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**“*PRESIDEBILISMO*” IN SOUTH AMERICA:**

**THE ARGENTINEAN CASE**

1. **Introduction**

South American countries have enjoyed a stable and uninterrupted democracy in the last 20 years. While the democratic transition stage appears to be completed, democratic consolidation still requires more attention. This is so since democratic stability cannot be automatically interpreted as government stability. Indeed, several presidents have been removed from office or have prematurely ended their term. In the last 27 years, twelve out of seventeen presidential breakdowns throughout the world have taken place in South America. While some South American presidents have been overthrown by military means, others have voluntarily resigned or removed by institutional mechanisms. This is a unique phenomenon especially considering that South American countries have characterized by giving strong constitutional powers to the president *vis-à-vis* the legislature. Thus, how come that many presidents have not been able to complete their term in South America? This phenomenon can be depicted as *presidebilismo*: presidents facing high risks of presidential breakdown in countries where they are endowed with strong formal powers[[1]](#footnote-1). Hence, the objective of this paper is to explain how and which factors drive *presidebilismo*.

In the following section I will review the literature on presidential failures by looking at the three major determinants: institutional, economic, and social. In addition, I will describe how these different approaches explain *presidebilismo*. Section III addresses the operationalization of the explanatory model that I propose; the conceptualization of the study variables, the selection of cases, and the method I will employ. In section IV, I will analyze the presidencies of the cases that I selected by looking at how executive-legislative relations, economic conditions, and mass mobilizations interact to finally affect *presidebilismo*. In the final part of this work, I present the conclusions, limitations and needs for further research.

1. **Literature review: the causes of *Presidebilismo***

Even though presidents’ premature ending of their terms in office is not a recent phenomenon, the scholarship has only recently started to address this phenomenon. Most of these works have focused on the causes or processes that led to such outcomes, the different types of premature presidential endings, and their consequences. Whereas some research has looked at the problem of presidential instability from a broader perspective, including countries from more than one geographical region (Baumgartner and Kada, 2003; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; Kim and Bahry, 2008); others have paid closer attention to Latin America and South America due to their high number of interrupted presidencies (Valenzuela, 2004; Negretto, 2006; Hochstetler, 2006; Hochstetler and Edward, 2009; Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010).

**Institutional determinants:**

The interrupted presidencies issue has been related to the so-called inherent instability of presidential regimes (Alvarez and Marsteintredet, 2010). In comparing presidential and parliamentary regimes, Linz (1990) argues that even when both systems face executive crisis, in parliamentary systems this would become a “government crisis,” whereas in presidential systems this would constitute “regime crisis” (p. 65). This is due to the dual democratic legitimacy in presidential systems, where the president (who is, simultaneously, head of government and the state) and the legislature are popularly elected for fixed and independent terms (Linz, 1994, p. 6). Linz (1994) provides several examples where executive crisis in Latin American countries later on turned out on regime crisis during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Linz (1994), times when executive and legislature are deadlocked can be especially “complex and threatening” in presidential systems for there is no democratic principle or rule that can solve such a conflict (p. 7).

Kim and Bahry’s (2008) work on interrupted presidencies on third wave democracies shows that divided governments, where the legislature is controlled by different parties or coalitions from the executive; low first-round vote share; and party fragmentation increase the odds of president’s resignation and removal. Mustapic (2010) points to the Congress as the key institutional feature of presidential democracy. She argues that the legislature would allow for institutional resolution of government crisis similarly to what the legislative branch does in parliamentary systems. Indeed, Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010) state that legislative action stands as the “main force” driving presidencies’ premature end (p. 216), which might be derived from low president’s share of votes in the legislature (p. 220). Negretto’s (2006) findings show that minority governments increase the likelihood of presidential breakdown. Nonetheless, Cheibub’s (2002) research on presidential democracies shows that presidentialism is neither related to deadlocks, minority governments, nor conflicts; thus, presidential breakdowns would not be affected by them.

Pérez-Liñán (2007) states that presidents would need a “legislative shield” to protect them from social mobilization. This “shield” requires a sufficient share of members of parliament that would support them, which in turns needs cohesive and disciplined parties. Valenzuela (1994) argues Latin American presidents are especially weak and constantly threatened by the little support of “fragmented parties with little or no internal discipline” (p. 12). He also adds that under minority governments presidents usually undergo serious troubles to generate “legislative support,” even from his/her own party (Valenzuela, 2004, p. 12). Indeed, in presidential regimes there seems to be a lack of incentives for executive-party cooperation. This is so since e.g. opposition’s politicians see strong presidents as threatening to their own interests, whilst it is preferable to avoid relations with weak presidents (Valenzuela, 2004, p. 13). Mustapic (2010) explains that in a two-party system it is less likely that president would be backed up by the legislature for the opposition has no major incentives for sharing the “costs of the crisis with the government party” (p. 23).

