

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Democrats' Mistakes and the Birth of Authoritarian Rule: Ramón S. Castillo and the Fall of Conservative Democracy in Argentina

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Abstract

On 4 June 1943, a military coup crushed Argentina's democracy, marking the end of the oligarchic era and 'planting the seeds' of Peronism. This case sheds light on how rulers' mistakes can operate as a key independent variable in producing regime changes. We argue that the former conservative president, Ramón S. Castillo, provoked an otherwise avoidable democratic breakdown. Specifically, Castillo's misguided relationships with regime insiders and outsiders unintentionally eroded political stability and triggered the fall of democracy. Until now, agent-based scholarship has fallen short in tracing incumbents' mistakes and linking them to regime-change processes. We test the argument by conducting a within-case analysis of Argentina's democratic fall in the early 1940s, scrutinising the president's errors at five critical events. We conclude that critical-event analysis can help disentangle the role of leaders' mistakes in other episodes of regime change.

Keywords: presidential mistakes; regime change; within-case analysis; critical events; Argentina

Introduction

On 4 June 1943, the armed forces staged a military coup in Argentina. This democratic breakdown marked a key moment in the country's history for two reasons. First, the coup brought an end to the 'Infamous Decade' (1930–43), a period characterised by oligarchic domination,¹ corruption scandals, and clientelism.² This conservative democracy³ was similar to the political regimes in Chile, Peru and Colombia

¹David Collier and Fernando H. Cardoso, *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

²Alberto Ciria, *Partidos y poder en la Argentina moderna (1930–1946)* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1964); Mark Falcoff and Ronald Dolkart (eds.), *Prologue to Perón: Argentina in Depression and War, 1930–1943* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975); Tulio Halperin Donghi, *La República imposible (1930–1945)* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2004).

³Following Levitsky's and Collier's conceptualisation criteria, we added the adjective 'conservative' to recognise Argentina's 1930s political regime as a diminished subtype of democracy. David Collier and

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around the same timeframe.⁴ Second, the military's overthrow of Ramón S. Castillo – the last president of Argentina's oligarchic era – resulted in Juan Domingo Perón's rise to power. Within the new military government, Perón built a political coalition that launched him into the presidency in 1946, changing Argentina's political trajectory forever.⁵ Similar political developments occurred in Bolivia (1943) and Peru (1948), where the military forcefully removed right-wing coalitions from power and laid the groundwork for the emergence of populist movements.⁶

What role does human agency – particularly presidents' *mistakes* – play in producing regime change? Specifically, how did Castillo's actions affect the 1943 Argentine democratic breakdown? Despite the vast academic scholarship on transitions to and from democracy,⁷ little progress has been made to systematically trace how presidents' behaviour, specifically their mistakes, explains regime change. This article aims to contribute to the 'historical turn' in democratisation studies by showing how a new variable, incumbents' failures, can trigger a democratic breakdown in a substantially relevant case.⁸

Theoretically, our article offers a *political agency* approach to studying regime change.⁹ While agent-based scholarship typically focuses on actors' deliberate choices during regime transitions,¹⁰ we concentrate instead on leaders' mistakes.

Steven Levitsky, 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics*, 49: 3 (1997), pp. 430–51. Drawing insights from Boix and Stokes (2003) and Boix, Miller and Rosato (2013), the Argentine 1930s regime was democratic because the head of government (the president) and the Congress were popularly elected, and the entire male population could vote. See Carles Boix and Susan Stokes, 'Endogenous Democratization', *World Politics*, 55: 4 (2003), pp. 517–49; and Carles Boix, Michael Miller and Sebastian Rosato, 'A Complete Data Set of Political Regimes, 1800–2007', *Comparative Political Studies*, 46: 12 (2013), pp. 1523–54.

⁴Thomas Skidmore, Peter Smith and James Green, *Modern Latin America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵Juan Carlos Portantiero, 'Transformación social y crisis de la política', *La Ciudad Futura: Revista de Cultura Socialista*, 4 (March 1987), pp. 14–5; Juan Carlos Torre, 'Interpretando (una vez más) los orígenes del peronismo', *Desarrollo Económico*, 28: 112 (1989), pp. 525–48; Miranda Lida and Ignacio A. López, *Un golpe decisivo: La dictadura de 1943 y el lugar de Juan Domingo Perón* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2023).

⁶Skidmore *et al.*, *Modern Latin America*, pp. 376–402.

⁷Seymour M. Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *American Political Science Review*, 53: 1 (1959), pp. 69–110; Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966); Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); Barbara Geddes, 'What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2: 1 (1999), pp. 115–44; Barry Ames and Ignacio Mamone, 'Agency and Structure in Latin American Regime Change', *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 13: 1 (2021), pp. 5–39.

⁸Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Ziblatt, 'The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond', *Comparative Political Studies*, 43: 8–9 (2010), pp. 931–68. This research agenda emphasises the uses of history to explain political transitions; however, it has so far concentrated on Europe and institutional factors.

⁹James Mahoney and Richard Snyder, 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34: 2 (1999), pp. 3–32.

¹⁰Dankwart Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model', *Comparative Politics*, 2: 3 (1970), pp. 337–63; Guillermo O'Donnell and Peter Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule:*

We therefore dialogue with studies that remark on agents' inaccurate assumptions,¹¹ cognitive biases,¹² and failed political strategies¹³ as relevant aspects of regime change. By examining leaders' mistakes through the methodological lenses of critical events,¹⁴ we advance a novel way to study regime-change processes at the micro level.

This article emphasises incumbents' erratic relationships with regime insiders and outsiders as key for destabilising the status quo. We draw insights from Daniel Treisman's conceptual framework to further contribute to the extensive literature on regime change.¹⁵ We demonstrate how Treisman's framework, which underscores how autocrats' missteps can produce democratisation, works in the opposite direction. Not only democracy but also autocracy can occur by mistake. Additionally, we show that leaders can make a sequence of multiple mistakes, not just a singular one, in producing regime change. Our case study embraces the complexity and richness of the critical juncture under analysis by tracing how Castillo made five errors that led to the birth of authoritarian rule.

Without denying the importance of structural or institutional factors, we argue that Castillo's mistakes played a significant role in the fall of conservative democracy in Argentina. Specifically, Castillo's missteps at five *critical events*¹⁶ in the eight-month period before the coup led to an otherwise avoidable regime breakdown. These events were: (i) his appointment of a new war minister, (ii) his selection of his successor in office, followed by (iii) his refusal to negotiate with civilian elites in the ruling coalition, (iv) his indifference to the aforementioned minister's disloyalty, and (v) his negotiations with the military conspirators. As our counterfactual analysis illustrates, although Castillo had alternative courses of action at each critical event, his sub-optimal decisions negatively impacted the regime's survival.

We conduct a within-case analysis through process-tracing to reveal the causal mechanisms that link Castillo's mistakes with the fall of democracy. We advance a causal argument in a historical case by reconstructing Castillo's sub-optimal decisions through meticulous archival work while also considering the alternative options that he ignored.¹⁷ Managing his ruling coalition, Castillo not only delegated

Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *The Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹²Kurt Weyland, 'Toward a New Theory of Institutional Change', *World Politics*, 60: 2 (2008), pp. 281–314; 'The Arab Spring: Why the Surprising Similarities with the Revolutionary Wave of 1848?', *Perspectives on Politics*, 10: 4 (2012), pp. 917–34.

¹³Alfred Stepan, 'Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown: Brazil', in Juan José Linz and Alfred Stepan (eds.), *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Latin America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 110–37.

¹⁴Laura García-Montoya and James Mahoney, 'Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research', *Sociological Methods and Research*, 20: 10 (2020), pp. 1–45.

¹⁵Daniel Treisman, 'Democracy by Mistake: How the Errors of Autocrats Trigger Transitions to Freer Government', *American Political Science Review*, 114: 3 (2020), pp. 792–810.

¹⁶García-Montoya and Mahoney, 'Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research', pp. 1–45.

¹⁷Martin Bunzl, 'Counterfactual History: A User's Guide', *American Historical Review*, 109: 3 (2004), pp. 845–58.

power to a covert autocrat – the newly appointed war minister (critical event i) – but also avoidably alienated previously supportive civilian (critical event iii) and military elites (critical event iv). Controlling outsiders, a major policy failure discredited his authority and alienated key civilian and military opponents (critical event ii). Also, he failed to use repression when there was enough time to weaken the military plotters (critical event v). To support our empirical claims, we consulted various primary (recorded interviews, Agustín P. Justo's archival fond, written press, and political memoirs) and secondary sources (history books and articles).

Although our article only focuses on one instance of democratic collapse, it speaks to a broader set of cases. When on 30 January 1933 President Paul von Hindenburg named Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany, he empowered a disloyal, covert autocrat and made a terrible mistake for the country's democratic longevity.¹⁸ Latin American history also offers crucial examples of how democrats' mistakes gave birth to authoritarian rule, including the cases of Washington Luís (Brazil), Hipólito Yrigoyen (Argentina), Salvador Allende (Chile) and Isabel Perón (Argentina), among others.¹⁹

We organise the article as follows. First, we discuss the scholarship on regime change. We argue that political-agency approaches have more analytical leverage for studying regime transitions in Latin America and show the theoretical relevance of incumbents' mistakes during these processes. Second, we evaluate alternative explanations for the 1943 Argentine democratic fall. Third, we present our methodological strategy to set the theoretical framework into motion in the within-case analysis. Fourth, the within-case analysis traces Castillo's mistakes that impacted the democratic breakdown. The last section concludes and suggests future lines of investigation.

