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ARGENTINA

Peronism and Inclusionary Populist Adaptation to the Pandemic

Germán Lodola and Luisina Perelmiter

In mid-December 2019, a grand Peronist coalition returned to power in Argentina after beating in the first round of a polarized presidential race a center-right and utterly anti-populist alliance led by Mauricio Macri, who was seeking reelection. In an unexpected move, the candidacy of the newly elected President Alberto Fernández—a mainstream party leader with no personal electoral base, who served as cabinet chief during the left-populist Peronist presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015)—was decided by the still very popular but also highly polarizing former president. Cristina Fernández relinquished the presidential position and decided to run as vice president, thus bringing together a mosaic of Peronist factions that had been fragmented in their opposition to Macri’s market-oriented policies into a powerful electoral vehicle, the Front of All (*Frente de Todos*).

Within the complex political space of Argentine Peronism and in a hyperpolarized context, Alberto Fernández was about as un-populist as one could find. His candidacy was a deliberate sign of moderation for the party and the electorate; it was an attempt to temper deep rivalries and then make Peronism a unified viable project. However, as moderate as he is, Fernández still had to navigate the storm at the head of a political party regarded as synonymous with Latin American populism, and he had to do so in alliance with the party’s key populist leader (and vice president) and the manifestly populist current that she leads.

Only four months after the government came to power, while it was initiating the renegotiation of the country’s sovereign debt and the annual inflation rate peaked at 54%, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a pandemic. Despite its populist credentials, the government’s approach to managing the crisis contradicts the textbook model that recent versions of right-wing (exclusionary) populism like Trump in the US and Bolsonaro

in Brazil mobilized. Critically, unlike them, Fernández promptly took on board health recommendations, adopted stringent measures, including compulsory nationwide lockdowns, condemned negationist practices and—claiming to represent “the Argentines” as a whole—established a science-driven and heroic discourse that convoked “the people” to fight against a common threat following experts’ advice. Although the lockdown measures had demobilizing effects, the government made explicit efforts to mobilize political, scientific, material and human resources to craft a unifying, national response. It was actually a liberal, more technocratic and pro-market fraction of the opposition which—supported by the media—deployed a radicalized discourse infused with anti-populist scapegoating characterizing the government as authoritarian and a rhetoric that questioned expert knowledge, dichotomized options into “health versus the economy,” fueled social discontent by encouraging demonstrations against lockdowns and expressed doubts about the vaccines’ effectiveness and safety.

The results of the government’s management of the crisis were mixed. In July 2020, within months of the onset of the pandemic, Argentina was in the middle of global rankings for the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths, well below the Americas’ average and close to the global average (Our World in Data 2020, 2021). A year later, the country had moved up in both rankings. With around 0.5% of the global population, Argentina accounted for nearly 2.4% of cases and declared fatalities, more than four times the global average. Performance in terms of vaccination—and excess mortality—is notably better. With almost 58% of the population having received at least one dose, Argentina ranks at the forefront of the pandemic response in this respect.

This chapter examines how the Fernández administration followed a markedly different approach to the crisis from that of other well-known populist governments. However, we claim that the Argentine government’s response to the pandemic was still populist, but of a very different sort, rooted in the political logic and ideational framing of left-wing (inclusionary) populism.

The chapter first describes the nature of the Peronist governing coalition, then discusses the attributes of an inclusionary populist model adapted to the pandemic. Finally, it describes the policies and rhetoric deployed by the Fernández government in reaction to COVID-19 and its consequences.

The grand Peronist coalition

Only four years after having been defeated by a right-of-center and deeply anti-populist coalition, Peronism returned to power in a country where politics has for decades been played out in a bipolar Peronist–anti-Peronist divide. President Alberto Fernández was the singular product of political polarization. In many countries, polarization gave rise to extremist and anti-political establishment competitive forces. But in Argentina, the resilient Peronist movement pragmatically adopted a more moderate stance than in the past, so as to assemble a winning coalition of left-populist organizations and insider party elites, and thus

make Fernández's own maxim a reality: "With Cristina, it is not [yet] enough and without her, it is impossible" (Página 12 2018).