Mainwaring and Shugart’s (1997) work brings up more nuances to the discussion of institutional variables by assessing the interaction between party system and presidentialism during times of crisis. They find that the interaction between presidentialism and party system also affects the level stability/consolidation of democracy, where fragmented party systems and undisciplined parties make the system more unstable. In addition, several researchers have shown the difficulty for holding long-lasting party coalitions in presidential regimes (Deheza, 1998; Thibaut, 1998; Amorim Neto, 2006). However, this does not mean that long-lived coalitions are not possible in presidential systems. For example, Chile and Brazil have enjoyed successful coalitions since both returned to democracy (Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010). This would be possible since coalitions in presidential regimes work under two different dynamics. Lijphart (1999) explains that presidential regimes are by definition minimal winning coalitions when it comes to the presidency; but they also can be minimal winning, oversized, or minority cabinets regarding to legislative support (p. 105).

**Economic factors:**

Others have stressed the role of economic performance on presidential breakdowns (Negretto, 2006, Hochstetler, 2006; Kim and Bahry, 2008; Alvarez and Marsteintredet, 2010; and Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010). Government stability might be threatened by high rates of inflation and slow economic growth. For instance, Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010) find that economic growth proved to have a significant effect on presidential breakdowns (p. 220). They also show that a common feature of most interrupted presidencies have been economic mismanagement by the government, something which Hochstetler and Edward (2009) agree. Kim and Bahry (2008) show that a poor economic performance increases the likelihood of presidents “leaving office early.” Negretto (2006) complements this argument by claiming that premature presidential endings usually take place amid social mobilization triggered by “unpopular economic policies” (p. 87).

In addition, Alvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) posit that both democratic and presidential breakdowns share some basic determinants that influence them, e.g., economic performance and social mobilization (Alvarez and Marsteintredet, 2010, p. 49). It is worth noting Przeworski and Limongi’s (1997) findings about the relationship between economic development and democratization. They (1997) find that countries with a declining economy with a *per capita* income between $1,000 and $2,000 face more troubles when it comes to democracy’s survival than countries with $1,000 or less but with a growing economy (p. 177). This might help to understand the challenges that South American states may face when it comes to president’s instability. However, even when democratic and presidential breakdowns might share some common causes, their outcomes are fairly different. For instance, in South America after 1978 all presidential breakdowns have been followed by civilian governments, not military governments (Hochstetler, 2006). Likewise, Alvarez and Marsteintredet (2010) point out that, even when presidential regimes are unstable (as Linz would argue), in the last decades this instability has not translated into a systemic failure, instead into a government crisis.

**Social mobilization:**

Another factor driving presidential instability has been social mobilization (Hochstetler, 2006; Kim and Bahry, 2008; Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009; Llanos and Marsteintredet, 2010. People on the street demanding the president’s ouster has usually been triggered by political scandals and poor economic performance. Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010) find that street protests are not statistically significant for explaining presidents’ early endings of their terms in office. In fact, they (2010) posit that institutional variables such as the executive-legislative relationship play a greater role in presidential breakdowns (p. 223). In contrast, Hochstetler (2006) argues that social movements do affect presidents’ ousters especially when linked to legislative actions. Hochstetler (2006) defines this as a “mutually reinforcing collaborative action” that has been able to successfully depose presidents from office in South America. She (2006) also claims that when institutional means have not found people’s support, motions for removing presidents have not worked out; however, social mobilization by their own have often turned out successful (p. 409). Kim and Bahry (2008) support Hochstetler’s findings, and also point out the importance of social mobilization. Kim and Bahry (2008) even state that in Latin America social mobilizations have stronger effects on presidential stability when compared with African countries. Additionally, Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) show that high levels of perception of corruption and the number of deaths as a result of governments’ repression against protesters have significant effects on explaining the failure/success of challenges to the presidents. Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) highlight the increasing role of exogenous factors driving presidential stability, such as mass mobilizations. By only taking into account institutional variables (e.g. minority governments) it becomes harder to explain presidents’ premature ending of their terms in office (Hochstetler and Edwards, 2009).

**Understanding the causal chain of presidential breakdowns:**

The major factors affecting presidential breakdowns identified in the literature review are institutional, which mainly stress the executive-legislative relationships. Among non-institutional factors, it was found the role of mass mobilization, poor economic performance, scandals in which the president has been directly involved, number of death protesters, and corruption. The relation among these factors can be understood either by following the explanations by Llanos and Marsteintredet (2010); or by Hochstetler and Edwards (2009), and Kim and Bahry (2008). On the one hand, the role of executive-legislative relations becomes more relevant for explaining the final outcome. Minority government may be sufficient to depose the president from office when political and/or economic crisis take place regardless mass mobilizations’ presence and strength. According to Hochstetler’s (2006), and Kim and Bahry’s (2008), after political scandals or economic crisis take place, the president’s survival hinges around social mobilization. The legislative action and street protests may nurture from each other to depose the president. Although mass mobilizations might be so strong that by their own may determine the outcome (Figure 1). Under minority government situations the opposition might be even less likely to support the government and share the responsibility about political costs derived from economic crisis and street protests’ repression.

