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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ARGENTINE CENTRE–LEFT

The Crisis of *Frente Grande*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the inner workings of the Argentinian *Frente Grande* party at the height of its political and electoral development. It is based on the assumption that parties are not singular actors, but diverse organizations with complex internal operations. From that perspective, in order to identify the causes of both its rapid growth and current crisis, the article examines the distribution of power, styles of leadership and formal and informal rules of the *Frente Grande*. Starting from conceptual frameworks recently suggested in the literature, this article explains the *Frente*'s institutionalization attempts and the resilience of its leadership. The article also considers the impact of the party's original organizational characteristics on its subsequent development.

KEY WORDS ■ Argentina ■ Latin-American parties ■ new left ■ party organization

Introduction

The history of Argentina's parties is complex, reflecting the impact of alternating cycles of military and civilian rule (O'Donnell, 1979: 121). During the twentieth century and prior to 1983, Argentina had only three periods with minimum conditions for democratic rule, or – as defined by Dahl – polyarchy (1971). Free elections with universal suffrage[1] were held only between 1916 and 1930, 1946 and 1955 and 1973 and 1976. In all, less than half the twentieth century was characterized by free and democratic regimes, as compared to more than half a century of an assortment of non-democratic regimes, ranging from diverse forms of restricted democracy, competitive oligarchy, bureaucratic authoritarianism to the final plunge into state terror (Abal Medina and Suárez Cao, 2002).

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Despite such political instability, two major political parties have dominated Argentina's political arena: the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR) and the *Partido Justicialista* (PJ – the former Peronist Party). However, after redemocratization in 1983, some relevant third parties emerged, the *Frente Grande* (FG) being the most important. This article analyses the development of FG, with the intention of identifying and analysing the internal causes behind its rapid growth and subsequent decline. It is argued that the causes of this failure lie not only in weak institutionalization and party leadership, but, paradoxically, in the very speed of its growth as well.

The FG was created in 1993 when two minor centre–left coalitions, *Frente por la Democracia y la Justicia Social* (FREDEJUSO) and *Frente del Sur*, joined forces. Their membership came from three different political sources: (1) PJ's centre–left members who abandoned their party in protest against Menem's policies;[2] (2) various centre–left groups and parties, such as the *Partido Intransigente*, former Christian Democrats and independent human-rights activists; and (3) leftist organizations such as the Communist Party (PC).

Early in its history, the FG unexpectedly achieved impressive electoral results in Buenos Aires City in the 1993 legislative elections and in the 1994 elections for constitutional convention delegates. These early victories led to a shift within the forces of the party's structure, boosting the leadership of Carlos 'Chacho' Álvarez. The latter – a centre–left deputy – along with a small group of politicians from the City of Buenos Aires had quit Peronism in 1991. By taking advantage of his growing popularity and internal power, Álvarez succeeded in moulding a centre–left orientation for the party. However, the party's left wing, including the PC, abandoned the FG after accusing Álvarez of wanting to establish a personalistic leadership.

In late 1994, the FG formed a wider coalition called *Frente por un País Solidario* (FREPASO) by joining traditional parties such as the *Partido Socialista Popular*, the *Partido Socialista Democrático* and other groups led by former Peronists like José Octavio Bordón. At the 1995 presidential elections, FREPASO was runner-up, relegating the traditional second force, the UCR, to third place for the first time in its history. In early 1996, Bordón – who had been FREPASO's presidential candidate – left the party after unsuccessfully attempting to challenge Álvarez's leadership.

By 1997, the UCR and FREPASO formed the centre–left coalition *Alianza por el Trabajo, la Justicia y la Educación* (normally abbreviated to *Alianza*), winning the parliamentary elections the same year, as it benefited from the widespread unpopularity of President Menem's policies. At the 1998 open primaries held by the coalition to select its presidential nominee, the FG/FREPASO candidate, Graciela Fernández Meijide, lost to the UCR candidate, Fernando de la Rúa, who went on to win the presidential contest the following year, with Álvarez becoming vice-president. In mid-2000, the *Alianza*'s candidate Aníbal Ibarra (FG/FREPASO) became mayor of Buenos Aires City, Argentina's second largest district.

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Nevertheless, the De la Rúa government showed from the beginning little eagerness for changing the policies of the previous decade, not just in the socio-economic sphere, but also in the institutional one, which should have offered the Alianza the greatest potential for significant reform. In October 2000, Álvarez, who had been fighting long-standing corrupt practices in the Senate, resigned the vice-presidency after De la Rúa's cabinet re-shuffle promoted functionaries allegedly involved in such practices.

A few months later, in May 2001, Álvarez resigned his position as FG/ FREPASO chairman and quit politics. His departure, along with the fact that the government policies differed substantially from those promoted by the original *Alianza*, plunged the party into deep crisis. Thus, several of its top leaders joined a new centre–left movement led by deputy Elisa Carrió called the *Alternativa por una República de Iguales* (ARI).