Theoretical Framework: Democrats' Mistakes and the Birth of Authoritarian Rule

The study of regime change has a long tradition in the subfield of comparative politics. Conditional upon their primary explanatory variable, these studies can be grouped into three types of frameworks: structural, institutional and voluntarist approaches to democratic transition or breakdown.²⁰

Structural and institutional frameworks leave actors with a little room for manoeuvring at the micro level to understanding regime change.²¹ Given a specific

¹⁸Henry A. Turner, *A treinta días del poder* (Barcelona: Edhasa, 2000).

¹⁹Brazilian President Luís poorly manipulated the 1930 electoral results, leading his opponent Getúlio Vargas to uprise and inaugurate a new political era (see Thomas Skidmore, *Politics in Brazil, 1930–1964: An Experiment in Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967)). During the same historical period, Argentine President Yrigoyen eroded the government's capacity to squash military conspirators by putting aside his war minister, General Luis Dellepiane, thus triggering the 1930s coup (see Ciria, *Partidos y poder en la Argentina moderna*). In some extremes, Chile's Allende and Argentina's Isabel Perón showed how presidents with substantial domestic policy failures lost credibility and provoked the realignment of regime insiders and outsiders to overthrow them. For these cases, see Arturo Valenzuela, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Chile* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and Guido Di Tella, *Perón-Perón 1973–1976* (Buenos Aires: Hyspamérica, 1986).

²⁰Mahoney and Snyder, 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change'; Geddes, 'What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?'

²¹Mahoney and Snyder, 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change'.

macro-economic,²² cultural,²³ or institutional environment,²⁴ these approaches expect people to act the same way despite their individual differences. In this view, president A, B or C would behave very similarly, if not the same, given context X. In Latin America, however, these frameworks have proven to be weak.²⁵ Modernisation theory,²⁶ oil wealth,²⁷ colonial institutions,²⁸ and economic performance have failed to predict variation in democratic paths in the region.²⁹

Voluntarist frameworks, or approaches focused on political agency, have demonstrated more analytical leverage to explain Latin American regime trajectories.³⁰ Starting with the classic works of Juan José Linz,³¹ Arturo Valenzuela,³² and Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter,³³ these studies understand both structures and institutions as external constraints that somehow limit but *by no means* determine actors' behaviour. According to James Mahoney and Richard Snyder, 'regime transitions are special times when the causal impact of structural factors is temporally relaxed'.³⁴ In such abnormal times, when information problems and unpredicted behaviours are pervasive, the role of agency and individual choices – mostly, of political and military elites – becomes crucial for the regime's fate. As O'Donnell and Schmitter put it, emphasising actors' interactions at the micro level during regime transformations does not deny the existence of macro-structural elements. Such elements are still 'there', but their influence is more undetermined than under normal circumstances.³⁵ Following this line of inquiry,

²²Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy'; Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*; Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley, CA: Institute for International Studies, University of California, 1973).

²³Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy'; Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963).

²⁴Charles Call, 'Democratisation, War and State-Building: Constructing the Rule of Law in El Salvador', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 35: 1 (2008), pp. 29–49; Acemoglu and Robinson, *The Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

²⁵Ames and Mamone, 'Agency and Structure in Latin American Regime Change'.

²⁶Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); Francisco Panizza, 'Beyond Delegative Democracy: Old Politics and New Economics in Latin America', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 32: 3 (2000), pp. 737–63.

²⁷Thad Dunning, *Crude Democracy: Natural Resource Wealth and Political Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁸Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson, 'Reversal of Fortune: Geography and Institutions in the Making of the Modern World Income Distribution', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 117: 4 (2002), pp. 1231–94.

²⁹Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Scott Mainwaring and Anibal Pérez-Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁰Mahoney and Snyder, 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change'; Ames and Mamone, 'Agency and Structure in Latin American Regime Change'.

³¹Juan José Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

³²Valenzuela, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*.

³³O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.

³⁴Mahoney and Snyder, 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change', p. 6.

³⁵O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, p. 5. For example, in his classic study of Brazil's 1964 democratic fall, Stepan perceives the fragmented structure of the Brazilian party system as a

several case studies have remarked on the behaviour of specific leaders and collective actors in democratisation and democratic breakdown processes.³⁶

Political-agency frameworks have mainly focused on agents' *deliberate* choices to explain regime change, particularly democratisation. Under this view, elites create 'pacts'³⁷ and 'great compromises' between social groups to embrace democracy³⁸ or avoid a social revolution.³⁹ In any case, actors' purposive actions are always key to this process.⁴⁰ However, some studies have argued that citizens' psychological biases⁴¹ and leaders' 'mistaken assumptions'⁴² can also affect regime trajectories. While political leaders' mistakes do not necessarily lead to a regime change, there is evidence that sometimes they do. For instance, according to Alfred Stepan, João Goulart's failed presidential leadership was crucial for Brazil's 1964 democratic breakdown.⁴³ A recent study by Treisman took this line of research further by revealing that *only* a third of democratic transitions since the 1800s occurred because elites wanted them to. Instead, in two-thirds of the cases, democracy emerged because autocrats made *mistakes* that weakened their authority and destabilised the status quo.

A mistake is understood as a non-optimal choice. Actors make mistakes when, facing multiple courses of action, they select an option whose payoff is lower than that of other feasible alternatives. Typically, mistakes occur due to information or calculation problems. On the one hand, *information mistakes* take place when, although our logic might be perfect, we miss a piece of information that would have changed our decision.⁴⁴ As pointed out by a large body of research on international relations – particularly on cognitive psychology and its applications to foreign-policy decisions⁴⁵ – international and domestic environments impose

necessary but insufficient 'macrosocial' factor for explaining the outcome. Within the margin of manoeuvrability left by this institutional context, the former president's provocative behaviour was the crucial variable behind the democratic collapse. Stepan, 'Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown'. For an alternative interpretation of the relationship between agency and structure during political transitions, see Daniel Treisman, 'Income, Democracy, and Leader Turnover', *American Journal of Political Science*, 59: 4 (2015), pp. 927–28.

³⁶Capoccia and Ziblatt, 'The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies', pp. 931–68; Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Valenzuela, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Stepan, 'Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown', pp. 110–37. Recent scholarship in political psychology has pointed out the relevance of presidents' personalities in democratic erosion. See Ignacio Arana Araya, 'The Quest for Uncontested Power: Presidents' Personalities and Democratic Erosion in Latin America, 1945–2012', *Political Psychology*, 43: 3 (2022), pp. 511–28.

³⁷O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.

³⁸Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy', pp. 337–63.

³⁹Acemoglu and Robinson, *The Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

⁴⁰Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

⁴¹Weyland, 'Toward a New Theory of Institutional Change', pp. 281–314; 'The Arab Spring', pp. 917–34; Kurt Weyland, *Making Waves: Democratic Contention in Europe and Latin America since the Revolution of 1848* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁴²Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*.

⁴³Stepan, 'Political Leadership and Regime Breakdown', pp. 110–37.

⁴⁴Treisman, 'Democracy by Mistake', pp. 795–6.

⁴⁵Philip E. Tetlock and Charles McGuire, 'Cognitive Perspectives on Foreign Policy', in Ralph K. White, (ed.), *Psychology and the Prevention of Nuclear War: A Book of Readings* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), pp. 255–73; Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in*

heavy information ‘processing demands’ upon political leaders. To deal with an overwhelming flow of information, inevitably leaders must reduce complexity and create shortcuts to make decisions. In this process, it is not surprising that they overlook a critical piece of information that, had they not missed it, would have changed their perception of a specific problem or situation and prevented them from making a mistake.⁴⁶ The everyday-life expression ‘Had I known X, I would not have made that mistake’ thus makes perfect sense and may be part of leaders’ decision-making process.

On the other hand, *calculation mistakes* occur when, despite having accurate or correct information, we ‘do the math’ wrong. In other words, we choose a course of action that does not maximise our benefit.⁴⁷ As leaders usually interact with many influential political actors in time-constrained settings, they may miscalculate their most preferred courses of action. Rulers do not operate in a vacuum; instead, they delineate their behaviour conditional upon other actors’ preferences. When leaders fail to either explicitly or tacitly coordinate with their peers, they may adopt sub-optimal choices not only in different policy areas but also, for instance, in preventing a political regime from falling.⁴⁸

As opposed to deliberate-choice explanations, which assert that autocrats intentionally take steps to democratise the regime, ‘democracy by mistake’ occurs when autocrats’ sub-optimal strategies give birth to democratic rule while trying to prevent it. These mistakes can be of different kinds and vary from case to case; still, they can broadly be divided into two main areas: leaders’ relationships with the regime *insiders* and *outsiders*. In a nutshell, regime insiders are part of the ruling coalition, while outsiders are not.⁴⁹ Treisman distinguishes three typical incumbent errors with regime insiders.⁵⁰ One of them is avoidably alienating the army or a portion of the state security forces, as these actors hold the hard power to bring down the regime or prevent other actors from doing so. The end of General Alfredo Stroessner’s dictatorship in Paraguay in 1989 exemplifies this type of mistake. The alienation of civilian elites is another variant of incumbents’ mistakes with regime insiders. For instance, Perón’s fight with the Catholic Church was one of the leading causes behind Argentina’s regime change in 1955, as he lost the support of a critical ally.⁵¹ A third type of mistake that autocratic incumbents can make in dealing with regime insiders is delegating power to agents who turn

American Foreign Policy (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶For example, leaders may take unnecessary risks believing they are in a ‘domain of loss’ when they are in a ‘domain of gains’ because they ignore certain information. For more detail on this point, see Jack S. Levy, ‘Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 41: 1 (1997), pp. 87–112.