**Figure 1:** Causal paths and interactions of *Presidebilismo*’s determinants

Poor Economic Performance

Scandals

**Presidebilismo**

Minority government

Mass Mobilization

1. **Research Design**

**The Model: two structural determinants and one precipitant**

It is important to note that there is a closer relation between economic crisis/scandals and mass mobilization than between economic crisis/scandals and minority government. Mass mobilizations usually arise in response to poor economic conditions. For instance, Corrrales (2002) posits that in less stable democracies when the economy performs poorly, people mobilize in order to protest against the government and politicians that (they believe) are corrupt, while exhibiting strong “anti-establishment sentiments” (p. 37). Mass mobilizations then are the last visual reaction of economic crises. Leaving out political scandals, street protests seem unlikely to appear under good economic conditions. Thus, an economic crisis becomes a necessary condition for the upsurge of mass mobilizations, which can also affect their strength and length.

In turn, minority governments are not necessarily a consequence of economic crisis. It is true that a ruling party or a coalition may be electorally punished by its economic mismanagements, but that would not its only cause. Intra-party struggles, coalition breakdowns, ideological confrontations, government’s inability to deliver electoral promises, executives that does not compromise with other parties, and electoral rules are some examples of minority governments’ causes. Whereas economic crisis and mass mobilizations are closely related; economic crisis and minority governments work under different dynamics.

Therefore, the model that I propose will look at the probability of *presidebilismo* by focusing on the economic conditions and minority governments. Yet, it is implied in this model that as greater the severity of the economic crisis, higher is the likelihood of having more and stronger street protests. Mass mobilizations are understood as “precipitant” or “triggers” of presidential early departure, which may speed up presidential removal. As Figure 2 shows, the prospect for president’s survival is lowest under poor economic conditions and minority government; whereas it is the highest when the economy does well and the executive’s party controls the legislature. The interaction between economic crisis and minority government sets the scenario within which political actors will perform. For example, the civil society, students’ organizations, and unions become relevant actors that might achieve their goals under these structural conditions.

**Figure 2:** Interaction Economic Situation, Minority Government and Presidential Ouster Risk

High

***Presidential Ouster Risk***

Low

Bad Good

**Economic Situation**

**Majority Government Minority Government**

Figure 3 shows how the two structural determinants interact and how these interactions may increase or reduce presidential survival. For instance, when both structural conditions met in quadrant “C” prospects for presidential survival are at the minimum, whereas quadrant “B” represents that the elected president has the highest chances to remain in office. Either if the structural determinants simultaneously concur in quadrants “C” or “B,” their interaction pushes them to the same direction, magnifying their effect on the outcome. However, when these meet in the quadrant “A” or “D”, they offset each other, enabling the president to complete his/her constitutional term as expected.

**Figure 3:** Four Scenarios for President Survival as results of Economic Conditions/Executive-Legislative Relations Interactions

Majority government

***Exe-Leg***

Minority government

**BIGHBigh**

**A**

**D**

**CLLL**

Bad Good

**Economic Situation**

Consequently, so as to answer the research question “*how and which factors drive “Presidebilismo”?* I develop the following working hypotheses:

**H1:** *Presidential ouster risk will be the highest under economic crisis and minority government.*

**H2:** *Presidential ouster risk will be the lowest as economy does better and when the ruling party also controls the legislature.*

**H3:** *During economic crisis the president may survive in power as far as s/he enjoys a majority government.*

**H4:** *The president may finish his/her constitutional term in office under a minority government when the economy is stable.*

**Defining *Presidebilismo***

As it was explained at the beginning of this paper, *presidebilismo* depicts the phenomenon in which a president, who has been endowed with strong formal powers *vis-à-vis* the legislature, is somewhat unable to stay in office. Complementary, drawing on previous works (Cheibub, 2002; Hochstetler, 2006; Negretto 2006; and Kim and Bahry, 2008), I define the concept of *presidebilismo* as the situation where a president, who has been popularly elected in competitive elections, leaves office by means of impeachment, legislative initiatives, or resignation. *Presidebilismo* describes the situation where presidents are unable to fulfill his/her constitutionally term in office but without compromising the democratic order. What distinguishes *presidebilismo* from other concepts such as “interrupted presidencies” or “presidential breakdowns” is that in the former the presidential ouster is not an outcome of the use of force or its threat thereof by either the armed or police forces of the country.