De la Rúa, weakened by a serious defeat at the October 2001 mid-term elections, the intensification of the economic crisis and strident social unrest, resigned the presidency on 20 December 2001. When Congress elected Peronist Eduardo Duhalde as President, some FG leaders joined his administration, while others joined ARI. A third section, led by Ibarra, held a national party caucus in April 2002 and broke with those who supported the administration. Thus, in a single year, the party was reduced to a third of its size. Unable to agree on a candidate for the April 2003 presidential elections, the party opted not to support any specific candidacy.

Hence, the quick growth of the FG was followed by an equally rapid collapse. Currently, the FG has become irrelevant in the electoral arena and has turned into a small satellite organization of PJ. It is possible to distinguish between external structural and internal causes of this downfall. The former largely reflect the grave economic crisis that operated during the time the FG was in office. However, much has already been written on this subject, and this article seeks instead to demonstrate the significance for FG's downfall of its internal problems.[3] The article shows that organizational factors explain both the rapid growth and the collapse of the party. The following section outlines the level of institutionalization and the type of leadership that characterized the original FG; thereafter, the party's strategic alliances and growth strategy are analysed, and FG's crisis and decline explained.[4] The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for centre–left parties of FG's short experience.

Party Institutionalization and Leadership

Institutional Weakness, the 'Open-Minded Style' of Leadership and the Strategy of Forced Growth

Political parties never function as single monolithic units, but as competitive arenas where diverse forces seek its control and resources. According to

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Kitschelt (1994: 207), parties must be analysed as miniature political systems, where forces permanently strive to maintain or build power. In these disputes, actors face formal rules related to power distribution, but they also develop informal rules. These informal rules may eventually outweigh the organization's charter and become essential to the inner workings of weak newborn organizations such as FG.

FG's organizational structure presented several particular features. First, it is important to recognize that the party developed as a by-product of those political structures that Álvarez and his followers had created after abandoning the PJ in 1991. The idea of building a solid and stable party organization was never in their minds at this time. This became an important matter only when the need for formal processes emerged, such as internal elections. The party developed in an arbitrary manner, primarily as a means by which to displace Menem's administration, rather than as an end in itself. According to Panebianco, a party's degree of institutionalization tends to be low if a 'linkage of goals' does not take place within it (Panebianco, 1990: 52). This was exactly the case of the FG.

The FG leaders always fought to have freedom of action, hoping not to be tied down by institutional procedures when making decisions. This was for two reasons. In the first place, party growth was achieved largely as a result of its leaders' popularity and media exposure, not as a result of territorial development. Secondly, the party's nucleus often considered Álvarez's speed of response an important requirement. His capacity to generate political initiatives enabled the FG to succeed at junctures where a weak structure would usually fail.

Álvarez's leadership was based on a widespread consensus that identified him with the FG and its development, as indicated in Table 1. Alvarez was FG's most representative leader for almost three-quarters of the members of the party congress. Moreover, elite interviews reveal the existence of a tacit principle establishing that party members did not discuss the policies designed by party heads, but at the same time their superiors did not impose their views on certain subjects, such as the direction of individual members' actions or the way intermediate leaders should function in each field.

This leadership style was of an open-minded nature, because of the considerable freedom allowed to supporters. Control over the party's base was

Table 1. Which leader represents you? (asked to members of the FG National Congress)

C. Álvarez	74.46%
G. Fernández Meijide	9.18%
A. Mosquera	4.08%
M. Sánchez	3.06%
J. Cafiero	2.04%

Source: Survey carried out by the author at the Congreso Nacional del Partido Frente Grande, Mar del Plata, 3 July 1999 (154 out of the 234 members present).

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less apparent than has been traditional for organizations with strong personalistic leaders. This peculiar manner of exercising power created a structure that was often at odds with its formal norms: it effectively undermined its rules, creating an interplay that was often incomprehensible to its own membership. In many situations, formal institutions established a distribution of power through primaries, where voters would choose certain slates. However, the main actors always blamed this form of internal democracy for 'being traumatic', and tried (successfully) to avoid it by all means.[5] Even at the height of its internal struggles for power, the party would not consider an electoral solution for allocating internal posts. This 'fear of confrontation' may have stemmed from several causes, the most important of which was a concern on the part of the leadership that – given the underdeveloped party organization indicated in Table 3 – a few thousand votes was a poor mechanism for allocating political power.

Furthermore, party leaders feared that the more left-wing character of the party base would result in the selection of candidates that would damage the FG's appeal to the general electorate. As indicated in Table 2, even the members of the party Congress were located to the left of the party as a whole. Members also perceived a clear turn to the centre by the party in its short history. In the Congress of the Buenos Aires City branch of FG, which was formed by less prominent members, the self-placement was further to the left (3.28), which suggests that distance from the leadership was correlated to a more leftist ideology.

The organization's strategy for development, which can be described as one of *forced growth*, could only function within a framework of institutional weakness. Political organizations – even embryonic ones – tend to behave conservatively in order to avoid threatening the durability of their achievements (Panebianco, 1990: 46). Álvarez took the organization to its limits, repeatedly placing it at risk. Within the party, this was perceived as a tendency to jump to unknown but nevertheless widely trusted courses of action. Certain charismatic aspects of Álvarez's leadership allowed the FG to deal with the traditional and rational limitations that leaders face, permitting the party to pursue the strategy of forced growth.

