

The Young in the Kirchnerist Age (Argentina. 2007-2015): Political Payoff or Transformation Tool?

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Abstract

The objective of this text (which also involves a working hypothesis) is to contribute elements intended to analyze social policies as political and institutional resources which can add to the building of a presidential leadership. Taking this as a starting point, social policies designed for the young—which were especially fostered and financed during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s second term of office—are analyzed as elements that may have helped to build a political leadership. However, it is also appropriate to consider the presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) in order to gain a better understanding of such a construction, since this is the point where the political-institutional scaffolding that propelled that leadership lies.

With regard to social interventions of the young, different studies conducted across Argentina have highlighted the increase of social participation and citizenship building. Those studies provide some hints in relation to the question raised when considering such interventions as political and institutional resources: are the young a political payoff or a transformation tool?

Keywords

the young, Kirchnerism, politics, social policies

1. Introduction

In this work, we deem appropriate to introduce a hypothesis that we have developed to advance in other areas of research. This may lead us to establish certain relations with the theory of presidential populisms and leaderships, as those aspects have been a part of Argentina’s political history in the last twelve years.

This hypothesis involves considering the social policies designed for the young—which were especially fostered and financed during Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s second term of office—as political and institutional resources which can contribute elements to consolidate or maintain a political leadership.

A cleavage in the contemporary history of the young in Argentina was Néstor Kirchner's death, the former president. It was from this moment that the social-generational collective was reborn in the political arena with a previously unseen presence. For this reason, we have analyzed Fernández's presidential period comprised between 2007 and 2015. However, we consider it is adequate to refer to Néstor Kirchner's mandate, since this was the political and institutional scaffolding which allowed for the transition from a strong leadership to another dominant type, due to the accumulation of political and institutional resources over a prolonged period.

Various investigations have shown an increase in youth's participation in social actions—in the context of state interventions. This operates as an indicator of a new relationship between youth and the State (as compared to the situation in the 1990s). This situation accounts for a renewed enchantment with the public state sphere, and with this, the traditional forms of political participation. It is at this point where our main question arises: Has youth transformed into a political payoff, or into a tool of political transformation?

2. What Do We Mean When We Refer to Populism

This word is used in the context of social sciences as a polysemous expression with a remarkable negative connotation. As Biglieri and Perelló (2007) note:

“... it is not surprising that the term is reproduced by the media when it comes to judging negatively a particular government, political party or politician; it is not surprising, either, that this is also the case in the political arena: politicians use the word “populism” as an attack weapon to discredit a particular opponent; nor is it less astounding that scholars engage in normative arguments” (p. 3).

Similarly, these authors introduce a review of the different theoretical currents that have analyzed different aspects of the populist phenomenon. The rebirth of populism studies has been approached from functionalist perspectives (Germani; Di Tella) to historic-descriptive ones (Murmis; Portantiero; Cavarozzi; O'Donnell), but the contributions made by Ernesto Laclau have undoubtedly been the core. Considering this, we believe it is appropriate to mention one of the elements incorporated to the research works in this area by this Argentine philosopher. As this author poses in his classical text, “La razón populista” (The Populist Mind, 2010), the construction of a people—in the sense of popular—is a fundamental dimension of any democratic system: *“The construction of a people is the sine qua non requirement of democratic functioning. Without a vacuum, there is neither people, nor populism, but there is no democracy either”* (p. 213).

Chantal Mouffe (2011) contributed numerous elements to understand democracy and its relation with the populist dimension. This Belgian political scientist proposed the concept of agonistic democracy. This type of democracy entails the radicalization of a system with the characteristics of democracy, which implies a hegemonic construction trying to outgrow an already existing one. In this construction, political mediations are proposed as a relationship between a “they” and a “we”. The heart of the matter

here—and the type of populism involved—is the group of people included in the “we”, and consequently, the ones that are excluded. At this point, it is necessary to incorporate some notions like left-wing, right-wing and center—with the laxity that ideology-charged categories allow. During an interview in 2015, Chantal Mouffe said:

“... today, the frontier between left and right does not mean much, since left-wing parties have moved towards the center, and the fundamental differences between left-center and right-center parties have vanished. I prefer to speak about rethinking the left, redefining the left. In a sense, the ‘left-wing populism’ category has this goal”.

Now: What is the content of “left-wing populism?” Beyond question, it refers to the movement that is formed by popular movements that try to outgrow the hegemony of neoliberalism through a democratic struggle (Mouffe, 2015). At this point—and going back to previously mentioned notions—it is necessary to note that it is not about the radical left which rejected democratic institutions as expressions of political liberalism, but a left that proposes a change within a consolidated regime.

