprised two stages: one ran between 1985 and 1988, when a new internal sector, the *Renovación*, displaced the Orthodox faction and modernized the party

TABLE 2 Challenges faced by the PJ, adaptive strategies, and degrees of personalization.

Year	Challenge	Adaptive strategy	Institutionalization vs. personalization of nomination procedure
1983	Electoral (failed)	Nomination by party organ	Highly institutionalized
1989	Electoral (successful)	Primary elections (only time ever)	Moderately institutionalized
1989-99	Governmental	Ideological turn and policy outsourcing	—
1995	Electoral (successful)	Incumbent reelection	Moderately personalized
1999	Electoral (failed)	Nomination by incumbent (<i>dedazo</i>)	Highly personalized
2003	Electoral (successful)	Neolemas: change of electoral law to allow multiple runners per party	Moderately institutionalized
2003-07	Governmental	From heir/dauphin to traitor/Jacobin	—
2007	Electoral (successful)	Nomination by incumbent (<i>dedazo</i>)	Highly personalized
2007-11	Governmental	Policy radicalization	—
2011	Electoral (successful)	Incumbent reelection	Moderately personalized
2011-15	Governmental	Rhetorical radicalization, policy improvisation	—
2015	Electoral (failed)	Incumbent nomination (<i>dedazo</i>)	Highly personalized
2019	Electoral (successful)	Party leader nomination (<i>tuitazo</i>)	Hyper-highly personalized
2019-23	Governmental	Bicephalous	—

Notes: Highly institutionalized: nomination is made through preexisting institutions; Moderately institutionalized: nomination is made through especially altered institutions; Moderately personalized: nomination naturally falls on the incumbent; Highly personalized: nomination is made by the incumbent (*dedazo*); Hyper-Highly personalized: nomination is made by a nonincumbent party leader (*tuitazo*).

Source: Own elaboration.

image and its dominant coalition. The second stage was triggered when Antonio Cafiero, who had led the renovation, lost the presidential candidacy to Carlos Menem, who had been part of the process without severing ties with the previous dominant sectors, for example, the unions and the provincial caudillos (McGuire 1997; Mustapic 2002). Despite the renovators' defeat, two significant transformations had taken place within the PJ under its leadership. First, the party had become consistently pro-democracy, leaving no room for an alternative order. Second, the party managed to cut off the informal, but strong, links with the unions. Henceforth, the PJ would keep the substantial support of working-class and lower class voters, but it would become a patronage-based rather than a labor-based party (Levitsky 2003). This transformation was particularly significant in urban areas, since patronage had traditionally been stronger in small towns and the countryside. Although the democratic shift and simultaneous deunionization of Peronism took place while in opposition, they would have momentous consequences once the PJ got back to power.

To carry out its metamorphosis, Peronism resorted to two consecutive electoral strategies. The first was an outcome of a decision made by the Renovators—mainly Cafiero—in 1985, which consisted of running on a splinter list just to, after beating the official party list, return to the party, and take control using their newly gained electoral legitimacy. This could be done because the Peronist tradition considered the party as just the electoral instrument of the *Movimiento*, therefore allowing for party splitting if broader loyalty to the movement was maintained. The second strategy was calling (for the first time) a party primary to choose the presidential candidate in 1988. This time, however, the Renovators' strategists miscalculated, and the result benefited their opponent, Carlos Menem. Both strategies would be subsequently used at the provincial and municipal levels every time the Peronist leaders were unable to reach an agreement and nominate their candidates without elections. Once in government, the PJ could also manipulate the electoral rules and the transfer of the Peronist internal struggle onto the public arena as ways of dealing with leadership selection.

Governmental challenge: 1989–1999

Some PJ activists usually complain that Menem turned Peronism upside down, sweeping its nationalist and autarkic doctrine into a neoliberal one and abandoning its traditional working-class base in favor of a coalition with the upper classes.⁴ The initial appointment as economy minister of a representative of the largest Argentine multinational firm, Bunge y Born, and the later nomination of Domingo Cavallo to the same office, clearly ran contrary to the traditional party stance. However, the possibility to carry out such a sweeping transformation was already built up in the party structure. Unlike most social democratic and former communist parties, the PJ is characterized by a flexible organization, especially after cutting its ties to the unions. This led Levitsky (2003, p. 23) to define it as a mass populist party, meaning the combination of strong societal rootedness with high internal fluidity. Such a combination bestowed the party with a remarkable adaptive capacity, as it could change in response to new challenges without alienating its core electorate.