⁴⁷Treisman, ‘Democracy by Mistake’, pp. 795–6.

⁴⁸For more information on coordination problems and their relationship to regime transitions, consult Ivan Ermakoff, *Ruling Oneself Out: A Theory of Collective Abdications* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁴⁹Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press, 2005).

⁵⁰Treisman, ‘Democracy by Mistake’, p. 805.

⁵¹Benjamin García Holgado, ‘Vencedores y vencidos: Surgimiento y éxito de la coalición golpista antiperonista dentro de las Fuerzas Armadas (1946–1955)’, *Postdata*, 21: 1 (2016), pp. 85–128.

out to be disloyal and favour democratisation processes. General Franco's appointment of Prince Juan Carlos as his successor in office and the alleged hardliner General Adolfo Suárez in a crucial position within the armed forces illustrate a mistake like this one.⁵²

Continuing with Treisman's mistakes framework, with regime outsiders, leaders can mishandle the use of violence either by repressing in excess and producing a backlash by the opposition (e.g. Bangladesh in 1990) or by not repressing when needed to weaken their opponents.⁵³ Relatedly, Milan W. Svobik has also highlighted repression's 'double-edged sword' nature. Specifically, he argues that incumbents should be careful not to empower the military in excess when deciding to repress the masses, as they could become vulnerable to their political interests in the future.⁵⁴

In addition to mishandling repression, incumbents can misuse the distribution of political benefits to the opposition either by making excessive concessions that strengthen their opponents or by not making enough concessions at the right time to moderate their demands (Gorbachev exemplifies the former and Louis-Philippe the latter). Other types of errors with regime outsiders include incumbents' major policy failures or poorly managing electoral processes, both of which can decrease their popularity or subvert crucial groups that have the resources to terminate the regime. Alberto Fujimori's corruption and human-rights abuses became so flagrant that he escaped from Peru in an exceptional case of policy failure. A classic example of mishandling electoral processes is the 1988 Chilean national referendum, in which – in a fatal miscalculation – Pinochet did not anticipate unfavourable results.

It seems very plausible that not only democracy but also autocracy can occur by mistake. Simply put, democrats' errors probably resemble those of autocrats and may catalyse regime breakdowns as well. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita has been arguing for a long time that, just like autocrats, democrats are rational actors who aim to maximise power to survive in office.⁵⁵ Democrats are not necessarily 'less evil' or 'better intended' than their autocrat counterparts; in fact, they must also strategically interact with regime insiders and outsiders to maintain a firm grip on power. Democratic leaders' choices play a crucial role in coalition-building,⁵⁶ interactions with the other branches of government,⁵⁷ and retention of office.⁵⁸ For example, Richard Neustadt's seminal work points to presidents' behaviour as a crucial factor for making democracies work, especially regarding their communication,

⁵²Javier Cercas, *Anatomía de un instante* (Barcelona: Mondadori, 2009).

⁵³Treisman, 'Democracy by Mistake', p. 803.

⁵⁴Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵⁵Bueno de Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival*; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook: Why Bad Behavior Is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

⁵⁶Cesar Zucco, 'The President's New Constituency: Lula and the Pragmatic Vote in Brazil's 2006 Presidential Elections', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 40: 1 (2008), pp. 29–49.

⁵⁷Alejandro Bonvecchi and Javier Zelaznik, 'Strategic Convergence? Explaining the Effects of Presidential Decree Power on Legislative Behavior in Argentina', Yale Program on Democracy Workshop, New Haven, 2013.

⁵⁸Aníbal Pérez Liñán, 'Liderazgo presidencial y ciclos de poder en la Argentina democrática', *Revista SAAP*, 7: 2 (2013), pp. 389–99.

persuasion and negotiation abilities.⁵⁹ Relatedly, Linz and Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart highlight that leaders' actions could be decisive in explaining democratic stability or breakdown.⁶⁰ Indeed, Linz stresses a high probability that certain individual actors, facing similar situations, respond in ways that can trigger or prevent a democratic collapse.⁶¹

Just like autocrats, democrats err. Von Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler was a terrible mistake for the Weimar Republic's survival. Interestingly, it resembles Spain's authoritarian collapse as General Franco also delegated power to agents who pulverised the regime. President Luís' mismanagement of the 1930 Brazilian electoral process somehow mirrors Pinochet's mistake with the plebiscite almost 60 years later. The former led to Brazil's democratic collapse and the latter to Chile's democratic transition. Yrigoyen's unwarranted alienation of military elites compares with General Stroessner's aggravation of army officers, leading, respectively, to Argentina's 1930 democratic collapse and Paraguay's 1989 transition to democracy. Allende's and Isabel Perón's administrations in Chile and Argentina expose how democrats with catastrophic policy failures were forcefully removed from office, which is similar to what occurred to Fujimori in authoritarian Peru. These parallels tell us a clear story: conceptually, democrats' mistakes reflect those of autocrats in producing regime change.

We test Treisman's framework in a democratic context to show how democrats' errors can mirror those of autocrats in catapulting regime change. To our knowledge, there is no systematic investigation that combines presidents' mistakes with critical-event analysis to unpack the process of a regime change, which seems especially relevant considering the role of presidential leadership in Latin America.⁶² As heads of government, presidents have plenty of government resources at their disposal, conferring them a leading role in policy and party politics.⁶³ During a regime transition, when uncertainty and misinformation are the norm, presidents' optimal vis-à-vis sub-optimal decisions can make a difference in either preventing the regime from falling or accelerating its demise.

Rethinking Argentina's 1943 Democratic Breakdown

The Argentine historiography has advanced two structural explanations to account for the 1943 democratic breakdown. Some studies have focused on the exhaustion of the first phase of the import substitution industrialisation (ISI) model and the state's inability to articulate social interests. From this perspective, the breakdown represented an authoritarian and modernising path with new social arrangements.⁶⁴

⁵⁹Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: New American Library, 1960).

⁶⁰Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*; Juan José Linz, 'The Perils of Presidentialism', *Journal of Democracy*, 1: 1 (1990), pp. 51–69; Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart, *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶¹Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, p. 16.

⁶²García-Montoya and Mahoney, 'Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research'.

⁶³Ames and Mamone, 'Agency and Structure in Latin American Regime Change'.

⁶⁴Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición: De la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1962); Portantiero, 'Transformación social y crisis de la política'.

These macro-economic processes were undoubtedly part of the Argentine landscape; however, they cannot fully account for the 1943 democratic fall. The Argentine economy was reasonably stable during those years, and the government was already implementing measures to reinforce the industrial sector and sort out the 'macro-economic bottlenecks'.⁶⁵ According to Aldo Ferrer, there was an interdependent relationship between industry and agriculture, and the conservative governments' economic policies were not different from those in other parts of the Western hemisphere.⁶⁶

A second structural explanation underscores the increase in the working class' bargaining power and its ideological radicalisation toward communism.⁶⁷ As stated by Hernán Camarero, the state utilised repression as communism was increasing its influence within the labour movement.⁶⁸ For some historians, the leading military faction behind the coup – Grupo de Oficiales Unidos (United Officers' Group, GOU) – was driven by its anti-communism. Furthermore, this group opposed Robustiano Patrón Costas, a potentially successful and explicitly pro-Allies presidential candidate. The GOU considered Patrón Costas a menace to Argentina's neutralist policy because he intended to realign the country in support of the United States–Soviet Union alliance during the Second World War. Undoubtedly, autocratic reversions in Latin America have been historically influenced by international power dynamics, which shape domestic actors' political preferences. While the GOU's ideological motivations cannot be disregarded, this explanation is insufficient because the Argentine labour movement in the 1940s was extraordinarily complex, and communism was only one of the main forces within it.⁶⁹ Moreover, Patrón Costas' foreign-policy preferences are still debatable.⁷⁰ Although the two structural interpretations previously described are essential for contextualising the military-political dynamics of the period, they cannot account for the erratic choices made by the last conservative president.

A classic institutionalist interpretation of the 1943 Argentine regime breakdown emphasises the conservative democracy's legitimacy crisis, characterised by corruption scandals, clientelism and state repression.⁷¹ From this perspective, Castillo was severely constrained by the institutional context and the armed forces' tutelage. Contrary to this thesis, we will show that Castillo had considerable room to manoeuvre, and the mistakes he made were crucial in triggering the democratic collapse.