In relation to this—in the context of the review of Argentine political history in the last decades—we can see how these populisms are analyzed objectively. Thus, we can place the Menemist government (1989-1999) within the category of “right-wing populisms” (Trocello, 2000), and Kirchnerist governments (2003-2015) can be labeled as left-wing populisms (Paramio, 2006; Biglieri & Perelló, 2007; Ollier, 2010, 2014; Andrenacci, 2010; Mouffe, 2015).

3. About Presidential Leaderships

The already mentioned leaderships have recently been objects of study in different areas of social sciences (and particularly in politics), since the texts that have been published in said contexts have tended to indicate the negative effects of the presidential system on the democratic regime, among which we can mention Linz’s classical work (1994). In that sense, studies like the one conducted by Shugart and Mainwaring (2002) provide elements to understand the stability of those presidential systems in South America. The main criticisms to those regimes are based on this aspect, since the contextual characteristics of said territories (which are a fertile soil for some purposes, but a difficult road for democracy) turn out to be more suitable for those regimes than for the consolidation of a parliamentary system. Consequently, the incorporation of these contextual characteristics lead to evaluate the relationship between the stability of the regime and the presidential system/parliamentary system pairing in a different way. Likewise, investigations like the one produced by Hochstetler (2008)—devoted to studying South American presidential systems during the democratic transition—highlight the main weaknesses of those regimes, which put them immediately at risk. Those weaknesses are reflected in four main elements: the adoption of neoliberal-like policies; the participation of the government in corruption cases; the existence of legislative minorities and social demonstrations, which can be accompanied by legislators. The last one is the most important.

4. The Characteristics of Cristina Fernández's Leadership

Although this section will be devoted to characterizing Fernández's leading role, it is necessary to start studying an earlier period, since the political and institutional scaffolding that acts as a basis for that leadership began with Néstor Kirchner, in 2003.

As Hochstetler (2008) notices, the adoption of neoliberal policies is one of the factors that risk the stability of presidential systems. And this is what happened during the period following Carlos Menem's terms of office, which was notable by the adoption of said policies. However, that process was a consequence of a larger one embracing a marked accumulation of capital at a worldwide level, which began in the 1970s (Bauman, 2014). This was undoubtedly an important precedent of the post-convertibility crisis (2001-2002), a period during which the movements against neoliberal measures were one of the main components of the social context at that time. The resulting social-political climate risked the presidential regime. The president—who had been chosen by the people—resigned, and there followed a brief period during which five temporary presidents were subsequently appointed. The last of them was Eduardo Duhalde, who decided to call an early election. The result of the election—after Carlos Menem retired from the balloting process—marked the beginning Néstor Kirchner's leadership (2003-2007).

The year 2003 opened a new period in the history of Argentine history, and it was characterized by the return of the political sphere. This return materialized in the invitation to build a new model of country: national and popular. The latter concept was taken from the first Peronist government, but with a special emphasis on the human rights advocacy to honor memory, truth and justice (Mucarsel, 2014).

The first years of Néstor Kirchner's term were not easy, since the social-political context (a product of crisis) was not the optimal social scenario. Similarly, the fact that he had become president with a very small amount of votes was not an auspicious one. The need for leadership was born at that time, and it was developed by building legitimacy. In order to understand this construction, we will consider the theoretical categories proposed by María Matilde Ollier, an Argentine political scientist who has exhaustively devoted to analyzing Kirchner's leadership. This researcher proposes three arguments organized around the following rules: i) the less institutional presidential democracies are, the more relevant the presidential leadership will be, and vice versa; ii) the possibility of adopting a particular style of leadership (weak or strong) lies in the political and institutional positioning (in terms of situation) of the president in low-intensity presidential democracies; iii) the constant variable is the low intensity, whereas the changing one is the presidential leadership. Considering this, three dimensions of analysis are built: the configuration of political parties; the sources of power beyond political parties, and the particular way in which the concept of pro-government political forces/opposition adopts the form president/opposition (Ollier, 2010).

What was the role of these dimensions in Néstor Kirchner's leadership? In relation to his party line at that time, he became the head of Peronism, since he was the President. The second dimension—which

involves the sources external to parties—developed in a favorable climate, since labor unions, governors (party-liners and others), human-rights and worker movements became his main allies. Finally, considering the third variable, that helps to define the political and institutional position of leaders in low-intensity democracies—Néstor Kirchner faced a fragmented opposition, a condition that the above mentioned factors helped to consolidate. All these elements:

“... favored the new Peronist leader, and this was also helped by an international economy which was beneficial for Argentina; this strengthened the President’s political and institutional position so much that he could appoint his wife as his successor” (Ollier, 2010, p. 22).