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

The internal fluidity of Peronism produced at least two significant outcomes in the 1990s. First, it permitted the successful candidacy of a handful of subnational outsiders, such as the elected governors of Santa Fe and Tucumán. Second, it facilitated the programmatic shift undertaken by the Menem government (Corrales 2002). The latter was due to the tendency of the Peronist bosses to bandwagon toward office-holding leaders (Levitsky 2003, p. 144): as the authority of the party bodies is disregarded, "control of the state means control of the party" (p. 161). The about-face did not entail brand dilution given its tolerable economic outcomes (Lupu 2016). Since patronage-based organizations tend to be more pragmatic than ideological and given that the hub-and-spoke nature of Argentine federal politics prevented horizontal anti-Menemist coalitions, the party programmatic about-face seemed complete. Yet, it was not: the same party flexibility allowed for a rapid reversal to a nationalist, populist and anti-neoliberal program—under a new personalized leadership.

THE KIRCHNERS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PERSONAL DYNASTY

After the electoral defeat in the presidential elections in 1999 to President de la Rúa and the *Alianza* coalition, there was a leadership struggle within Peronism between former president Menem and failed presidential candidate Eduardo Duhalde. The attribution and duration of party tenures were among the main issues at stake, as Menem allegedly was the Council chair and Duhalde held the same position in the party Congress. The debate overtly exposed that formal institutionalization had not taken place despite the new environmental conditions such as democratic stability and government turnover. However, the PJ would not need to readapt to its opposition status: the disastrous mismanagement of the ruling *Alianza*

⁴ In fact, Menem accomplished to build a new coalition between upper and lower classes (Gervasoni 1997; Levitsky 2003).

resulted in a presidential vacancy in late 2001, albeit not before a mid-term election had been carried out. As a result, in December 2001 Peronism held a comfortable majority in Congress and was able to control the process of presidential succession (Malamud 2015). In fact, the PJ senators had wisely appointed one of their own as the leader of the Senate, thus placing him in the line of succession should a presidential vacancy occur. When De la Rúa eventually resigned, it took only 10 days of internal turmoil and institutional crisis until Duhalde was appointed with multiparty congressional support. The PJ was back in power, not through presidential elections but by means of congressional nomination. Still, the internal transfer of leadership was not over.

By early 2003, the PJ had survived persecution (since 1955), proscription (until 1973), and electoral defeat (in 1983 and 1999) along with, when in government, the paramount crises of hyperinflation (1989–1990) and global collapse (2001–2002). It had even resisted two across-the-board programmatic and coalitional twists in a decade without losing its electoral base or its organizational power. The social rootedness that permits many people *to be Peronist* instead of just *voting for Peronism* (Ostiguy 1998), combined with an outstanding degree of institutional flexibility, turned out to be a successful formula for adapting to hard times.

Electoral challenge: 2003

The fragmentation of the party and the inconclusiveness of the struggle for supremacy left the PJ leaders with difficult dilemmas. Duhalde had ascended to the presidency by promising that he would not run in the subsequent election. Moreover, he knew that breaking his promise might jeopardize the precarious economic stability achieved by his administration. In a bicephalous party, the exclusion of one leader leaves the other with the upper hand, and Duhalde understood that Menem would win an internal election against any other candidate. Lacking the power to appoint his successor, he decided for a strategy followed in many provinces where the PJ ruled: allowing parties to present more than one presidential candidate, thus transferring the final decision to the general electorate. This mechanism did not replicate exactly the *Lemas* system,⁵ as votes were not cumulative, but it would work in a similar way provided that the two most voted candidates were Peronist, and so it was termed *neolemas*. As expected, two Peronists finished top. Menem finished first with 24 percent of the vote, but after public opinion polls predicted a landslide defeat for him against Duhalde's candidate Néstor Kirchner, who had received 22 percent, Menem declined to participate in the second round. Thus, Kirchner became the new president after an election in which one of the Peronist candidates won in every province, and the three Peronist contenders combined garnered more than 60 percent of the national vote. The strategy of (*auto*)-*divide and rule* had served the party again.