⁶⁵Pablo Gerchunoff and Lucas Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto: Un siglo de políticas económicas argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1998).

⁶⁶Aldo Ferrer, *La economía argentina* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963), pp. 224–5.

⁶⁷Juan Carlos Torre, *La Vieja Guardia Sindical y Perón* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1990).

⁶⁸Hernán Camarero, *A la conquista de la clase obrera: Los comunistas y el mundo del trabajo en la Argentina, 1920–1935* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2007).

⁶⁹Torre, 'Interpretando (una vez más) los orígenes del peronismo'.

⁷⁰Halperin Donghi, *La República imposible*.

⁷¹Torre, 'Interpretando (una vez más) los orígenes del peronismo'; Luciano de Privitello, 'La política bajo el signo de la crisis', in Alejandro Cattaruzza (ed.), *Crisis económica, avance del Estado e incertidumbre política (1930–1943)* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2001), pp. 126–32; 'La vida política', in Alejandro Cattaruzza (ed.), *Argentina: Mirando hacia adentro* (Madrid: Mapfre-Santillana Ediciones, 2012), pp. 90–112; Darío Macor, 'Partidos, coaliciones y sistema de poder', in Cattaruzza (ed.), *Crisis económica*, pp. 50–94.

Finally, most agent-based approaches to the 1943 Argentine democratic collapse have underestimated Castillo's missteps.⁷² Such investigations relegate the president to a passive role by overstating the influence of other actors such as the armed forces, trade unions, and opposition political parties. As a result, they fail to evaluate Castillo's political agency to explain why he prioritised specific courses of action over others, and the connection between these decisions and the regime breakdown.

Method: Within-Case Analysis through Process-Tracing

Drawing insights from critical-juncture frameworks and counterfactual analyses,⁷³ we conduct within-case analysis to reveal the causal mechanisms⁷⁴ that link Castillo's mistakes to the 1943 Argentine democratic breakdown. We use process-tracing to show how the president's misguided relationships with regime insiders and outsiders – key political and military groups – in the months before the coup exerted 'a causal force' on the outcome.⁷⁵ Because causal process-tracing depends on accessing plenty of data, we selected a data-rich case for our investigation, abundant in archival sources.⁷⁶

We organise the empirical analysis around five *critical events*⁷⁷ in the critical juncture⁷⁸ of November 1942–June 1943 – eight months before the coup – to demonstrate how Castillo's decisions triggered the democratic collapse. These decisions set into motion a subsequent chain of events that culminated in the outcome of interest. Of course, countless events took place during Castillo's administration. However, our archival research and consultation of secondary sources pointed to five critical episodes for explaining the democratic fall. We identify the episodes through a critical observation typical of the historical method, which analyses data reliability by triangulating it with numerous and diverse sources.⁷⁹ These are: (i) Castillo's appointment of a new minister of war, (ii) his designation of his successor in office, followed

⁷²Ernesto Palacio, *Historia de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo Editor, 1954); Rodolfo Puiggrós, *La democracia fraudulenta* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez Editor, 1968).

⁷³James Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2001); Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism', *World Politics*, 59: 3 (2007), pp. 341–69.

⁷⁴We understand by 'causal mechanism' a temporal sequence of events which, divided into different stages, produce a specific result. See Tulia Falleti and James Mahoney, 'The Comparative Sequential Method', in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (eds.), *Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2015), pp. 211–39.

⁷⁵Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

⁷⁶Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland, *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 25; Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 79.

⁷⁷A critical event is defined as 'a contingent event that is causally important for an outcome in a particular case'. See García-Montoya and Mahoney, 'Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research', p. 20.

⁷⁸Capoccia and Kelemen define a critical juncture as a 'relatively short period during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest'. See Capoccia and Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures', p. 348.

⁷⁹Gilbert J. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1946), pp. 205–14.

by (iii) his refusal to negotiate with civilian elites in the ruling coalition, (iv) his indifference to the aforementioned minister's disloyalty, and (v) his negotiations with the military conspirators. Among all events, such episodes were critical because they were contingent (they could have turned out differently) and causally relevant (the outcome would not have occurred in their absence). Put differently, these events were both in the realm of the non-inevitable and at least moderately necessary or sufficient for the outcome. Additionally, the fact that they were temporally bounded in a short span of time facilitates their use in causal analysis.⁸⁰

In reconstructing every step of Castillo's decision-making process at each of the critical events, we show that he had other feasible alternatives.⁸¹ In other words, we examine what happened in the context of what *could have happened*⁸² and consider what likely consequences may have resulted had Castillo taken other equally viable courses of action. While intrinsic to all human action, as contingency becomes paramount during critical junctures, counterfactual analysis is essential for studying these processes.⁸³

To minimise the bias or systematic error in search of 'causal-process observations' (CPOs),⁸⁴ we collect evidence both from various primary sources of the same type (for example, from multiple newspapers) and from different kinds of primary sources. Specifically, we use four types of primary sources: recorded interviews from the Oral Archive History of Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (Buenos Aires, Argentina); documents from Justo's archival fond; written press (newspapers such as *La Prensa*, *La Nación*, *La Vanguardia*, *Crítica* and *Primera Plana*); and memoirs of influential politicians and military leaders from the time.⁸⁵ Additionally, we analyse in depth the Argentine historiography on the topic to gather information from secondary sources.⁸⁶

⁸⁰García-Montoya and Mahoney, 'Critical Event Analysis in Case Study Research'.

⁸¹As García-Montoya and Mahoney observe, this framework 'depends heavily on knowledge of the individual case to build counterfactuals'. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸²Bunzl, 'Counterfactual History'.

⁸³Mahoney, *The Legacies of Liberalism*; Capoccia and Kelemen, 'The Study of Critical Junctures'. See also a helpful exercise about the uses of contingency in history applied to this specific case in Fernando Devoto, 'Para una reflexión en torno al golpe del 4 de junio de 1943', *Estudios Sociales*, 46: 1 (2014), pp. 171–86.

⁸⁴A CPO is defined as 'an insight or piece of data that provides information about context, process or mechanism, and that contributes distinctive leverage in causal inference'. See James Mahoney, 'After KKV: The New Methodology of Qualitative Research', *World Politics*, 62: 1 (2010), p. 124; David Collier and James Mahoney, 'Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research', *World Politics*, 49: 1 (1996), pp. 56–91.

⁸⁵Manuel Goldstraj, *Años y errores (un cuarto de siglo de política argentina)* (Buenos Aires: Sophos, 1957); Nicolás Repetto, *Mi paso por la política: De Uriburu a Perón* (Buenos Aires: Santiago Rueda Editor, 1957); Martín Aberg Cobo, 'La revolución de 1943', in Horacio Zorraquín Becú *et al.* (eds.), *Cuatro revoluciones argentinas (1890–1930–1943–1955)* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Club Nicolás Avellaneda, 1960), pp. 79–94; Miguel A. Culaciati, *El presidente Castillo: Su política internacional y el golpe militar del 4 de junio de 1943* (Buenos Aires: Artes Gráficas Fajja Hnos, 1968); Federico Pinedo, *En tiempos de la República* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Mundo Forense, 1946); Juan Orona, *La logia militar que derrocó a Castillo* (Buenos Aires: Moderna, 1966); Manuel Lezica, *Memorias de un nacionalista* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Astral, 1968); Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, *Memorias (conversaciones con Carlos Payá)* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2001).

⁸⁶Ian Lustick, 'History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias', *American Political Science Review*, 90: 3 (1996), pp. 605–18.

Castillo's Mistakes and the Fall of the Argentine Conservative Democracy

This section traces how Castillo's errors contributed to the fall of the Argentine democracy in 1943. We first summarise Argentina's political context in the 1930s, explaining the configuration of political and military forces and Castillo's ascendance to power. Then, we offer an overview of the main argument, followed by the specifics of the critical events that explain the democratic breakdown.

The Context: Interwar Argentina and Castillo's Rise to Power

The Argentine scholarship has extensively debated the democratic condition of the 1930s political regime. Although selective fraud (in some districts and during certain times) was part of the electoral process, opposition parties had room to control seats in Congress and governorships. Moreover, the regime preserved civil rights and liberties (freedom of speech, press and association), guaranteeing that most non-extremist actors could influence the political arena. Finally, some key national figures – presidents, high-rank officers and opposition leaders – stabilised the regime with their compromise to formal democratic institutions; however, they differed in political ideas and their condemnation of electoral fraud.⁸⁷

The Argentine political landscape in the 1930s was fragmented into two main groups. On the one hand, the pro-governing forces were united in the Concordancia, which gathered conservatives, anti-populist radicals,⁸⁸ and independent socialists.⁸⁹ The government's project was initially characterised by political exclusion combined with economic modernisation.⁹⁰ The Concordancia represented an inorganic electoral front of provincial parties, which diverged on some domestic and international topics by the early 1940s and varied in size and electoral power. On the other hand, the Unión Cívica Radical (Radical Civic Union, UCR), the Socialist Party, communists and progressive democrats were the main opposition forces, which participated in elections conditional upon the absence of fraud.⁹¹ Besides partisan actors, the military arena was divided into three main groups, each of them with a third of high-rank officials: *professionals*, who hold a non-intervention position in politics; *nationalists*,⁹² who were anti-communist and mostly neutralist towards the Second World War (with a few

⁸⁷Darío Macor, 'Partidos, coaliciones y sistema de poder'; Privetellio, 'La política bajo el signo de la crisis'.