Repeating a historical pattern, Peronism returned in a coalitional format, a federal magma of well-established factions in which four identifiable groups coexist (Longa and Vázquez 2020; Murillo and Zarazaga 2020). First, the left-populist *kirchnerista* camp, by far the dominant faction, includes territorially rooted social movements, dissident unions and *La Cámpora*, a powerful and combative youth wing led by the Kirchners' son. Second, a diverse group of conservative factions which includes labor unions and governors from local Peronist expressions and allied provincial parties. Third, there are a number of non-*kirchnerista* Peronist mayors from Buenos Aires province, who backed some Kirchners' challengers in the past. And fourth, there is a right-leaning faction led by the most important of those challengers, Sergio Massa, who returned to the fold to become president of the Chamber of Deputies.

This scheme of power in which authority is dispersed among partisan leaders with capacity for autonomous expression differs radically from populisms of Latin America's left turn in the 2000s, like the Kirchners, which concentrated power in the hands of a dominant personality (Levitsky and Roberts 2011). As a Pan-Peronist coalition, the Fernández government provided incentives for moderation, both in its discourse and policies. However, at the same time, its origins and identity were intrinsically linked to the majoritarian populist faction, which, rallied around Cristina Fernández's undisputable leadership, remained the core coalitional member, while the other factions—including that led by Alberto Fernández—were unable to expand politically. This particular fusion of moderate party elites and dominant populist organizations made the Argentine government's management of the pandemic an adapted version of the left-wing (inclusionary) populist script.

The inclusionary populist model

Compared to other experiences in the continent, the case of Argentina during the pandemic deviates from the common populist libretto and in many respects is its reversed image. Nonetheless, we argue that the Peronist government mediated and "performed" its approach to dealing with the disease and that this "performance of crisis" (Moffitt 2015) carried the roots of Latin American left-wing (inclusionary) populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), which is statist, mobilizational and redistributive. Thus, the Argentine government's response entailed both a cultural and a political economy dimension of populism.

First, the Fernández administration assigned a decisive role to state action rather than personalistic leadership. In an unprecedented move, Peronism in power did not mobilize its supporters—"the people"—against a common threat. It actually demobilized them by taking some of the strictest measures in the democratic world to contain the disease and crafting public slogans such as "stay home" (*quedate en casa*). However, at the same time, the government harnessed the

power of the state apparatus to mobilize resources nationwide so as to strengthen the debilitated public health system, provide incentives to the local scientific community and promote mass vaccination. Second, it fed a heroic discourse, presenting a picture of an epic of confinement that sought to give sense to Argentines' collective suffering and illuminating the light at the end of the tunnel. The rhetoric employed was strategically pedagogical and science-driven rather than belligerent and negationist, at odds with the message of radicalized populists. Third and finally, this approach was coupled with a generous social policy package for low-income workers and those in the informal sector, a systemic electoral base of support for Peronism. These compensatory policies, which required a significant level of public spending, were adopted in an inherited environment of mounting inflation, economic stagnation and tremendous fiscal challenges that precluded macro-level populist redistribution.

The response

The Argentine government reacted swiftly and decisively to the health crisis by adopting strict measures. The images of death in the boreal winter, the increasing global consensus that the virus represented a real threat (as confirmed by the WHO on March 10) and the certainty of community transmission in the country led Fernández on March 20 to decree a comprehensive and compulsory nationwide lockdown despite the fact that Argentina, a nation of 40 million people, had registered only 8,371 cases and three deaths (WHO 2020). The quarantine decree, named Compulsory and Preventive Social Isolation (ASPO), severely restricted circulation, canceled nonessential activities (i.e., all but healthcare-related, food shopping and delivery services) and prohibited people from leaving their homes except for emergencies and to buy provisions. Moreover, the government closed the borders, schools and universities, public spaces and most businesses. The WHO standard recommendations regarding social distancing and mask-wearing were strictly adhered to. Other recommendations, including extensive testing, isolation of those who had contracted the disease, contact tracing, quarantining of contacts and the role of asymptomatic transmission, were not fully understood by the authorities and thus more leniently adopted (Feierstein 2021). This may be a factor that potentially accounts for similar end results for Argentina and other countries which followed less restrictive policies.