Governmental challenge: 2003–2007

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

Despite their different trajectories and ideology, Duhalde and Kirchner agreed on their rejection of the neoliberal policies implemented by Menem. Relying on the PJ historical traditions, they managed to bring

⁵ The so-called *Ley de Lemas* is a mechanism that allows parties to present more than one list (or candidate) in a general election. The winner is the most voted list (or candidate) of the most voted party; this is why the system is usually described as “multiple” and “cumulative.”

about another programmatic turnabout, the second in slightly more than a decade, which reverted to most of the positions that the last Peronist administration had abandoned. As soon as Menem left the scene, bandwagoning tactics started working and Kirchner rapidly capitalized on them, accentuating his alliance with Duhalde aimed at taking control over the party. Most party leaders that previously had supported Menem readily realigned with the new president. Therefore, the new administration was able to overturn relevant Menemist policies with the support of the same legislators that had previously endorsed them.

Electoral challenge: 2007

On inauguration, Kirchner kept senior ministers appointed by Duhalde, among them economy minister Roberto Lavagna. Duhalde himself was instrumental to appease the party local chieftains that felt mistreated by the new president. However, Kirchner did not wait to openly challenge Duhalde for full party control. Elected by only 22 percent of the electorate, the president feared to appear weak and felt he needed to legitimize his mandate with an electoral victory in the mid-term elections. Therefore, he moved the queen: by asking his wife Cristina Fernández, then senator from Santa Cruz province, to run as senatorial candidate from Buenos Aires province (where she was born). Kirchner openly challenged Duhalde's locus of power. Duhalde asked his own wife Chiche, then national deputy, to run against Fernández. Fernández's ample victory by 45–20 percent of the votes had three consequences. First, it gave Néstor Kirchner the undisputed party leadership. Second, it left all non-Peronist parties trailing way behind, showing that general elections continued to simultaneously be Peronist primaries as well. Third, though not evident at the time, it positioned Fernández for the next presidential race. When time came, and after playing ambiguity for more than a year (“the next president could be a male penguin or a female penguin,” he mocked by reference to the bird that populates the Patagonian shores), Néstor Kirchner finally declined to run for reelection and postulated *una pingüina* instead. His never declared but recognizable intention was to skip the constitutional ban to more than two consecutive presidential terms by resorting to marital alternation, allowing the couple to remain in power almost indefinitely—if they won the elections.

Governmental challenge: 2007–2011

Cristina's first term was unexpectedly turbulent. Having campaigned over claims for further institutionalization and “fine-tuning,” she found herself triggering the wrath of the United States, the agricultural producers (*el campo*), and the mainstream media outlets since the very beginning. The face-off with *el campo* led to the early resignation of her chief of cabinet (and future president) Alberto Fernández and her minister of economy Martín Lousteau, but also to the estrangement of Vice President Julio Cobos, who led the Radical Party splinter with whom the Kirchners had built the winning electoral alliance. This breaking led to the radicalization of the administration and an ensuing electoral defeat in the 2009 congressional mid-term elections. When most pundits were pointing to the dysfunctionality of a bicephalous government, nature solved the question by claiming Néstor Kirchner's life in October 2010. Against all odds, and based on an international economic windfall, Cristina rode on a wave of widower's sympathy toward her re-election, now forced by the departure of her late husband.