⁸⁸We understand by 'anti-populist radicals' those members of the party who opposed Yrigoyen, the former populist president between 1916–22 and 1928–30. They referred to themselves as *antipersonalistas* or *antiyrigoyenistas*. See Ignacio A. López, 'Un "frente nacional" para tiempos de crisis: La Concordancia y el ocaso de la política de los viejos acuerdos', in Leandro Losada (ed.), *Política y vida pública: Argentina, 1930–1943* (Buenos Aires: Imago Mundi, 2017), pp. 19–34.

⁸⁹In total, the Concordancia had 72 deputies (out of 158), 16 senators (out of 30) and 12 governors (out of 14 districts). See Guillermo Molinelli, Valeria Palanza and Gisela Sin, *Congreso, presidencia y justicia en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Temas Grupo Editorial / CEDI, 1999).

⁹⁰Portantiero, 'Transformación social y crisis de la política'.

⁹¹In total, they gathered 86 deputies (out of 158), 14 senators (out of 30) and two governors (out of 14 districts). See Molinelli *et al.*, *Congreso, presidencia y justicia en la Argentina*.

⁹²'Nationalist' is an umbrella term for different military, intellectual and political actors. They wanted a strong government (most of them were authoritarian, a few praised fascism), state intervention in the economy and a neutralist policy in the Second World War. See Sandra McGee Deutsch and Ronald Dolkart, *The Argentine Right: Its History and Intellectual Origins, 1910 to the Present* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly

pro-Axis exceptions); and *liberals*, who supported President Justo and were internationally pro-Allies. In short, while the regime insiders were the Concordancia forces and the liberal officers, the outsiders were the opposition political parties and the professional and nationalist officers.

The Concordancia won the 1931 elections due to the UCR's abstention. The newly elected President Justo (1932–8) was a liberal general who used the fraud machine to avoid the return of the UCR in several districts. Justo's strategy to survive in power consisted of dominating important military sectors by appointing loyal officers in crucial posts. Given that Justo could not be re-elected due to a constitutional prohibition, he worked to return to office in 1944. During the Second World War, he developed a clear pro-Allies position.

In 1938, a new pro-government presidential ticket formed by Roberto Ortiz and Castillo was fraudulently elected. Justo picked his friend Ortiz, an anti-populist radical, as his successor with the desire to return to office in the next presidential turn. Unlike Justo, Ortiz had stronger democratic convictions and implemented a brief period oriented to clean and open elections (1938–40). Regarding the Second World War, like Justo, Ortiz had pro-Allies tendencies. When in July 1940 Ortiz retired from office due to health problems, his conservative vice-president, Castillo, replaced him and put an end to Ortiz's reformist programme.⁹³

Castillo was a conservative democrat who believed in universal male suffrage and the need for representative democracy according to the Sáenz Peña Law.⁹⁴ However, he was a tenacious anti-radical who prevented the major party's return to power through institutional shortcuts by committing to some fraudulent elections. He had inflexible neutralist tendencies towards the Second World War. Within three years, Castillo consolidated the government coalition to benefit the conservatives by taking advantage of crucial government resources, including federal interventions and the appointment and promotion of nationalist officials in the armed forces.⁹⁵ Moreover, the new president wanted to block Justo's aspiration to return to power in 1944 and to lead a conservative hegemony within the Concordancia. For this reason, Castillo cemented an alliance with the nationalists in the armed forces – who antagonised Justo and were neutral about the Second World War – and reinforced conservative parties in the provinces against the liberal sectors in the Litoral and Central regions, which responded to Justo within the pro-governing coalition. Toward the end of 1942, the presidential government resources were

Resources, 1993); Fernando Devoto and María Inés Barbero, *Los nacionalistas (1910–1932)* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993).

⁹³Ignacio A. López, *La república del fraude y su crisis: Política y poder en tiempos de Roberto M. Ortiz y Ramón S. Castillo (Argentina, 1938–1943)* (Rosario: Prohistoria Ediciones, 2018); 'The Blind President and a Political Drama in Argentina's Interwar Politics: The Case of Roberto M. Ortiz and His Attempt at Democratic Redemption', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 2023, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13260219.2023.2191977>, last access 8 May 2023.

⁹⁴Sanctioned in 1912, the Sáenz Peña Law guaranteed the male universal, mandatory and secret ballot. It also established a hybrid system of majority and minority representation for federal elections. See Halperin Donghi, *La República imposible*.

⁹⁵Privitello, 'La política bajo el signo de la crisis'; 'La vida política'. See also Ignacio A. López, 'Los conservadores contraatacan: Repensando la política presidencial y las redes político-partidarias en tiempos de Ramón S. Castillo (Argentina, 1940–1943)', *Historia*, 1: 51 (2018), pp. 79–112.

politically, fiscally and administratively substantial.⁹⁶ Castillo had majorities in both houses of the National Congress and regained territorial control by promoting conservative governors in old and new districts.

The Argument: An Overview

Castillo's mistakes at five critical events between November 1942 and June 1943 negatively impacted the democratic survival. The former president had equally feasible courses of action that he opted not to explore. His poor negotiation skills, rigid mind-set, informational misperceptions and calculation mistakes were crucial in explaining why he arrived at these decisions and how they led to the outcome.

First, in November 1942, Castillo appointed General Pedro P. Ramírez as the new minister of war. He picked Ramírez – whose loyalty was even dubious at that moment – without consulting his advisors or his inner circle. Later, Ramírez revealed his disloyalty by playing a crucial role in assisting the military conspirators. Second, in February 1943, Castillo designated Patrón Costas as his successor in office. Castillo chose Patrón Costas, once again, without any internal deliberative process. When the Buenos Aires conservatives urged him to reconsider, Castillo thought of himself in a situation of gains,⁹⁷ and therefore perceived little risk in excluding the Buenos Aires conservatives from consideration. Immediately after Patrón Costas' designation, around 20 middle-rank nationalist officials formed the GOU and began planning Castillo's overthrow. Last but not least, Castillo's passivity towards Ramírez's disloyalty and unfavourable negotiations with the military conspirators were the final strikes against Argentina's conservative democracy. Figure 1 displays the causal mechanisms that drove Castillo's administration and the regime to a fatal outcome.

The Five Critical Events

Appointment of a New Minister of War (November 1942)

Castillo's advances in the military arena had been straightforward since 1940. With the desire to neutralise General Justo, who was increasingly committed to the Allies' cause and seeking a new presidential term for 1944–50, Castillo captured the support of important neutralist military sectors, displacing *justistas* and altering a dozen promotions.⁹⁸ Juan Tonazzi, the war minister from September 1940, was a *justista* general. He always responded to Justo's wishes. For instance, Tonazzi gave Justo an extremely well-informed panorama of the military forces by forwarding him secret information.⁹⁹ As part of Castillo's strategy to reduce Justo's influence in the army, he humiliated Tonazzi till resignation.¹⁰⁰ Without someone in a

⁹⁶Gerchunoff and Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión*, pp. 155–60.

⁹⁷Levy, 'Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations'.

⁹⁸Robert Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina, 1928–1945: De Yrigoyen a Perón* (Buenos Aires: Hispanoamérica, 1986); Alan Rouquié, *Poder militar y sociedad política en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981).

⁹⁹Various documents in the Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Fondo Agustín P. Justo (hereafter FAPJ), boxes 103–6.

¹⁰⁰Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*, pp. 255–6.

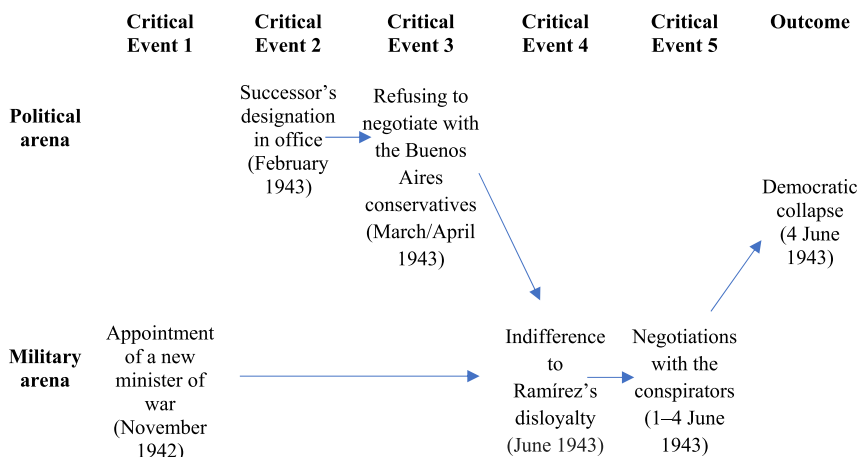


Figure 1. How Castillo's Mistakes Triggered the Democratic Collapse
 Source: Authors' elaboration.

vital position in the Ministry of War, Justo and his high-ranking liberal officers started losing terrain.