And that was the way in which Cristina Fernández’s leadership began. Her style very similar to the one of the former president, but it was also different in some aspects. Likewise, the change of the international economic context—which Ollier considers an external factor, and an important variable for the analysis of the presidential leadership—affected this period that extended from 2007 through 2011. At the beginning of her mandate, Fernández had to face the consequences of the world crisis of Capitalism, which originated in one of the most representative countries of such system: the United States of America. The crisis was so huge that questioned the continuation of the model. Although the possible changes might continue in the same direction—since, as El ás (2010) states, the capital is still a hegemonic force, and due to the structural complicity of the State (O’Donnell, 1978), violence could be used to defend Capitalism if it was deemed necessary. However, in our country—and in some other ones of the region, the impact of that crisis was softer due to the low level of integration with the United States. But in most parts of the continent, the GNP fell, and unemployment increased (El ás, 2010). In face of those changes, which were beneficial to Argentina and developed during Néstor Kirchner’s presidency, the leadership of Cristina Fernández found a shelter for numerous measures to redistribute wealth and income. And it is at this point when the political and institutional analysis becomes appropriate again, since those measures managed to consolidate the strength of the Kirchnerist leadership from 2003 through 2007—which then extended to a more dominant one through 2011 without any problems. This was possible due to the concentration of political resources built by Cristina Fernández after Néstor Kirchner’s death, in the period between 2011 and 2015. Those aspects materialized in a significant number of votes (a product of the coalition among several political parties)—that gave rise to Fernández’s positive image; the continued accumulation of party-line and legislative resources; the support of social, human-rights and worker movements, and the evident fragmentation of the opposition. All of these elements made the political and institutional environment a suitable arena for the construction of Fernández’s presidential leadership (Ollier, 2014).

5. The Young and Their Reunion with the State

Using the expression “the young” implies a theoretical position in relation to this topic. Being part of a generation is not only about sharing the same biological age, but it is also about experiencing common socialization processes (Margulis & Urresti, 1996; Reguillo, 2000; Chaves & Faur, 2006) and constructing both subjectivity and identity (Bonvillani et al., 2008; Castro, 2012; Vommaro, 2014). Similarly, the use of this term suggests the acknowledgment and diversity of the material and symbolic conditions within which the activities of the members of this social-generational group are conducted (Braslavsky, 1986; Chaves & Faur, 2006; Margulis, 2015; Vommaro, 2015).

The main working hypothesis—just as it was previously stated—is to consider social policies (in terms of political and institutional resources) as elements that can contribute to the construction of a presidential leadership. Taking this a starting point, we see social interventions of the young—a group that showed a strong support to the national and popular project—as an effective tool that helped to consolidate Cristina Fernández’s leadership.

The moment when the young showed a prominent presence after the political scenario of the 1990s was the death of Néstor Kirchner. As Florencia Saintout (2012) points out:

“On October 27th 2010, the young reappeared in the political arena for all those who had not noticed them: the conservatives who have celebrated all ends beforehand, and the advocates of a social science of surface epistemology, who were not devoted to notice the constant and intense hustle and bustle of the depths of society” (p. 2).

The author continues to state:

“During the following weeks, the media would not stop to highlight—in a surprised mode—the presence of young militants in the political agenda. A few questions arise: where did they come from? Where were they” (p. 4)?

In this sense, the social-generational collective reunited with the State, and what had the State prepared for them? Undoubtedly, the initiatives of the State to redistribute wealth and income during that period were a key element. The data collected by the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2013 revealed that social programs intended for the young increased to 88, and most of them focused on participatory policies of social inclusion and observance of rights. Data collected by Vázquez (2015) in the context of research projects conducted at the Gino Germani Institute (Buenos Aires University) showed a total of 156 social initiatives. Some of those measure were not intended for the young, but they also reached this group.

Those interventions (social inclusion, access to rights, or participatory measures) managed to reconstruct the bond with the State, which had been destroyed as a consequence of the past neoliberal decade. During that period the young had been erased from the political scenario. The research works dealing with social participation and citizenship building—in the context of the previous social

policies—can guide our main question: are the young a political payoff or a transformation tool?

During the 1990s, some studies conducted on this topic noted a poor participation of the young (Deutsche Bank, 1993; Margulis, 1994; Tenti Fanfani, 1998). However, said studies explored participation in the context of classical party-line schemes. Once those niches were identified, later works focused on other modes of participation that were built in the context of politicized interventions. These actions were not typical of politics, but rather a characteristic of artistic, educational or social solidarity environments (Vázquez & Vommaro, 2008; Kropff & Núñez, 2009; Borobia, Kropff, & Núñez, 2013).