The government's resolute action had the support of provincial governors and mayors. Unlike his federal colleagues in Brazil, Mexico and the US, Fernández neither abdicated responsibility for managing the COVID-19 crisis, delegating it to subnational and local executives, nor did he promote conflictual relations with them. Rather, he led efforts to impose a negotiated set of uniform responses nationwide (Giraudy, Niedzwiecki, and Pribble 2020). In a sign of federal coordination and political moderation, the first mandatory quarantine period was announced in a televised speech which featured the president accompanied by governors from the main opposition parties, the Kirchnerism and the so-called

Federal Peronism, that is, provincial non-*kirchnerista* Peronist forces. Later, continuing to promote the image of a consensual leadership, a “quarantine triumvirate” composed of Fernández, the *kirchnerista* governor of Buenos Aires province, Axel Kicillof, and his counterpart from City of Buenos Aires and leader of the opposition, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, used further televised broadcasts to announce the successive extensions of lockdown policies. As time passed, the national administration maintained an interventionist agenda but introduced a geographically “segmentation” of federal coordination (Goyburu 2020), gradually conferring to governors—first in the peripheral provinces and later in the metropolitan area—increasing autonomy to implement national restrictions and authorize the resumption of activities according to their different epidemiologic realities.

Although the opposition grouped together under the Together for Change (*Juntos por el Cambio* [JC]) coalition, which in 2015 for the first time allowed conservative and economic elites to win the presidency by democratic means (Murillo and Levitsky 2019), agreed that the country was facing an epidemiological crisis, it was divided over how to interpret events. The fear that the healthcare system could suddenly collapse moderated the increasing anti-lockdown posture of Rodríguez Larreta’s center-right faction. In contrast, the national leadership of JC and right-wing sectors led by Macri radicalized their attitudes and developed a negationist stance. With the support of an active group of journalists and media institutions, particularly *La Nación* and *Grupo Clarín*—with whom the Kirchners had experienced a radical confrontation, including a congressional law that limited the expansion of media conglomerates (Lodola and Kitzberger 2017)—the more conservative sectors organized a series of public demonstrations, promoted pot-banging in major cities and escalated an ideational dispute with the government. Using a conspiratorial and republican discourse, they interpreted regulations limiting mobility as being an erosion of economic and civil rights, a dangerous move toward communism, a sure path to becoming “Argenzuela” (in reference to Maduro’s autocratic regime). They accused the Fernández administration of leading an “infecto-dictatorship” (*infectadura*), a sort of autocracy led by epidemiologists, and exercising “sanitary terrorism” (La Nación 2020). Later on, in December 2020 when the government signed an agreement with Russia regarding the provision of the SPUTNIK V vaccine, the fiery JC national leader, Elisa Carrió, filed legal charges against the president and his Minister of Health, Ginés González García, accusing them of poisoning Argentines.

Contrary to other populist leaders who cultivated a confrontational and anti-scientific discourse, Fernández developed a science-driven communication style based on international medical recommendations and expert knowledge provided by a nonpartisan presidential committee of epidemiologists and infectiologists (Fernández Escudero 2020). As long as the strategy to contain the disease was successful, the president exploited his university professor image (he does, in fact, teach law at the university) in regular televised announcements (Cané 2021). It was common to see Fernández showing data and slide presentations in which

he compared the effects of Argentina's policies with those of other countries, and discussed forthcoming measures so as the population could be more prepared. At a certain point, these televised announcements became more sporadic and were eventually abandoned.

However, it was not only the pandemic that made the government adopt a science-driven approach. The emergency reinforced a legacy of major expansion in funding for public education and scientific research experienced under the Kirchners' administrations. It also brought to the forefront solid links established during the 2019 presidential campaign between the Front of All and the local scientific community, particularly from the realm of social sciences, which gathered to oppose Macri's adjustment policies and his openly manifested disdain for public education and national scientific institutions. Indeed, some of the government's highest officials and many other civil servants were recruited from the ranks of Argentine public academia.