Castillo's decision to appoint a new war minister was provocative and crucial for the future. In the Argentine military structure, the minister of war was head of operational command and directly controlled the headquarters' mobilisation. Some sources indicate that Castillo chose Ramírez only for ideological reasons – he shared his view towards foreign policy.¹⁰¹ Miguel A. Culaciati, his primary political advisor at the Ministry of the Interior, was not part of the decision, displaying Castillo's lack of communication with his inner circle.¹⁰²

Yet, it was clear that Castillo could have taken another path. For instance, he could have kept Tonazzi as war minister and negotiated a political truce with Justo. Alternatively, he could have appointed another anti-*justista* but professional general in the same position. This alternative appointment would have had the same systemic effect. For example, he could have appointed his faithful naval minister, Mario Fincati, whose mandate would have also weakened Justo's status in the military arena.¹⁰³ However, Castillo delegated power to a covert autocrat who later played a crucial role in staging the military coup.

Successor's Designation in Office (February 1943)

Between March and July of 1942, the deaths of the Radical leader Marcelo T. de Alvear and President Ortiz shocked the political arena, reinforcing the need for

¹⁰¹ As Halperin Donghi stated, Ramírez was an enthusiastic defendant of neutrality towards the Second World War and, in 1930, was the spokesman of 'the purest and hardest version of Uriburism'. See Halperin Donghi, *La República imposible*, p. 275. Besides, Ramírez participated in secret meetings conspiring against the president in Feb. 1942. See Gontrán de Güemes, *Así se gestó la dictadura* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Rex, 1956), p. 19.

¹⁰² Culaciati, *El presidente Castillo*, p. 30.

¹⁰³ Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*, pp. 255–6.

strong national leadership. From then on, two clearly defined actors dominated the political landscape. On the one hand, General Justo received support from the anti-populist radicals, an influential group of conservative leaders, and high-rank officers.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, President Castillo – together with the conservative core – used his prerogatives to strengthen the Concordancia ruling parties in several provinces. The provincial parties and crucial positions in the armed forces were the battlefields in a ‘cold’ confrontation between the two opponents.

On 11 January 1943, Justo’s unexpected death redefined alliances within the ruling coalition and the opposition (at that time, the former president was cementing a political alliance to run for the presidency next September). His death resulted in pivotal high-ranking military officials changing their loyalties. In this uncertain situation, and without solid national leaderships to challenge the executive authority, the road to the September 1943 presidential election became more dependent on Castillo’s actions, especially his ability to communicate, persuade and even defeat potential opponents.

Castillo had multiple potential succession candidates. He was not allowed to be a candidate himself because of an explicit constitutional prohibition (he could have only been a candidate after waiting another term). However, some of his collaborators considered this a viable option and tried to tempt him to run for office again, albeit impossible for a legalist and stubborn mind.¹⁰⁵ In a press interview in February 1943, Castillo discarded running for office in the next period and defended the Concordancia agreements.¹⁰⁶ Some sources indicate that the president was considering different options. For example, he thought of appointing either Admiral León Scasso or Guillermo Rothe (minister of justice and public instruction), both nationalists and strong Germanophiles, to consolidate his relationship with the nationalist officers.¹⁰⁷ Another option was negotiating with the Concordancia forces to include Rodolfo Moreno, governor of Buenos Aires Province, in the presidential ticket. A third alternative was imposing a different candidate without any internal deliberative process, believing that his decision would automatically persuade all the pro-government forces.¹⁰⁸

Castillo pursued option three. On 18 February 1943, the name of the next presidential candidate was released to the press: Patrón Costas, a pro-Allies Northern conservative, prominent in the National Senate but highly disliked by the public, press and opposition parties.¹⁰⁹ Contemporary witnesses and historians assert

¹⁰⁴Additionally, some sources in the Ministry of War believed that the US Embassy would be willing to fund his campaign with more than \$US10 million. ‘Informe exclusivo para el Excmo. Señor Ministro de Guerra (Personal)’, Buenos Aires, 8 Nov. 1942, in AGN, FAPJ, box 104, file 375.

¹⁰⁵Pinedo, *En tiempos de la República*; Oral Archive History of Universidad Torcuato Di Tella (hereafter OAH, UTDT), Arturo Jauretche, Interview, 1971.

¹⁰⁶*La Nación*, 10 Feb. 1943.

¹⁰⁷*Informe Reservado* (Intelligence memorandum to General Justo), n.d., in AGN, FAPJ, box 106, file 145.

¹⁰⁸Goldstraj, *Años y errores*, p. 300; OAH, UTDT, Juan Pablo Oliver, Interview, 1972, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹*Informe Reservado* (Intelligence memorandum to General Justo), n.d., in AGN, FAPJ, box 106, file 68. See also Ernest Sweeney and Alejandro Domínguez Benavides, *Robustiano Patrón Costas: Una leyenda argentina* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1998). In an interview in April 2015, his grandchild, Eduardo Patrón Costas, confirmed the candidate’s pro-Allies position, sustaining that Robustiano was respectful of the British political system and culture.

that Castillo shared respect, a sense of duty and a genuine friendship with Patrón Costas.¹¹⁰ However, Patrón Costas' election was mostly a reflection of Castillo's rigid thinking. Castillo's contemporaries often pointed out his inflexibility.¹¹¹ As Halperin Donghi argued, Castillo's firmness in Patrón Costas' candidacy did not reflect a statesman's stolidity but rather the 'stubbornness of an old man' in keeping prior compromises.¹¹² Although Patrón Costas was one of the leading figures in the conservative spectrum and, possibly, the second-most powerful man in partisan politics, Castillo could have endorsed any other candidates within the conservative circle.¹¹³ In other words, Patrón Costas was not his only card but a highly interchangeable one.¹¹⁴ As Castillo expressed in a press conference explaining the country's state of siege after Pearl Harbour: '[T]hat decision was taken by unanimity; the unanimity of the president, who is the one who decides.'¹¹⁵

Castillo's decision to endorse a pro-Allies candidate who was a conservative symbol of the status quo directly affected both outsiders in the military and political arenas. The nationalists, who had mostly a neutralist agenda towards the Second World War, felt alienated by the president's decision. A secret group of nationalist middle-rank officers, the GOU, was formed just a couple of days after the announcement of Patrón Costas' candidacy and it began planning the military coup. At the same time, Castillo's decision negatively impacted the opposition parties, as Patrón Costas' name on the presidential ticket guaranteed fraud in the next elections. In sum, Castillo's designation of his successor in office was a colossal policy failure that antagonised civilian and military opponents.

Refusing to Negotiate with the Buenos Aires Conservatives (March/April 1943)

Although most conservatives and anti-populist radicals supported Patrón Costas' candidacy, the Buenos Aires conservatives, headed by Governor Rodolfo Moreno, expressed disagreement. Moreno was a conservative who believed in the need for clean elections and foreign-policy changes towards the Allies' cause.¹¹⁶ Moreno's presidential ambitions were well known, and after the death of General Justo, he intended to head a liberal opposition within the Concordancia against Castillo

¹¹⁰Carlos Alberto Cuneo to R. Patrón Costas, Salta, 23 Dec. 1941, in the Archivo Robustiano Patrón Costas (hereafter ARPC), correspondence; *Informe confidencial al Sr. Ricardo Peralta Ramos (La Razón)*, Buenos Aires, 17 Dec. 1942, in AGN, FAPJ, box 104, file 442.

¹¹¹Castillo had a long history of tough decisions and a lack of flexibility dating back to when he was dean of the Law School at the University of Buenos Aires in the 1920s. One of his most inflexible decisions was the institution's three-month closure due to students' protests. See Edmundo Gutiérrez, *Bosquejos biográficos del Dr. Ramón S. Castillo* (Buenos Aires: Imprenta López, 1941), pp. 146–7.

¹¹²Six years before, in 1937, President Justo blocked Patrón Costas' vice-presidential candidacy, leading to an impasse between conservatives and the president that was solved by Castillo's nomination. From then on, Castillo became one of Patrón Costas' most reliable allies. Tulio Halperin Donghi, *Argentina en el callejón* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Arca, 1964), pp. 110–11; Carlos Ibarguren, *La historia que he vivido* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Dictio, 1977), pp. 669–70.

¹¹³OAH, UTD, Juan Pablo Oliver, Interview, 1972, pp. 28–30.

¹¹⁴*La Nación*, 27 Feb. 1943; *La Prensa*, 18 Feb. 1943.

¹¹⁵*La Prensa*, 19 Dec. 1941.

¹¹⁶Justo Rocha to Gilberto Suárez Lago (Partido Demócrata Nacional), La Plata, 2 Feb. 1943, in AGN, FAPJ, box 134, file 309. Castillo enacted the 'state of siege' in December 1941 after Pearl Harbour, which was extended for two years.

and the interior's (Argentina's hinterland) conservatives, committed to fraud and neutralism towards the Second World War.