This strategy implied rushing the party into national competition before it had anything like a nationwide organization. Instead of focusing on an area like Buenos Aires City, Álvarez pushed the FG to compete nationwide,

Table 2. Ideological placement

Question	*Mean*	*Deviation*
How do you locate yourself?	3.50	2.40
Where do you locate FG today?	4.66	1.99
Where do you locate FG at its origin?	2.97	0.66

Note: 1 is the extreme left and 10 the extreme right.
Source: As for Table 1.

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going so far as to challenge for the presidential prize. In effect, Álvarez forced the party to overreach the objective possibilities of its weak structure, which (as indicated in Table 3) was minimal in many districts. Only in Buenos Aires and Mendoza FG did members exceed 1.5 percent of the electorate, which, by Argentine standards, is an extremely low figure.[6] And in 18 of the 24 districts the party never reached the 29 percent it received at the national level in the 1995 presidential elections.

Considering the weakness of this organization, to take a small party that had performed satisfactorily in the capital in 1994 into the 1995 national presidential contest ran contrary to the logic of organizational survival. The same can be said of the decision to form an alliance with the large and well-established UCR, agreeing to choose a presidential candidate in joint open primaries, as publicly recognized by Álvarez (Álvarez and Morales Solá, 2002: 69).

Table 3. FG in all provinces

District	*Best electoral result of FG/FREPASO*	*No. of party members in 2000 (as % of the electorate)*
Buenos Aires	29.79% 1995	230,000 (2.55%)
Catamarca	15.88% 1995	2,500 (1.25%)
Chaco	12.38% 1995	1,500 (0.25%)
Chubut	15.05% 1995	1,700 (0.68%)
Ciudad de Buenos Aires	45.67% 1995	25,000 (0.98%)
Córdoba	20.77% 1995	9,000 (0.43%)
Corrientes	19.15% 1995	3,200 (0.56%)
Entre Ríos	24.72% 1995	7,000 (0.90%)
Formosa	16.83% 1995	–
Jujuy	21.42% 1995	–
La Pampa	24.88% 1997	3,000 (1.45%)
La Rioja	6.29% 1995	–
Mendoza	33.86% 1995	20,000 (1.97%)
Misiones	8.54% 1995	2,300 (0.92%)
Neuquen	32.13% 1997	1,500 (0.53%)
Río Negro	20.56% 1997	1,800 (0.55%)
Salta	20.29% 1995	3,000 (0.49%)
San Juan	25.30% 1995	1,500 (0.39%)
San Luis	24.79% 1995	1,000 (0.44%)
Santa Cruz	22.78% 1995	475 (0.42%)
Santa Fe	37.44% 1995	16,000 (0.75%)
Santiago del Estero	10.14% 1995	–
Tierra del Fuego	22.45% 1995	300 (0.47%)
Tucumán	29.13% 1995	5,500 (0.67%)

Source: Dirección Nacional Electoral. No data are available for certain provinces.

Institutional Weakness, Discursive 'Qualunquismo' and Fragile Identity

How can we assess FG's degree of institutionalization? A variety of indicators should be taken into account (Abal Medina, 2000: 329–34):

FG's Core Organizational Structures and Resources. These were minimal. None of the national leaders had a full-time commitment to the party. Only five people were on the payroll, all routine administrative employees.

Homogeneous Identity of Sub-units. This was low. In some provinces the party was known as *Partido del Frente*, in others, just as FG. In Jujuy, for example, there was no provincial FG, but a local party existed – MORECI – which was directly related to the party's national leadership.

Centralized Finances. No one was in charge of the party's finances nationally, nor was there even an administrator responsible for finances at party headquarters. People in charge of finances were personally connected to party leaders rather than occupying a formal position in the organization.

Relations with Non-Electoral Organizations. There were many inter-institutional difficulties. At FG's birth, a large sector of the state worker's association (ATE) had established close ties to the party through union leader Germán Abdala, but with the party's gradual turn to the centre (see Table 2) the informal relations it had developed with trade unions became confrontational on several occasions.[7] But other than connections with these unions, the party lacked contacts with social organizations.

Correspondence Between Formal Constitution and Power Distribution. There was a relatively close correspondence between the party's formal constitution and its distribution of power, since the same leaders occupied both formal and actual spaces of power.

Organizational Boundaries. These were unclear and easily crossed. Some top leaders (such as Oscar Massei from Neuquen and Rafael Flores from Santa Cruz) were not even registered party members, and the turnover of party leaders was high.

Internal Divisions. Internal party divisions were fairly well institutionalized, taking the form of either factions or tendencies, with little in common between them.

Leadership Careers. FG's brief history makes it difficult to track individual leaders' internal careers, so this aspect is of limited analytical value. However, there seemed to be no *cursus honorum* within the organization.