Perhaps not anticipating the roughness of the days ahead, on March 1, 2020, during his speech to the opening of the 138th session of Congress, Fernández stressed this attribute as a distinctive feature of his administration and as the counterbalance to Macri's elitist government, stating (*emphasis added*):

We need to strengthen our scientific and technology system. We began by expanding the income of national researchers and increasing the number of scholarships for our young people. We are going to reverse the trend of budgetary decline observed in recent years. I am proud to have incorporated numerous Argentine scientists into the government. *We are a government with scientists, not with CEOs.* A government with the conviction that knowledge is key for public policies and development.

(Fernández 2020)

The strict shutdown policies gave rise to a discourse with heroic components, an "epic of confinement." However, this rhetoric, which may have been effective in generating the support of public opinion, at least initially, cannot be considered populist as it was not designed to divide the society, but rather to demobilize it, with explicit appeals to stay home. Indeed, more than fostering populist mobilization, in Argentina the COVID-19 pandemic operated as a "natural" limitation to it.

Demobilization had an effect on the political dynamics of the governing coalition, as social movements of informal workers and unemployed people—and, to a lesser extent, the labor unions—were severely restricted in their repertoires of contention and consequently in their capacity to help the government obtain credit for its policies and decisions. Emilio Pérsico, leader of the Evita Movement, one of the most powerful territorial organizations within the *kirchnerista* camp, highlighted the demobilizing impact of the pandemic, affirming:

We need to get out into the street...without the street it is difficult for us to mobilize...If we need to, we can mobilize 200,000 people in seconds, we

fill the highway with *negros*. If Vicentín [a bankrupt agro-export giant the government mentioned could be nationalized] were to happen today, there would be a million people supporting the expropriation...We are missing an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate our power in the street...but we cannot find a way around the pandemic.

(Abal Medina and Santucho 2020)

The health crisis also affected mobilization “in” the state, that is, the state apparatus’ working routines and the bureaucratic styles typical of socially rooted party organizations like Peronism, which require territorial presence and physical proximity (Perelmiter 2016). The closure of public welfare offices limited an everyday resource mobilization which consists in physically—and culturally—connecting the state with “the people.” This limitation was partially counterbalanced by the decisive action of territorial social movements, which gained influence over the implementation of social and health policies in poor neighborhoods (Vommaro 2019; Abers, Rossi, and von Bülow 2021). Moreover, new bureaucratic routines to counterbalance the breakdown of state normality were adopted, for example, enabling virtual contact with social beneficiaries (Arcidiácono and Perelmiter 2021).

At the same time, the government found state intervention to be an adequate tool for providing a populist response to the demobilizing effect of the pandemic. By exploiting state power, it mobilized sanitary and human resources across the territory. In this way, the government crafted an alliance with representatives of the local scientific network and the Argentine pharmaceutical industry, the biggest investor in research and development (R&D) of the country’s economy and a regional export leader with the technological capacity to produce COVID-19 vaccines. Moreover, resorting to state action was an obvious shortcut to polarize with Macri, who had drastically cut healthcare spending during his mandate and eroded the public system by dismantling the Ministry of Health, a symbol of social welfare, and downgrading it to a secretariat.

First, the national administration strengthened the debilitated and asymmetric public health system. It increased the number of intensive care units, centralized the purchase and delivery of ventilators for the provinces, built a dozen modular hospitals for the care and isolation of non-severe cases in universities, sport clubs and cultural centers, extended the network of COVID-19 diagnostics and assigned more than 1,000 itinerant health workers to subnational and local jurisdictions.

Second, the government relied heavily on the national scientific system. It created the interministerial Coronavirus COVID-19 Unit (which centralized projects, infrastructure and equipment required to carry out diagnostics and research), financed the development of clinical trials on treating the virus using a hyperimmune serum developed with antibodies from horses, promoted the production of a biocidal social chinstrap (known as the “CONICET chinstrap,” in reference to the national agency involved in its production) and supported the

development of six COVID-19 vaccines in national universities in cooperation with private laboratories.