During February–April 1943, after Castillo imposed Patrón Costas' candidacy, the Buenos Aires conservatives tried to negotiate. As noted by Richard Walter, some negotiations took place to name Moreno as vice-president, but they failed.¹¹⁷ Castillo disregarded their advice to neutralise his influence and a possible liberal twist in the future administration.¹¹⁸ Instead, the president's attitude was reliable and inflexible towards endorsing Patrón Costas' candidacy.¹¹⁹ In the first days of May, Castillo unilaterally picked the former governor of Santa Fe, Manuel de Iriondo, as vice-presidential candidate: an anti-populist and pro-fraud radical.¹²⁰ His decision sealed any possibility of readapting the Concordancia programme to a more open domestic and foreign policy.

Facing the negotiations with the Buenos Aires conservatives, Castillo had promising options that he decided not to explore. One alternative was changing the presidential ticket by incorporating Moreno as vice-president. Another plausible option was appointing a nationalist presidential candidate – both closer to his ideas and popular in relevant armed forces sectors – and using the Buenos Aires conservatives' disagreement to neutralise Patrón Costas' candidacy.¹²¹ Since the partisan convention to proclaim candidates will have occurred some months later, this decision could have also dissuaded nationalists' conspiracies about the presidential succession. However, he crushed the internal civil opposition and reinforced his decision, thinking of himself in a position of gains.¹²² Castillo's political compromise with Patrón Costas weakened the ruling coalition by avoidably alienating previously supportive civilian elites.

Indifference to Ramírez's Disloyalty (June 1943)

After refusing to negotiate with the Buenos Aires conservatives, Castillo reaffirmed his desires: his preferences were respected, and he imposed his decisions. But some important events were taking place in the military arena. Justo's death triggered a regrouping in the armed forces' preferences, leaving the liberal officers without a chief. In this context, the nationalists had a unique opportunity to increase their influence.¹²³ In March 1943, a group of conspirators created the GOU after Patrón Costas' candidacy was made public. This nationalist group lacked a unifying leadership as all its members were middle-rank officers. Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, among others, was a member of this group. The GOU's manifest goals were to maintain the neutralist foreign policy and stop the communist advance in the labour movement; however, its latent goal was to stage a military coup in

¹¹⁷Richard Walter, *La provincia de Buenos Aires en la política argentina, 1913–1943* (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1987), pp. 241–9.

¹¹⁸Ernesto Aráoz to R. Patrón Costas, Salta, 3 Oct. 1942, in ARPC, correspondence.

¹¹⁹*Boletín Noticioso*, 28 Dec. 1942, in AGN, FAPJ, box 104, file 456.

¹²⁰*La Nación*, 17 May 1943.

¹²¹OAH, UTDT, Arturo Jauretche, Interview, 1971.

¹²²Goldstraj, *Años y errores*, pp. 300–1; Levy, 'Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations'.

¹²³Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*, pp. 241–2.

September 1943.¹²⁴ Ramírez, the new minister of war, probably knew about the GOU's existence because many of its members were in crucial positions in his ministry, including Captain Filippi, his son-in-law.¹²⁵

Ramírez's loyalty began to change dramatically. His ambivalent and taciturn personality was picked up by Robert Potash, who gathered some personal references from contemporaries to affirm Ramírez lacked 'firm ideas' and often 'reflected the opinions of the last person he had spoken to'.¹²⁶ By the end of May 1943, he contacted some prestigious radicals who invited him to run for the presidency in an opposition front.¹²⁷ Opposition parties faced the difficult task of uniting forces against the Concordancia. Radicals, the Socialist Party and the Partido Demócrata Progresista (Progressive Democratic Party) would join forces in a single ticket with a unifying external candidate.¹²⁸ Some radicals asked Ramírez to present as head of an opposition electoral coalition as a 'merging' candidacy beyond parties. The minister of war could have been crucial to defeat Castillo's and Patrón Costas' fraudulent plans.¹²⁹ Besides, according to Ramírez himself, he received a visit from General Arturo Rawson – the leading officer in mobilising the troops against Castillo a few days later – to support his position in the ministry, 'even with the use of force if needed'.¹³⁰

Coordination problems became evident at this critical juncture. The first coordination problem involved the Concordancia leaders choosing an alternative presidential or vice-presidential candidate. The second was the failure of all democratic opposition leaders, gathered in the Unión Democrática (Democratic Union), to introduce a prospective candidate other than Ramírez, whose disloyalty became a crucial test for Castillo's presidential leadership. How many courses of action were available for the president in those dark hours? After Castillo heard about the meeting between the opposition parties and Ramírez, he tried to persuade the minister to explain his actions. But he failed: on 1 June 1943, Ramírez only responded with a short and unclear declaration in the press.¹³¹ Castillo lost a fine opportunity to make Ramírez resign and appoint another general in his position. Ramírez's resignation would have taken a dissuasive turn for the conspirators, who were still disorganised at that time.¹³²

Once informed about the minister's disloyalty, the president could have acted diligently, demanding Ramírez's resignation by the end of May. He could have also commanded his loyal navy minister, Fincati, to control the Ministry of War, or appointed another general to neutralise any military plot against his authority.

¹²⁴Robert Potash, *Perón y el GOU: Los documentos de una logia secreta* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1984).

¹²⁵'El golpe contra Castillo', *Primera Plana*, No. 284, 4 Jun. 1968, p. 78.

¹²⁶Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*, p. 310.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 275.

¹²⁸These negotiations also included the Communist Party, whose leaders reinforced a 'Popular Front' electoral strategy. Repetto, *Mi paso por la política*, pp. 234–346.

¹²⁹Halperin Donghi, *La República imposible*, pp. 275–7.

¹³⁰Orona, *La logia militar que derrocó a Castillo*, p. 52.

¹³¹*La Nación*, 1 Jun. 1943.

¹³²Orona, *La logia militar que derrocó a Castillo*, p. 51; Lezica, *Memorias de un nacionalista*, p. 133; Culaciati, *El presidente Castillo*, p. 25.

Alternatively, Castillo could have kept Ramírez as war minister and listened to his demands, sealing a calculated alliance with the nationalist officers. But instead, he adopted a patient and reactive strategy. Rather than ‘taking the bull by the horns’, the president gave room for conspirative activities by only asking Ramírez to ‘justify his actions’. Evidence shows that many plotters capitalised on Castillo’s indecision to convince some decisive officers – such as General Rawson, Colonel Elbio Anaya, Colonel Ambrosio Vago, Colonel Alberto Gilbert and General Edelmiro Farrell – to join the conspiracy.¹³³ Castillo’s indifference to Ramírez’s disloyalty alienated some insider generals in critical operational positions, leading to his overthrow.¹³⁴

Negotiations with the Conspirators (1–4 June 1943)

In his last 24 hours as president, Castillo’s ineffective communication and persuasion skills, along with his information and calculation mistakes, triggered the democratic breakdown. By 3 June 1943, Castillo still had not taken any action against Ramírez.¹³⁵ Although the president had already prepared a decree to dismiss Ramírez, he had not signed it yet. However, the rumour that Castillo would fire the minister of war arrived at Ramírez’s office and set off the plotters’ final calculations.¹³⁶ On the night of 3 June, conspirators achieved a crucial triumph: the non-intervention of the Colegio Militar and El Palomar, two crucial garrisons, in the rebellion.¹³⁷ Ramírez was not dismissed until the morning of 4 June, when the troops from Campo de Mayo, the main headquarters, were already marching to Casa Rosada, the presidential palace. Besides, the president did not act against the federal police chief, Domingo Martínez, who was also revealed later as disloyal.¹³⁸

On top of that, Castillo made another tragic decision that night: he sent Ramírez to negotiate with the conspirators at Campo de Mayo, clearly underestimating how critical the situation was.¹³⁹ Instead of sending his disloyal minister to negotiate, Castillo himself could have dealt with the rebel officers and agreed to their demands (as he did in October 1941, when he partially accepted a petitionary that some high-rank military officers presented him). Ramírez’s presence in Campo de Mayo helped unify the conspirators. Still, the president’s fate was not yet predetermined.¹⁴⁰ At that moment, Castillo faced two options: either keep waiting or actively organise military forces from the sea to counterattack the mutiny. He decided to wait. As stated by Svolik, this was a clear brinkmanship regime of

¹³³Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*, pp. 279–80.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹³⁵Orona, *La logia militar que derrocó a Castillo*; Potash, *El ejército y la política en la Argentina*.

¹³⁶Culaciati, *El presidente Castillo*, p. 27.

¹³⁷Gontrán de Güemes, *Así se gestó la dictadura*, pp. 30–1.

¹³⁸Lezica, *Memorias de un nacionalista*, p. 135; Aberg Cobo, ‘La revolución de 1943’, p. 87; Gontrán de Güemes, *Así se gestó la dictadura*, pp. 33–4.

¹³⁹Domingo Martínez, *Historia de los acontecimientos del día 4 de junio de 1943 vividos por el Jefe de Policía de la Capital Federal, general de Brigada D. Domingo Martínez* (manuscript), in ARPC, correspondence, pp. 1–17; Enrique Díaz Araujo, *La conspiración del 43. El GOU: Una experiencia militarista en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Astrea, 1971), p. 193. Another source indicated that, rather than sending Ramírez to negotiate with the military plotters, Castillo lost sight of the war minister (Gontrán de Güemes, *Así se gestó la dictadura*, pp. 27–8).