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Overall, the FG was weakly institutionalized, and its formal rules did not constitute everyday practice nor were they taken into consideration when planning individual courses of action. Rules were no more than a collection of norms subject to constant redefinition. What truly operated as an informal structure was a certain number of practices that coexisted with the party's formal structure. Thus, as already noted, the process of selecting candidates usually set aside the party's formal rules. Therefore, the most important candidacies were never chosen through primaries: Graciela Fernández Meijide (for Senator in 1996, Deputy in 1997, President in 1998 and Governor in 1999); Álvarez (for Deputy in 1993, President in 1995, Deputy in 1997 and Vice-President in 1999); Anibal Ibarra (for mayor of Buenos Aires in 1995 and 1999); and Carlos Auyero (for governor of Buenos Aires in 1999) were chosen directly by the party leadership, mainly because they were considered the best candidates for the general election regardless of their internal support.

The general point is confirmed by adopting the analytical framework devised by Kitschelt (1994) in his study of European social democratic parties. This allows for interesting comparative analysis. Kitschelt combines two dimensions: organizational entrenchment and leadership autonomy, both inversely proportional to the control exercised by party members. As the party becomes more organizationally entrenched and its leaders more autonomous, the party members lose control over what the leadership is doing on their behalf. Kitschelt proposes four indicators for each dimension, assigning different scores of 0.0 for low levels, 0.5 for medium levels and 1.0 for high levels. Deploying this approach and suggested indicators to measuring the degree of organizational entrenchment, we find the following in respect of FG.

A *party's member/vote ratio* measures the 'encapsulation' of a party's electorate. The FG scored very low on this, at just 1.14 percent (56,275 members compared to 4,934,814 votes in 1995). For Kitschelt (1994: 221), a high ratio would be about 20 percent, while an intermediate ratio requires at least 5 percent.

The *availability of patronage* measures how dependent the party and its leadership are on assigning paid public positions to party militants. Before 1999, the party had no access to resources and positions within the Executive branch (either at local or national level), although Legislative staff posts were distributed mostly among party members. Therefore, the FG scores as medium.

The *size of a party's middle-level apparatus* refers to the number of full-time or part-time officials performing bureaucratic tasks at party headquarters. As explained above, the FG's administration was practically non-existent, and therefore scores low.

Finally, the indicator *ideological integration or pluralization* refers to the degree of ideological uniformity within the organization. The FG has a strongly pluralistic profile, especially regarding the different political and partisan origins of its members; nonetheless, as indicated in Table 3, the

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members of the FG National Congress defined the party's and their own ideology in moderately homogeneous ways. The party and its members were mostly progressive or centre–left. The FG therefore scored medium on this dimension (0.5 points).

The degree of organizational entrenchment is therefore low, with a total value of 1, comparable to cases studied by Kitschelt (1994: 224), such as the French Socialist Party (1), the Dutch Labour Party (0.5) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (1.5). Leadership autonomy, the second dimension, is measured as follows.

Central Control of Recruitment for National Electoral Office. When this process is centralized, it allows the leadership to nominate non-party members for important positions, thus increasing its autonomy from the party at large. The FG leadership's autonomy was very high in this sense, since – as previously discussed – the formal rules of candidate selection were usually put to one side.

Control of the Party Conventions. An autonomous commanding elite may attempt to hold few conventions, and to arrange them just before elections in order to minimize criticism or to control the agenda. Again, the FG leader's autonomy was undoubtedly high in these ways. This was especially clear in the 1999 party Congress, when the leadership succeeded in approving the alliance with UCR despite strong resistance from within the party rank-and-file.

Domination of the Parliamentary Leadership Over the Party's Executive. The leadership is stronger and more autonomous when occupying both key spaces of public power and intra-party positions. The FG presented a truly autonomous leadership in this respect, and again scores highly.

Party Autonomy from the Labour Unions. The FG had full autonomy from unions, as previously discussed.

In sum, the FG's leadership was fully autonomous, obtaining a top score on all four indicators, notably higher than in any of Kitschelt's nine case studies (1994). It is therefore possible to conclude that the organizational structure of the FG was under-institutionalized, presenting a low degree of formal routinization, as defined by Levitsky (2003: 18–19). The party combined shallow organizational roots with the highest level of autonomy in an almost perfect example of what Kitschelt (1994: 225) calls 'cadre parties or centralized clubs'. In contrast to the PJ and other 'mass populist parties' (Levitsky, 2003: 23), however, this low degree of formal institutionalization was accompanied by very weak social linkages.

Álvarez seemed unconcerned about the constraints of political structures (Abal Medina, 2000: 339), and consequently his party was forced to grow rapidly, or at least to die trying. Had the FG taken a more traditional path,

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such a fast development would have been infeasible. However, negative aspects of that growth pattern became endemic to the FG.

The 'open-minded style' of leadership produced an under-institutionalized organization that made a virtue of its shortcomings. A more institutionalized structure would not have followed its leader into risky endeavours. Furthermore, forced growth hindered institutionalization: while taking on further challenges, the party left aside the development of its internal organization – what FG leader Carlos Auyero candidly called 'the trouble with building a ship while sailing on it'.