Electoral challenge: 2011

After a heavy defeat in the 2009 midterm elections, in which Néstor Kirchner himself headed the lower house ballot in the Buenos Aires province only to lose to rookie Francisco De Narváez, many observers thought it was the end for Kirchnerismo. The presidential couple themselves tinkered with the idea of stepping down from office, but the experts were wrong. Kirchner's passing in 2010 and his moving mourning ceremony, Cristina's inner resilience, the joyful celebration of the *Revolución de Mayo* bicentennial, plus the

balsamic effects of good economic times in the international economy ended up in a landslide in 2011. Cristina garnered 54 percent of the vote, while the second runner, Socialist candidate Hermes Binner, only reached 17 percent. The presidential ticket was filled with Amado Boudou, Cristina's young minister of the economy, as the vice president. The contrast with the 2007 election could not be clearer: instead of a real coalition, the *Frente para la Victoria* (The Front of Victory, a fantasy name under which the Kirchners combined the Peronist Party with tiny parties and rubber stamps) was now the purest expression of the leader's preferences.

Governmental challenge: 2011–2015

Good economic times, however, were not to last. Cristina's second term was inaugurated with great expectations but then marred with a succession of crises from which the government survived, but not unscathed. This was not a regional exception: after the commodity boom of the 2000s and an ephemeral comeback following the 2009 financial crisis, left-of-center governments were struggling in most of Latin America. As cases in point, Paraguay's president, Fernando Lugo, was impeached in 2012, and Brazil's Dilma Rousseff would undergo the same destiny in 2016. Cristina, however, kept a strong hold over her party, which in turn controlled both houses of Congress. While public policy became a patchwork quilt, party politics remained surprisingly stable—at least in the incumbent front. Indeed, after losing the 2013 midterm elections to Peronist splinter Sergio Massa, Cristina managed to appoint Daniel Scioli as presidential candidate and made him arrive a close second to Mauricio Macri (PRO), who was elected in 2015 by a 51–48 percent margin. Kirchernismo was finally out, but, against widespread expectations, not down.

Electoral challenge: 2019

By the final year of Mauricio Macri's term, Cristina Fernández kept a strong but insufficient support within the electorate, with polls ranking her at around 30 percent. Self-aware that she was unlikely to win, but also that there was no stronger Peronist candidate, she made a bold and unexpected move by appointing her former chief of cabinet Alberto Fernández, who had become a ruthless critic during her second term, as presidential candidate. She chose for herself the vice presidential slot. In this way, she managed not to alienate her loyal supporters while, at the same time, reaching out to the center through a moderate frontrunner. This maneuver allowed Peronism to defeat the incumbent president in the first electoral round with a 48–40 percent result.

DISCUSSION: NATIONAL AND SUBNATIONAL ROOTS OF (SERIAL) PERSONALIZATION OF THE JUSTICIALISTA PARTY

The emergence of national leaders—such as Raúl Alfonsín (president 1983–1989) in the Radical Party, Carlos Menem, Néstor Kirchner, and Cristina Fernández in the PJ—has allowed both parties to attract and mobilize new generations of followers and cement their relevance and importance. The routinization of personalism rather than the institutionalization of rules has been a key for party success since democratization in 1983, but it has been much more dominant in the Peronist than in the Radical Party (see Figure 1). In both, however, the importance of the party leaders became so important that their commonly used labels were not the party names, but often “alfonsinismo,” “menemismo,” and “kirchnerismo”. In addition to the major parties, provincial and new national parties (“third forces”—*terceras fuerzas*) have almost exclusively been created around a single political leader and followed the large parties in using personalization as the main electoral strategy. Thus, early success with personalization in the 1980s around Alfonsín and even more so with Menem, has fed the increasing personalization of Argentine politics observed by Gervasoni (2018). Personalism in politics has become routinized by the early electoral success of personalization. It