¹⁴⁰Aberg Cobo, ‘La revolución de 1943’, p. 88.

interaction, and the perils of an autocratic upheaval were around the corner.¹⁴¹ However, Castillo was still supported by his navy minister, a significant part of the navy admirals, and some high-rank military officers such as General Juan Carlos Bassi, in control of the Maldonado headquarters, and General Ángel Zuloaga. Moreover, most parts of the national headquarters were mere spectators of the changing balance of power. According to Police Chief Officer D. Martínez, on the morning of 4 June, Castillo, showing his stubbornness, still denied that any troops were ‘marching from Campo de Mayo’.¹⁴²

The president decided to imprison Ramírez at 6.00 am while troops were marching to Casa Rosada. Finally, the military plotters, headed by General Rawson, quickly took control of the presidential palace and neutralised any government counteroffensive. But the conspirators’ triumph was not clear until noon, when they took all the pro-government posts.¹⁴³ According to some sources, Castillo believed that the interior headquarters would be able to defend him; in fact, he was still navigating in the Drummond in the afternoon of 4 June until he resigned in La Plata some hours later.¹⁴⁴ The president failed to use repression that would likely have weakened or disrupted his military adversaries.

Table 1 synthesises the five critical events between November 1942 and June 1943 that affected the democratic breakdown.

Conclusions

Democrats’ erratic choices matter for explaining regime change. Presidents’ prominent role in presidential governance systems, particularly in Latin America, is crucial to understanding democratic breakdown or stability. More concretely, presidents’ interactions with regime insiders and outsiders – commonly, key political and military actors – are essential for determining regimes’ trajectories. Especially in critical junctures, when structural and institutional factors are relaxed, presidents’ optimal vis-à-vis non-optimal behaviour can make a difference between gaining or losing the support of the previously mentioned actors and deciding the regime’s fate.

Our within-case analysis via process-tracing exhibits how Castillo’s mistakes in the period eight months before the coup ushered in the fall of conservative democracy in Argentina. Our counterfactual analysis reveals that the former president had multiple alternative courses of action in the November 1942–June 1943 critical juncture. However, Castillo’s tragic choices at five critical events triggered the fall of democracy. These events were: (i) the appointment of Ramírez as the new war minister, (ii) the designation of Patrón Costas as his successor in office, followed by (iii) refusing to negotiate with the Buenos Aires conservatives, (iv) disregarding Ramírez’s disloyalty, and (v) his negotiations with the military conspirators. After accessing vital information sources through archival work to trace Castillo’s

¹⁴¹The ‘brinkmanship’ interaction model between the government and the military predicts a high risk of political instability and ‘overt military interventions’. For more information, see Svulik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.

¹⁴²Martínez, *Historia*, p. 5.

¹⁴³Gontrán de Güemes, *Así se gestó la dictadura*, pp. 32–5.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 36.

Table 1. Castillo's Taken and Alternative Courses of Action at the Critical Events

Critical events / course of action	Alternative course of action I	Alternative course of action II	Taken course of action
Event 1: Appointment of a new war minister (November 1942)	Keep Tonazzi as minister and negotiate a political truce with General Justo	Appoint another anti- <i>justista</i> but professional general (e.g. Mario Fincati)	Appoint Ramírez, an obscure nationalist general who turned out to be disloyal
Event 2: Successor's designation in office (February 1943)	Choose a nationalist candidate to consolidate his alliance with the nationalist officers	Negotiate the future candidate with the Concordancia forces	Unilaterally choose Patrón Costas, a pro-Allies and pro-fraud politician against the desires of most of the armed forces
Event 3: Refusing to negotiate with the Buenos Aires conservatives (March/April 1943)	Negotiate and appoint Moreno as vice-president with the Buenos Aires conservatives' support	Negotiate and choose another presidential candidate with the Buenos Aires conservatives' support	Refuse any negotiation and maintain chosen candidacies
Event 4: Indifference to Ramírez's disloyalty (May/June 1943)	Immediate removal from office	Keep Ramírez in office and accept his demands	Interrogate Ramírez and delay his removal
Event 5: Negotiations with the conspirators (1-4 June 1943)	Immediate repression of the conspiracy	Negotiate with the conspirators and accept their demands	Make Ramírez command the negotiations with the plotters

Note: The rows represent the critical events; the columns, Castillo's alternative and taken courses of action.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

alternative vis-à-vis taken courses of action, we confirmed that his errors played a crucial role in destabilising the military and political arenas, thus leading to the democratic fall.

Most political-agency frameworks underscore incumbents' purposive actions to explain regime change. We concentrate instead on rulers' mistakes. Following Treisman's recent study, we show how not only democracy but also autocratisation processes can be triggered by mistake. Just like autocrats, democrats must also maintain reliable relationships with regime insiders and outsiders to stay in office and secure the regime's survival.

Castillo's stubbornness and lack of creativity, together with his calculation and information misperceptions, led him to commit grave strategic errors that both fragmented regime insiders and fuelled outsiders' discontent. Regarding his ruling

coalition, Castillo delegated power to an agent (Ramírez) who turned out to be more motivated with pursuing autocratisation than with defending the status quo (critical event i) and avoidably alienated civilian (critical event iii) and military elites (critical event iv). Concerning the opposition, Patrón Costas' designation (critical event ii) was a significant policy failure that alienated crucial civilian and military opponents. Additionally, he delayed repressing the conspirators (critical event v). As our critical-event analysis has revealed, Castillo jump-started a chain of errors to produce the democratic fall, demonstrating how complex the process of a regime change can be.

Our article reveals how democrats' mistakes can set off autocratisation processes in an extreme, 'old school' case of democratic breakdown where the military staged a coup d'état. Future studies could use a critical-event framework to scrutinise leaders' poor choices and better comprehend more subtle variants of democratic erosion.¹⁴⁵ Typically portrayed as a deliberate choice by populist leaders, democrats' mistakes may also contribute to the current wave of democratic regression. Democratic incumbents' missteps can empower actors with undemocratic goals (e.g. judges or media companies) who might push for autocratic measures such as diminishing freedom of expression or making elections less competitive, among others. For this reason, scholars must not overlook democrats' errors in their relationship with regime insiders and outsiders when examining democratic backsliding dynamics.

Being attuned to presidents' mistakes may also increase our understanding of other relevant outcomes, from party alliances to nuclear escalations. Therefore, analysing leaders' decisions to determine whether they are optimal or not in different policy areas is essential for establishing a more realistic account of political phenomena. Investigating leaders' mistakes – not necessarily presidents, but also prime ministers, union leaders, governors, and other politically powerful actors – should not be disregarded to explain significant developments in comparative research.

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Errores de demócratas y el nacimiento del régimen autoritario: Ramón S. Castillo y la caída de la democracia conservadora en la Argentina

El 4 de junio de 1943, un golpe militar hizo sucumbir la democracia argentina, marcando el fin de la era oligárquica y 'sembrando las semillas' del peronismo. Este caso permite iluminar cómo los errores de líderes políticos pueden funcionar como una variable independiente clave para producir cambios de régimen. Argumentamos que el ex-presidente conservador, Ramón S. Castillo, provocó una ruptura democrática que era evitable. Específicamente, las relaciones fallidas de Castillo con actores internos y externos del régimen erosionaron sin intención la estabilidad política y provocaron la caída de la

¹⁴⁵Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2017).

democracia. Hasta ahora, los análisis académicos enfocados en actores no han rastreado suficientemente los errores de los dirigentes en el poder para vincularlos a los procesos de cambio de régimen. Testeamos el argumento llevando a cabo un estudio de caso de la caída de la democracia argentina a principios de los 1940s, escrutinando los errores del presidente en cinco eventos críticos. Concluimos que el análisis de eventos críticos puede ayudar a desenredar el rol de los errores de líderes políticos en otros episodios de cambio de régimen.

Palabras clave: errores presidenciales; cambio de régimen; análisis de caso; eventos críticos; Argentina

Erros dos democratas e o nascimento do regime autoritário: Ramón S. Castillo e a queda da democracia conservadora na Argentina

Em 4 de junho de 1943, um golpe militar esmagou a democracia argentina, marcando o fim da era oligárquica e ‘plantando as sementes’ do peronismo. Este caso lança luz sobre como os erros dos governantes podem operar como uma variável independente fundamental na produção de mudanças de regime. Argumentamos que o ex-presidente conservador, Ramón S. Castillo, provocou uma ruptura democrática evitável. Especificamente, as relações equivocadas de Castillo com atores de dentro e de fora do regime corroeram involuntariamente a estabilidade política e desencadearam a queda da democracia. Até agora, estudos acadêmicos focados nos atores não conseguiram rastrear os erros dos mandatários e vinculá-los aos processos de mudança de regime. Testamos o argumento realizando um estudo de caso da queda democrática da Argentina no início dos anos 1940, examinando os erros do presidente em cinco eventos críticos. Concluimos que a análise de eventos críticos pode ajudar a desvendar o papel dos erros dos líderes políticos em outros episódios de mudança de regime.

Palavras-chave: erros presidenciais; mudança de regime; análise de caso; eventos críticos; Argentina

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