Quick growth made organizational identities shift constantly because of the many umbrella groups (FREDEJUSO, FG, FREPASO, *Alianza*) that coexisted. Deciding the candidacies was a troublesome process: someone nominated within the FG would have to be validated by the rest of the FREPASO parties, and later discussed with the UCR. Policy-making went down the same path, whether originated by FG, FREPASO or *Alianza*. This left the role of FG's organic bodies with no clear boundaries, giving leadership more freedom to manoeuvre.

Party leaders made up their political discourse as they went along, showing a frequent tendency towards *qualunquismo*. This term (Abal Medina and Castiglioni, 1999: 319–21) is used not to denote an ideological standpoint but, rather, a set of ideas that pandered to the opinions of the ordinary people, *dell'uomo qualunque*. Faced with the difficult task of appealing to the 1990s' voters, Álvarez and his followers found the discourse of traditional left-wing Peronists constraining; consequently, they used *qualunquismo* profusely. This was most evident in their discourse on corruption. Accusations of corruption in Menem's administration proved to be a successful electoral tool – until the FG formed an alliance with the UCR. But FG made the issue into a panacea, insisting that by merely ending corruption the population's quality of life would improve. Once in office, when faced with concrete problems, they discovered their gross miscalculation. Exaggerated promises of high standards of propriety would make FG very vulnerable when dealing with grey areas of public administration.

The use, and frequently abuse, of *qualunquismo* was detrimental to the creation of the FG's own core discourse. FG's criticism of Argentine politics suggested the promise of a *new politics*, a new approach that would 'put an end in the economy to the evil relationship between the State and major economic groups, and in politics, abandon the patronage characteristic of the two main Argentine parties', as several party documents affirmed (see Abal Medina, 2000: 373–7). This element is the only remaining stronghold of the party's discourse. Denunciation of 'traditional' political practices had been a staple of Álvarez and the MRP group (his internal faction within PJ) since 1987. However, the new way of doing politics was never efficiently implemented and could not avoid the pitfalls of resorting to *qualunquismo*.

The absence of a solid discourse is comparable to its chronic identity problems, brought about largely by the party's diversity. The diversity of an

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Table 4. Perceived ideological locations of FG

	You define yourself as:	*You define FG as:*
Centre–left	23.0%	33.3%
New left	10.3%	10.3%
Progressive	31.0%	49.4%
Left	9.2%	0%
Left Peronist	23.0%	4.6%
Other	3.3%	2.2%

Source: As for Table 1

organization resulting from dozens of splits from different parties created a structure made up of members from disparate political and ideological identities, for which FG failed to synthesize a coherent new position. In the end, the concept of *front* was its only substance: it acknowledged the members, ranging from left-wing Peronism to diverse ideological currents of Marxism, caused a constant erosion of strength and cohesion. While the party underwent a de-constructive phase, this did not lead to the construction of a new and positive identity.

Joining the UCR in the *Alianza* electoral coalition in 1997 further weakened the FG's identity. Formerly a rival, Radicalism represented the traditional rival, which had served to generate an identity for the FG. 'The other' defined an 'us' that partially came from a bland position of simply confronting 'the old' and generating an identity based on novelty ('a new way of doing politics', 'a new popular alternative', etc.).

Relatedly, the FG's identity was partly founded on its denunciation of political corruption. Initially, the party and its leadership exploited (perhaps excessively) the chance to make accusations of corrupt political practices and patronage against Peronists and Radicals. This forged an identity for the FG as 'ethical', as opposed to its 'corrupt' opponents. However, problems arose. The very alliance with the UCR forced the FG to moderate its criticisms in this regard, and to tolerate certain patronage practices typical of Radicalism. Additionally, once in office, the FG could no longer use this strategy to its advantage, having no 'corrupt Menemist government' to denounce. Instead, the FG had to constantly prove that its deeds corresponded with its words.

Finally, for all their problems, the two elements of identity, novelty and anti-corruption, made sense as long as the FG was in opposition. Once the party became part of the government, however, its strategy could no longer be based on denunciation, having thus to develop a positive approach and to seek to transform its proposals into public policies. But the *Alianza* administration became a disorderly coalition of those who followed the traditional ways of Argentine politics, and others who tried to act in accordance with the party's new ideals. However, the media exposure of the former overshadowed the latter, leaving the enduring impression of a failed project.

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The *Frente Grande*'s Growth

The strategy of forced growth that Álvarez and his group imposed on FG's development achieved impressive results. In 1991, the different groups that would later form the party had only one elected official in the whole country – a member of Buenos Aires City Council. Two years later, at the first elections faced by the new party, the FG obtained three national deputies and four councillors. In contrast to these modest beginnings, by the year 2000 the FG boasted the Vice-President, the mayor of Buenos Aires, Mendoza's deputy governor, one senator, 30 national deputies, 16 other city mayors, 71 provincial legislators and nearly 200 councillors.