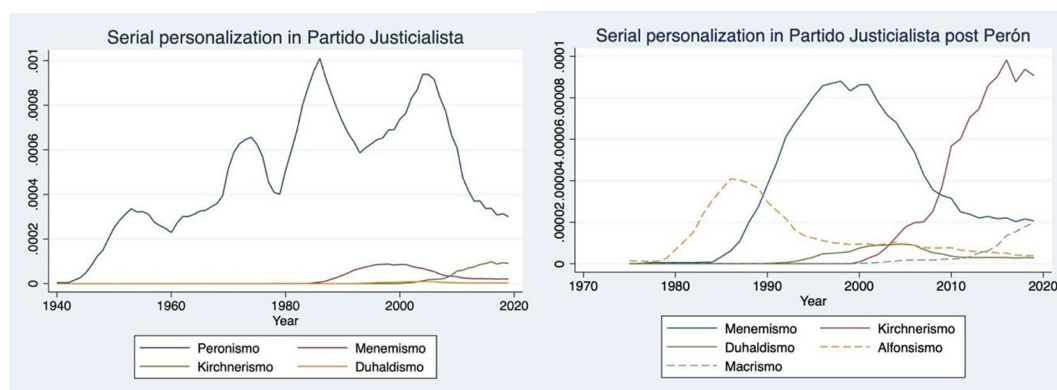


FIGURE 1 Serial personalization in Argentine parties.

Notes and sources: Data from Google Books Ngram Viewer, Spanish (2019) corpus (Ngram Viewer 2024). Solid line: leaders in the Justicialista Party; dashed line: leaders in non-peronist parties.

was therefore no surprise that when UCR, PRO, and PJ were all defeated in the 2023 election, the winner was by a personalist candidate, Javier Milei, leading a very personalized party, *La Libertad Avanza*.

The data from the Spanish 2019 corpus of Google Books displayed in Figure 1 (Ngram Viewer 2024), provide some further evidence to our arguments above about serial personalization in the PJ and further shows three things. First, Perón still is the key name in the PJ, also dominating in the post-Perón era. Second, and more important for this article, the graph to the right shows that PJ under Menem and Kirchner gained the personalist terms “menemismo” and “kirchnerismo,” indicating that once a leader is chosen in PJ the party organizes, at least rhetorically, around that leader. Third, the graph to the right shows that while “alfonsinismo” indeed was an often-used term indicating a certain personalization around Alfonsín, this was a much weaker than in the PJ, and “macrismo” never reached the levels observed under Alfonsín. The data thus indicate that personalization is a stronger phenomenon in the Justicialist party than its adversaries, but also that the PJ has succeeded in generating serial personalization from Perón to Menem and the Kirchners. Electoral results also indicate that serial personalization has been a success for the Justicialist party.

The remainder discusses to what degree the successful routinization of serial personalization is relevant for theories of party leadership and party institutionalization (see the introduction to this special issue), and then links the roots of serial personalization to a rule-guided but malleable system for leadership succession, the dominant patronage system, and the importance of provincial politics in Argentina. Finally, we consider whether these roots also condition the extent to which serial personalization is a strategy that can travel beyond Argentina and the PJ.

It is generally assumed that if a personalized party institutionalizes, the party “...can reap significant rewards...” and depersonalization “...can effectively reshape the party’s external image into something less ‘personal’ and potentially more lasting” (both quotes from Harmel and Svåsand 2019a, p. 3). The party institutionalization literature views institutionalization as the key challenge but also as the main recipe for surviving the death of a charismatic leader. Our article shows that a party can serially personalize, and that serial personalization can, at least in the Peronist case, be a recipe for survival and success after the death of the charismatic, foundational leader. Thus, the case of the Peronist Party challenges the common wisdom that personalist parties must institutionalize to survive, serial personalization is an option, but may be challenging to achieve. Three factors contribute to the success of this strategy of the Peronist Party, factors that also to a certain extent, limit the extent to which this strategy can travel and be successful in other contexts. First, the PJ case indicates it is easier to personalize if the party and the electoral rules are not very institutionalized to begin with. Second, we believe that the patronage system and delinking to the unions may have helped—patronage allows for following the money and runs counter to institutionalization. Yet

patronage by itself would not open for serial personalization had it not been for the combination with the third factor, Argentine federalism. The federal nature and strength of the provinces in the Argentine makes it a low-risk strategy for the party to personalize since even with personalization, the party/provinces can replace the leader, opening for serial personalization. In a centralized state, personalizing the leading may be very risky for the party and for democracy.