Beyond any doubt, the year 2010 marked a cleavage in the political history of the young in Argentina, since the visibilization achieved in that year—and the following ones—put them in a key place. We can see: “... *the rise of organizations whose name or own perception is related to the young; organizations that are created as a result of a fluent dialog with the State, and find a fertile soil for action and development of projects in the public policies of some Latin American governments (which call themselves progressive or popular)*” (Vommaro, 2015, p. 23). Later studies confirmed this trend of youth involvement in politics, and with this, the return of the social-generational collective to traditional participation spaces. Those studies refer to the reconfiguration of the relationship among the young and the State, which is expressed through a renewed enchantment with the public and state spheres (Kropff & Núñez, 2012; Saintout, 2012; Vázquez, 2012, 2013; Vázquez & Vommaro, 2012; Vommaro, 2015).

At this point, it is important to mention the role of social inclusion and access-to-rights policies, since the implementation of those actions—and the resources devoted to it increased significantly (Núñez, Vázquez, & Vommaro, 2015). From this moment on, another significant political-institutional resource was formed. This allowed for the continuation of the construction of a strong bond with Cristina Fernández’s leadership. Apart from this—just as Llobet (2013) proposes—said actions especially impacted on the processes of subjectivation and identity construction, which influenced fields like political identity and citizenship building.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of Cristina Fernández’s presidential leadership (2007-2015) shows that the way in which she exercised power was a dominant one (in terms of accumulation of political and institutional resources), which was favored by the context of a low-intensity democracy, with a marked tendency to delegate duties. The fact that her term was preceded by Néstor Kirchner’s presidency is remarkable, since that period served as political and institutional support. Here, it is necessary to note—even in the context of the hypotheses considered by Ollier (2010-2014)—that this type of leaderships put us in front of a complex dichotomy: presidential stability and presidential instability. The leaderships like the ones of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández have the characteristics of those leaderships that can

guarantee more stability for presidential democracies. We can refer to similar cases in South America, like the ones in Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela.

Likewise, it is necessary to consider the role of the social movements which were an additional party-line resource that benefited Kirchnerist leaderships. During the first period (2003-2007), many of them—mainly human rights and worker ones—showed their support to the national and popular movement, and this continued over the period 2007-2015. However, at that moment, and also later on, there were social protests of different sectors: the agricultural sector, due to tax deduction issues; middle-class and wealthy sectors, due to limitations in the purchase of foreign currency; and a more heterogeneous group of the society, due to insecurity cases. These protests did not manage to achieve an effective mediation with the presidential leader because they lacked a mediator, and also because the opposition was fragmented (De Piero & Gradin, 2015). This helped Cristina Fernández to continue with the accumulation of political and institutional resources.

From a different perspective, we notice that many of the features of Cristina Fernández's leadership are characteristic of the postulates made by Laclau and Mouffe as a radicalization of left-wing populism and democracy. In relation to Kirchnerism, Chantal Mouffe (2015) says: “... *they showed that the State can help, that it is not an enemy, that the State can be very useful in radicalizing democracy ... it is about an immanent struggle within institutions in order to transform them and recalibrate the relationship between democracy and liberalism. This is the identity of political experiences in South America*”.

Regarding our working hypothesis, we have analyzed the relationship between Cristina Fernández's leadership (2007-2015) and the young, and the social policies adopted over that period as political and institutional resources than can enrich this construction. However, we have observed that few precedents have been developed to study it in more detail. In this sense, we have considered it proper to present the problem and contribute some elements of analysis, although we are aware of the fact that no solutions are stated. Undoubtedly, the young have felt questioned by this leadership that resorted to State's wealth and income distribution-oriented actions—among others—as a tool. This increased the social participation of the young, and helped in the construction of citizenship, just as previously cited studies have shown. Considering the characteristics of Fernández as a leader, it is necessary to highlight the fact that populist governments emphasize the participatory dimension through a strong presence of the State. Consequently, the youth phenomenon might be an expression of this type of leadership (Biglieri & Perello, 2007).

Without any doubt, the question of the juvenile participation as a political payoff or a transformation tool—as it was previously presented—is not a cold case. It is possible to consider that this phenomenon may have a hint of both aspects—although an empirical development of the hypothesis is mandatory in future works. There is even a previous work on the juvenile mind built from the participation of the young in the management of social policies. This precedent shows that there is a tension between the

trends mentioned above, which is characteristic of the construction of youth identity (Vázquez, 2015). This reveals that the issue is much more complex, since it involves presidential leadership and the young themselves.

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