Table 1 gives the party's electoral progress based on its ability to enjoy the benefits stemming from three different circumstances: (a) the identity crisis of Peronism, (b) its opposition to the 1994 UCR-PJ constitutional reform agreement, and (c) the voters' increasing dissatisfaction about patronage and political corruption. Each of these factors played a different but equally important role in the FG's growth. Thus, a crisis of ideology and identity within Peronism, brought about by policies implemented by President Menem, broke down ties of party loyalty within sectors of the PJ. Disaffected PJ leaders and activists went to form the FG. Furthermore, Menem's policies continued to sway PJ leaders and militants to migrate to the FG.

The negotiation between Menem and Alfonsín to reform the constitution, known as the Olivos Pact,[8] gave the fledgling FG an opportunity to make its greatest advance at the polls and place itself in the public eye as the 'genuine' opposition to Menemism. In the race for the constitutional reform assembly of 1994, the FG would abandon the domain of expressive and minority politics to become the expression of a new political alternative.

Widespread disillusionment with the UCR over the Olivos Pact left a void in party politics that the FG would come to occupy, the largest slot the left had ever occupied in Argentina. Electoral analysis (Torre, 2003) clearly indicates that FG's electoral base came from non-Peronist sectors, mostly UCR

Table 5. Electoral results of the FG (1991–99)

	Election		
	Votes	*Percentage*	*Label*
Legislative 1991	229,190	1.4	FREDEJUSO or others
Legislative 1993	603,221	3.5	FG
Constituent 1994	2,082,622	13.2	FG
Presidential 1995	4,934,814	28.4	FREPASO
Legislative 1997	6,168,175	36.3	*Alianza**
Legislative 1999	8,091,473	41.1	*Alianza*
Presidential 1999	9,167,404	48.4	*Alianza*

*Although in some districts FREPASO campaigned separately.
Source: Author's own data, plus electoral data provided by Ministerio del Interior.

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or left-wing voters. Socio-demographic indicators of districts where the FG was most successful at the polls show that FG voters were mostly middle-class urbanites. Additionally, the party performed best in districts where traditionally the PJ had been weak and the UCR strong, such as Buenos Aires City.

In 1994–95 the prevailing view was that the FG was nothing but a 'flash party', offering citizens a vehicle for punishing the UCR. However, Álvarez and his group seized the opportunity and generated their own identity, based on denunciation of patronage in general and of corruption in Menem's administration in particular. In spite of overusing *qualunquismo*, their strategy found acceptance among various social sectors that, in the context of a stable economy and certain economic growth, had developed concerns about post-materialist issues: an ethical public administration, a government based on democratic and republican principles and a society offering equality in civil rights.

The *Frente Grande*'s Crisis

The party's greatest achievement was to express the right message at the right time, though not without paying a price for that success. It was able to leave aside the traditional criticism of social inequalities and mistaken economic priorities typical of the classic left, and to broach the views shared by the 'new left' (Kitschelt, 1994: 32). The FG's political discourse operated within the political sphere in the purest sense: striving to end corrupt practices that detracted from the credibility of politics as a trustworthy arena to change reality for the better – 'FG's best discourse goes beyond politics: it is not about action, but rather about how to act' (Sarlo, 1998: 21). This critique was deeply democratic and progressive, and was focused on improving and transforming politics. By taking advantage of the crisis affecting the main political parties and by voicing people's dissatisfaction with politics, the FG became increasingly successful in public opinion surveys and at the polls.

Growth was also made possible by the media. Without such coverage, it would be nearly impossible to explain how such a weakly organized force could become so quickly installed in the national political arena. The media generated a novel political scenario into which FG quickly settled. Radicals and Peronists complained that the media explicitly supported Álvarez's party, but that appears to be a wild exaggeration. In reality, FG leaders understood the importance of media coverage and knew how to get it, and generated initiatives that addressed the issues of the moment, those highly ranked on the media's agenda. Though neophytes and without the benefit of professional media management, Álvarez and the FG moved as quickly as Menemism did. In this respect, Álvarez was a media phenomenon, as was Menem: both charmed the media with their irreverence towards the traditional rituals of politics, their easiness of manner and their speed.

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Álvarez's speed in making decisions and in creating initiatives is key to understanding how the FG took advantage of political opportunities. Speed helped to force its growth, but also hindered its institutionalization. Fernández Meijide pointed out that Álvarez 'is impulsive, he pushes ahead, never stopping to see what was built. He is used to the politics of *fait accompli*: moving first and explaining later' (Pazos and Camps, 1995: 263).

The FG developed as an organization designed to match its leader: chaotic, disorderly, fast and charming. Its leaders were open-minded and charismatic; its background was left-wing Peronist; its followers were urban, middle-class, 'progressive' citizens. All this added up to an eclectic, centrist-oriented political discourse and created this peculiar party, which was, perhaps, a post-materialist version of the Latin American left (Plumb, 1998: 103).