Finally, more than anything, the government of Alberto Fernández aimed at implementing mass vaccination. Argentina is a country with a long tradition of vaccination, where the state finances a large number of free and compulsory vaccines. Furthermore, anti-vaxxers still constitute a small and silent minority. As in most Latin American countries, the success of the government's vaccination program was and continues to be associated with the conditions of the production and commercialization of vaccines worldwide (Luna 2021). There are dozens of vaccine projects in the region, but only the Cuban Sovereign 01 has reached the clinical trial stage so far. For this reason, Argentina played all its cards. It riskily signed an agreement with Russia on the SPUTNIK V vaccine, although it has been rejected by parts of the scientific community, participated with Mexico in the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine through the mAbxience laboratory and took part in clinical trials for the Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and Sinopharm vaccines (Luna 2021).

The vaccination process experienced a series of ups and downs, including missteps associated with vaccines that did not arrive on time, and a political scandal linked to some known people jumping the queue for vaccinations, which led to the early resignation of González García and damaged the government's public image (Goldman and Picco 2021). All in all, the Fernández administration managed to launch a comprehensive health strategy that privileged the application of the first dose. As of July 2021, 40% of Argentines have received one dose of the vaccine, but only 18% have had both doses (Our World in Data 2021).

As occurred on the health front, the government also mobilized resources to support the implementation of social and labor policies to compensate its core constituents. These policies were rapidly implemented, comprehensive in scope and implied a significant budgetary effort given critical economic constraints (Etchemendy, Espinosa, and Pastrana 2021). As a result of Macri's largest International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in history—worth US\$57 billion—and consequent austerity measures, Argentina had fallen into a recession that had made it the worst performer in Latin America aside from Nicaragua and Venezuela (ECLAC 2019).

With regard to formal workers, as soon as the first lockdown was declared, the government announced the temporary extension of unemployment insurance, issued a decree to prohibit layoffs and unilateral work time reductions and set up the Assistance to Work and Production program (*Asistencia al Trabajo y la Producción* [ATP]), which included subsidies that amounted the equivalent of double the minimum wage. The ATP was often combined with furlough schemes organized jointly with business associations and unions that together covered 75% of the gross wage in critical sectors. The government also reduced employers' payroll contributions and granted 0% interest loans for self-employed workers.

Moreover, the Fernández administration extended existing programs and enacted new measures to protect informal workers. It announced extra payments

to those covered by noncontributory social protection programs, including conditional cash transfer program for children and adolescents, income support for the disabled and noncontributory pensions. Second, it established the Emergency Family Income (*Ingreso Familiar de Emergencia* [IFE]) for those in the existing non-contributory programs, the unemployed, the self-employed in lower-income categories and domestic workers. Both programs combined were estimated to have 10 million recipients. The International Labor Organization placed Argentina among the top 12 countries in the world in terms of job and income protection in its response to the pandemic (International Trade Union Confederation 2020).

Conclusion

The case of Argentina deviates from the populist scrip written by rightist, exclusionary leaders; indeed, in many respects, it constitutes the polar opposite. Although the Fernández government's management of the crisis was also manifestly populist, it was of a quite different nature, anchored in the logic and beliefs of Latin American left-wing inclusionary populism. In the context of the health emergency, the government, a broad-based Peronist alliance of moderate party elites and a dominant populist organization commanded by the party's central populist leader, relied on the power of the state apparatus to harness political, material, scientific and human resources to develop a cohesive, national response with an inclusive coalition. Rather than trying to polarize and divide the society, the adapted inclusionary Peronism offered "the Argentines" a heroic collective reason to combat an external threat. As conceived, Argentina's case shows that there is not a single populist guide but a menu of populist templates, which express different—and sometimes opposite—ideological principles.

One as yet unsolved puzzle about Argentina should motivate future research, namely the fact that despite the aggressive measures and rather technocratic approach taken to contain the disease, the end result was a tragedy of substantial proportions.

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