Above we have argued that the PJ has managed to use or manipulate the electoral rules in a way that has promoted and allowed for (serial) personalization. As regard the processes of candidate nomination and electoral engineering, the PJ is arguably the most resourceful party in Latin America. The two most widely used mechanisms for internal selection in Argentina are primary elections (formal) and elite arrangement (informal) (De Luca, Jones, and Tula 2002). Mustapic (2002) describes a third mechanism for selecting candidates for public office that consists of allowing many candidates to run along in general elections. To be sure, such permission is not usually formalized, but it is rooted on the fact that nobody is ever expelled from Peronism if the movement is allegedly larger than the party and may thus present diverse candidacies. As the PJ structure presents no reentry costs, it is possible—and quite normal—to challenge the official party list in one or more elections and return to the party afterward. The fourth mechanism is usually applied when the PJ is in power and consists of manipulating the electoral rules—such as gerrymandering, implementing the Lemas system, or rescheduling the electoral calendar—in order to favor certain candidates over others—and, besides, against other parties.⁶ The relatively malleable rules of leadership succession in the PJ, but also the malleability of electoral rules and candidate nomination, aided the party to at the same time promote personalization and manage the interpersonal conflicts generated by competition for the PJ leadership, and secure relatively peaceful leadership succession in the party. Therefore, we argue that a strategy of serial personalization is easier in party systems and democracies that are not highly institutionalized to begin with.

The second factor that conditions personalization or serial personalization as a successful party strategy is that holding public office (at the provincial and federal level) must come with resources to generate mass support for a new leader, in particular when change leader also has meant ideological turnabouts. Already in the late 1980s, the PJ delinked its ties with the unions and replaced these with patronage-based ties to the working and lower classes. Access to patronage resources, however, came through public office (governor and presidential positions), facilitating or nurturing (personal) ties to the national leader, while reducing the importance of the party as an institution, or the carrier of an ideology. A patronage-based system at the federal and provincial level thus facilitated a personalist strategy.

The serial personalization of Peronism, however, also has institutional, subnational roots. While the use and manipulation of electoral rules and a patronage-based system may condition parties toward personalization, we argue that *serial* personalization in the PJ case is facilitated by the federal structure in Argentina. First, the personalism that structures parties and the competition for votes on the national arenas is rooted in politics in the provinces (see Table 3 and Malamud and De Luca, 2016). At the provincial level, institutional change has increased the governors' power. The spread of immediate reelection of governors has facilitated their control over provincial political careers, as mentioned in the first section and shown in Table 3. Personalization is thus not a factor that starts with the presidency or the national leadership of the PJ party, but a trait that subnational bosses who aspire to national leadership bring with them when they step up to the national arena. Second, and more importantly for the argument made here, with their increased institutional powers, governors at the subnational arena have an autonomous power base (relatively) independent of the national arena. This reduces the risk of personalizing the party in two ways. First, the governors' autonomous provincial power base makes it less likely that a strong, personalized leadership at the national level will affect their control over the provincial party. Second, the subnational autonomous power base also makes it possible for the province and provincial party leaders, that is, the governors, to replace the national party leader if necessary. Thus, the federalist structure and strength of the subnational leaders have facilitated the *serial* personalization of the PJ.

⁶ In all, we observe four broad types of candidate selection: informal from within (elite arrangement), formal from within (primaries), informal from outside (party splitting), and formal from outside (manipulation of electoral rules).

TABLE 3 Provinces won by political party, Argentina 1983–2019 (provinces listed by population in 2010 census).

PROVINCIA	1983-87	1987-91	1991-95	1995-99	1999-2003	2003-07	2007-11	2011-15	2015-19	2019-23
Buenos Aires	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PRO	PJ
Córdoba	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Santa Fe	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PS	PS	PS	PJ
CABA	---	---	---	---	ALIANZA	ALIANZA-FREPASO	PRO	PRO	PRO	PRO
Mendoza	UCR	PJ	PJ	UCR	ALIANZA	UCR	PJ	PJ	UCR	UCR
Tuamán	UCR	PJ	PJ	FR	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Entre Ríos	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Salta	PJ	PJ	PRS	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Misiones	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	FR	FR	FR	FR	FR
Chaco	PJ	PJ	PACH	UCR	ALIANZA	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Corrientes	PAL	PAL	PAL	PAL	ALIANZA	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR
Santiago del Estero	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR
San Juan	PBSJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Jujuy	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Río Negro	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR	ALIANZA	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR	UCR
Neuquén	MPN	MPN	MPN	MPN	MPN	MPN	MPN	MPN	JSRN	JSRN
Formosa	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Chubut	UCR	PJ	UCR	UCR	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
San Luis	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Catamarca	PJ	PJ	PJ	UCR	ALIANZA	UCR	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
La Rioja	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	ALIANZA	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
La Pampa	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Santa Cruz	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ	PJ
Tierra del Fuego	---	---	---	MPF	PJ	UCR	JRFR	JRFR	PJ	Foija