A party's characteristics are never self-explanatory or isolated elements, but rather come together to create a specific form of political action. The FG's organization was flexible due to its weak internal institutionalization, which gave Álvarez the autonomy to generate novel political initiatives. Because of the fact that the FG's political ideology was eclectic, these initiatives did not need to follow any specific tradition. Álvarez's leadership gave freedom to the party's mid-level leaders and encouraged an organization with open borders where individuals and groups were free to come and go (Abal Medina, 2000: 326). When the party took on governing responsibilities, however, all these qualities that had been useful in building power while in opposition became completely dysfunctional, especially given the complex social and economic context. In addition to the difficulties any newborn party faces in directing the executive, they were forced to do so in extremely harsh times.

Álvarez's leadership style shaped the allocation of government portfolios: responsibilities were left to those with specific interests and not decided by the party's leadership in a strategic way. Thus, Alberto Flamarique, who had been operating in the party leader's shadows, was named Labour Minister and launched his political career as an unconditional follower of President De la Rúa. Fernández Meijide, with no experience in the administration, ended up running the complex Ministry of Social Development, and a similar pattern emerged throughout lower levels of government. This unplanned and disorganized approach led Álvarez to recognize that it was impossible to apply party policy. The different factions that had acquired government posts acted autonomously, without any obligation to report back to the party.

When Álvarez resigned as Vice-President in October 2000, he could not – or would not – get factions sympathetic to him to follow suit. This left the party in the middle of the road – it was neither truly the opposition, nor the ruling party – and members decided their own course of action based on personal preferences. From the time he resigned as Vice-President until the moment he quit as FG president in May 2001, Álvarez continued to hold frequent meetings with the rest of the party leadership, but never established a clear strategy to follow. An intra-party group led by deputies Darío

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Alessandro and Rodolfo Rodil developed and was supported by those who believed the party should remain committed to the De la Rúa's administration. They claimed that it was their political responsibility to support the government, even though the latter had drifted from the Alliance's original purpose. Álvarez felt compelled to resign and abandon politics altogether because of the strength of this group, and perhaps, too, due to the lack of viable alternatives (Álvarez and Morales Solá, 2002: 55).

Evidently, a poorly institutionalized organization could not overcome the estrangement of its leader. Once again, what had previously been a source of strength became a severely negative factor. Party factions distanced themselves more and more, each one concentrating individually on specific areas of action. National deputies engaged in a long and agonizing process of internal debate, and many abandoned the FREPASO bloc to join other parliamentary options, such as those who followed José Vitar, and joined Carrió's bloc (ARI).

Party members who either stayed or left the De la Rúa administration acted independently. In October 2001, after the *Alianza* lost the parliamentary election, the Minister of Social Development, Juan Pablo Cafiero, and other officials decided to leave the administration, while many others continued until its collapse in December 2001. The group led by Ibarra that was governing Buenos Aires City acted autonomously and managed to stay away from FG's national issues.

As a reflection of the party's crisis, at the 2001 parliamentary elections the FG ran on joint tickets with the UCR in some districts, while at the same time it was strongly critical of the national government. In other districts, accompanied by Radicals, it openly campaigned as part of the opposition. In the remaining districts, the party joined the newly formed ARI, the most radical opposition alternative.

By December 2001, as the national government was heading towards its dramatic collapse, the party was clearly divided into three groups: two led by irreconcilable parliamentary factions, and a third, in the middle, with its base in Buenos Aires City. A few days before the final collapse of the De la Rúa administration, an attempt to hold a national party convention failed because of the lack of a necessary quorum. Its purpose was to declare the FG's opposition to the government and to withdraw from the alliance with the UCR. The end of the *Alianza* government did not put a stop to the party's internal power struggle. In fact, it made it worse, since the Alessandro-Rodil or, as it was known, *oficialista* group, joined the parliamentary coalition supporting Eduardo Duhalde's interim government.

In March 2002, a FG convention was finally held, with the absence of Vitar's close deputies who had resolved to join the ARI party that same day. After frantic negotiations, Ibarra's faction obtained the necessary quorum to pass a resolution opposing Duhalde's administration. Refusing to participate, the *oficialista* sector claimed the convention was fraudulent and filled a petition in court to declare it null and void.

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The party was formally led by the Ibarra faction and placed itself somewhere between Duhalde's administration and Carrió's ARI party. Political indecisiveness persisted throughout 2002 and lasted until February 2003, when the FG executive voted to give freedom of action to its party members regarding the April presidential election, in which FG neither presented nor supported any candidate. That election was won by peronist Néstor Kirchner, representing the PJ faction and gaining considerable electoral support received from FG members. As a result, various FG members occupied significant posts in Kirchner's cabinet, including the Foreign Affairs and Defence ministries. Moreover, in September 2003 Ibarra was re-elected to the Buenos Aires City Government, mainly due to Kirchner and Carrió's support. In late 2005, Álvarez himself was appointed to an important international post as Chairman of the Commission of Permanent Representatives of MERCOSUR, proposed by the Argentine government. Currently, even if the party has regained a formal legality and many ex-members hold positions in the administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Ibarra's impeachment[9] and the party's irrelevance in the electoral arena have turned it into a small satellite organization of PJ.

Conclusions

The type of leadership and the lack of institutionalization and solid discourse were two key factors behind the FG crisis. However, a third and very significant cause was its strategy of forced growth. In his attempt to build the party, Álvarez overlooked its limitations and pushed it beyond its possibilities. This strategy was extremely successful, considering that a small political group from Buenos Aires City came to lead in the polls and caused, for the first time in Argentina's history, the defeat of a Peronist administration[10] – all in less than seven years.

Ironically, its success was also the key to its downfall. As this article shows, the reasons for this downfall lay mainly in its internal organization. FG was unable to govern the nation, or to be a strong counterpart of the UCR – a solidly institutionalized century-old party. Both parties were equal at the polls because the FG had strong backing from public opinion, but once in office this parity disappeared. The differences were evident when the cabinet was named: two ministers from FG and eight from UCR. This isolated the party and prevented it from accomplishing its goal of changing politics.

The party lacked the necessary material and institutional resources to make its voice heard within the state apparatus. That was illustrated by Álvarez's failed attempts to prevent obscure deals in the Senate, when the latter passed a labour reform law in 2000. This eventually led to Álvarez's resignation as Argentina's vice-president and later as FG President.

Alianza was both the zenith and the nadir of FG, achieving more in seven years than some long-standing Latin American centre–left parties, such as

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the Mexican *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*, but it entered a severe crisis just as quickly as it emerged.

ARI's leader, Elisa Carrió, ran for President at the 2007 elections. She finished in a strong second place, and is currently the most important figure within the opposition. ARI is for the most part composed of former FG members and factions, and it resembles, in organization and discourse, the FG of the 1990s. However, this new political group has inherited more flaws than virtues from its predecessor. With its charismatic, personal, even mystical breed of leadership, and a disregard for institutional spaces, ARI does not strive to be innovative nor to dispense with factionalism – the main characteristics that helped FG grow. Laying the groundwork to guarantee ARI's continuity as a political force could prove to be much more difficult.[11]

Notes

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1 Suffrage has been truly universal only since 1952, when women were finally enfranchised.
2 Most of them belonged to an internal PJ faction called *Movimiento Renovador Peronista* (MRP). The latter had left the party in 1990 as a symbolic protest against the presidential amnesty (*indulto*) conceded by Carlos Menem to those responsible for the state terrorism affecting Argentina between 1976 and 1983.
3 At the time Alvarez left office, the economic situation was still under control and would later have the chance to improve, as the IMF provided substantial benefits in what was called the *blindaje financiero* first, and the *megacanje* soon after.
4 The research for this article is based on a series of interviews, surveys and analysis of party documents, as reported in Abal Medina 2000: 373–7. It includes: (1) personal interviews with leading party figures such as Darío Alessandro, Carlos Álvarez, José Octavio Bordón, Luis Brunati, Fernando Melillo, Irma Parentella, Sergio Rossi, Fernando Solanas, Luis Vespoli, among others; (2) 134 party documents from MRP, Modejuso, FREDEJUSO, Frente del Sur, Frente Grande, FREPASO and Alianza (1987–2003); (3) surveys carried out by the author at the Congreso Nacional del Partido Frente Grande, Mar del Plata, 3 July 1999 (154 out of the 234 members present) and Congreso Distrital del Partido Frente Grande de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 18 December 1999 (198 out of the 275 members present). In addition, several newspapers were reviewed, including: Clarín, Nación, Página 12, Sur, La Razón, La Voz del Interior, La Capital, Unidos, Noticias, Somos, Gente, La Ciudad Futura, Punto de Vista, La Vanguardia. It should also be said that the author has made use of his experience as Director of the Frente Grande's School of Political Formation in Buenos Aires City.
5 The decision over the most prominent candidacies was taken without resorting to the party primary formal procedures, either by setting aside these rules or by 'agreeing' to unity tickets.

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6 In Argentina, no fees are required to become a member of a party. Thus, PJ and UCR have enrolled large segments of the electorate, generally as a result of internal competition between different factions. Currently, 14 percent of the electorate are members of PJ and 10 percent of UCR, and in certain districts (such as Formosa) these numbers exceed 50 percent in the case of PJ. (Official data by the Dirección Nacional Electoral.)

7 The party also had ties to sectors of the teacher's association (CTERA), which maintained their linkage to FG for a longer period than ATE. Only after the party took office were these ties broken.

8 Menem could not be re-elected in 1995 because, at that time, the Constitution banned the immediate re-election of the President. In order for re-election to take place, Menem and the UCR leader Raúl Alfonsín agreed to promote a constitutional reform. That agreement led to protests and social unrest (Abal Medina and Castiglioni, 1999).

9 After a fire in a night club that resulted in almost 200 deaths, Ibarra was impeached by the Buenos Aires City Legislature, where he had very little partisan support.

10 On the previous occasions when Peronist administrations were removed from power (1955, 1976), this had happened through military coups.

11 A few months before the 2007 elections, Carrió quit her position as party leader to have 'more freedom'. Her subsequent actions (including the creation of a new movement, *Coalición Cívica*, which contains ARI as just one of its components) were seen by many as a right-wing turn, and after the elections half of ARI's national deputies left the party's legislative bloc.

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