Colors: blue = PJ; red = UCR/Alianza; yellow = PRO; green = other nation-wide parties; orange = provincial parties. *Criterios*. The sign indicates party affiliation or national alignment of the elected governor at the time of election. In four cases (CABA 2003, SdE 2008/2009, TdF 2011, RN 2015), the governor was reelected by a different party, as shown by the “=” sign; in one case (TdF 2019), the governor lost against a candidate from an allied party. In 2015, FRC in Misiones withdrew from the national deputy’s block of the PJ. Elections until October 12, 2021; 237. PJ = 150; UCR/Alianza = 46; other national parties = 11; provincial parties = 29; federal interventions = 6. Abbreviations: FR, Fuerza Republicana; FRC, Frente Renovador de la Concordia; if, federal intervention; JSRN, Juntos Somos Río Negro; MPF, Movimiento Popular Fueguino; MPN, Movimiento Popular Neuquino; PACH, Partido Acción Chaqueña; PAL, Partido Autonomista Liberal; PBSJ, Partido Bloquista de San Juan; PN, Partido Nuevo; PRS, Partido Renovador Salteño; PSP, Partido Socialista Patagónico. *Source*: Updated from Malamud and De Luca (2016, pp. 58–59).

CONCLUSIONS

Challenged by the death of its founder in 1974, persecution under authoritarian rule (1976–1983), and electoral competition after redemocratization in 1983, Peronism and the PJ could easily have died with or shortly after its leader. They certainly did not, and PJ has proven to be highly successful in terms of surviving, winning elections, and governing in the democratic era that started in 1983. It did so not by fully institutionalizing its rules, but rather by converting to repersonalization of the party and routinizing personalization in a process we have coined as serial personalization. We have shown that Peronism chose personalization over institutionalization as a strategy for obtaining electoral and governing success in the current democratic phase. We believe this strategy of serial personalization has not been analyzed by the literature, and counters the common wisdom about party institutionalization literature. We hope to have contributed to the literature on the evolutionary patterns of personalized or previously institutionalized parties by identifying the mechanisms behind PJ's success. We cautiously argue that serial personalization in the PJ case has been facilitated by the use and manipulation of already malleable electoral rules, and a patronage system combined with a federalist structure and strong regional leaders. This personalization strategy may therefore not be replicable in all potential cases.

Argentine politics resembles an ocean: while the waves rock the surface at the national level, bringing and taking party leaders with them, the deeper waters of subnational politics remain mostly still as demonstrated in Table 3. The waves we see are surfed by sequential leaders with personalistic traits, most of all in the PJ, but the waves themselves are a routinized institution. Peronism has shown to have the most surfers challenging the waves and each other, while leadership scarcity has led other parties to retain fallen surfers for longer times.

Although the PJ has never been a formally institutionalized party, its succession mechanisms have worked with an unbroken rhythm: it seems to say, “the leader has lost, long live the (new) leader,” for winning, or riding the waves, is the top party goal. This is why subnational leaders are eager on trading their political support in exchange for coattail effects: national leaders are those who improve the electoral conditions of provincial party leaders, whether by their charismatic electability as candidates or by their federal funds generosity as government officials. Bandwagoning in the PJ has been oriented by victory rather than ideology.

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How to cite this article: Malamud, A., and L. Marsteintredet. 2024. “The institutionalization of “serial personalization” in Argentina’s Peronist Party, 1983–2023.” *Social Science Quarterly* 105: 486–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13384>