**Case study on *Presidebilismo*:**

From a methodological stand, most works on this topic suffer from the problem of limited variance in the dependent variable; that is, only studying cases that have experienced presidential breakdowns. The only exceptions are Hochstetler (2006), and Hochstetler and Edwards (2009) that have allowed for some degree of variation on the dependent variables by focusing on “challenges” to presidents, which means that even if the attempt to remove the president fails, it is included into the analysis. Most works addressing this phenomenon have used cross-national and time-series quantitative analysis; thus, there is a need for bringing more methodological diversity that can improve the understanding about the causal mechanism among variables.

The quantitative-leaning tendency for addressing this topic has overlooked how the independent variables work together to finally impact on the dependent variable. Simple correlation found in quantitative works does not provide information whether it timing when independent variables take place matters or not. Moreover, as Gerring (2006) suggests, when the “useful variation” of the phenomenon is rare, case-studies are better equipped than medium or large *N* studies (p. 111). Even though the case study’s limitation is the lack of generability of its findings, it still can provide significant insights about the causal mechanisms. In fact, the real number of *presidebilismo* is not very high, so a mid-*N* study still can address a significant number of the whole cases. Therefore, this paper attempts to qualitatively analyze through a case study how the main variables discussed in the literature review (exe.-leg. relations, social mobilization, and economic crisis) affect *presidebilismo*.

**Why Argentina?**

Most presidential breakdowns in the world have taken place in South America, specifically, in seven countries. In fact, three of them have concentrated the major number of interrupted presidencies. In Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador presidents have failed to finish their constitutional terms in office more than once in the last 30 years. Unlike Ecuador and Bolivia, Argentinean presidents have not been deposed by indigenous mobilizations or military interventions. Argentina represents a special case due to its homogeneous population and high level of democracy and economic development in comparison with Bolivia and Ecuador. Rather, economic crisis, union-led street protests, and institutional arrangement have been more important for explaining Argentinean *presidebilismo*. From the 1990s on, Argentina could rule out military influence on politics and also was able to become in one of the most prosperous developing countries in the world. Notwithstanding the ouster of two presidents, Argentinean democratic regimen has not been threatened. The Argentinean case also enables to look closer at how economic conditions and social mobilization combine with institutional arrangements to affect presidential survival. As it was described in the previous section, the scholarship is divided among those that regard the executive-legislative relations as the main determinant of presidential stability, those that stress on social mobilization, and those that focus on both factors that combined affect president’s prospect of survival.

Argentinean “*presidebilismo”* will be addressed by looking at the two deposed presidents, Raul Alfonsín (1983-1989) and Fernando de la Rúa (1999-2001), who were popularly elected in competitive elections. There were other Argentinean presidents who were ousted from power as well (Adolfo Rodríguez Saá and Eduardo Duhalde); but since they were appointed by the Congress after De la Rúa’s failure, they are not included in this study. In addition to Alfonsín and De la Rúa's administrations, I will analyze the Menem terms in office (1989-1995 and 1995-1999). I do this to add more variation to the dependent variable “presidential stability.” Menem’s administration will serve to see whether the same factors that affected Alfonsín and De la Rúa were present during his terms in office.

**Sources:**

Information about social protests is collected from Schuster’s *et al* (2006) work that covers mass mobilizations in Argentina from 1989 until 2003. Although, there is a limitation since for Alfonsín’s administration data are not available for his whole term, it is still useful for it provides enough information about the previous months of his resignation. In addition, I will use printed press information so as to complement Schuster’s *et al* data. Economic crisis information is gathered from the World Bank data series. In order to identify periods of economic downturns I look at the following variables: GDP *per capita*, inflation rates, GDP growth, external debt, and unemployment. All these data serve to compare the different economic situations that the three presidents underwent. Information about election results and Congress’s party composition has been obtained from the Argentina’s *Ministerio del Interior* (Ministry of Internal Affairs). For complementing this, I also refer to secondary data sources such as research articles published on scientific journals that address the executive-legislative relations in Argentina, although these studies do not carry out comparative analysis across the three presidencies.

1. **Data Analysis**

**Raul Alfonsín’s Presidency (1983-1989):**

After several years under a military regime, Raul Alfonsín took office in Argentina with the major goal of consolidating the transition to democracy. He got an absolute majority of the votes and became the first president from the Radical Party to win a free and fair election since the 1940s. This electoral victory also translated into the Chamber of Deputies where the *Union Cívica Radical* (UCR, Radical Civic Union) obtained a majority of seats (50.8%). However, Alfonsín’s party was not able to control the Senate, where the UCR only got 39.1% of the seats, while the major opposition party, the *Partido* *Justicialista* (PJ), held 45.7% of the seats. Moreover, the PJ also won the majority of governorships, 54.5% *versus* 31.8%of the UCR. Hence, from the very beginning, Alfonsín suffered from a minority government.

It is worth noting that Argentinean parties are characterized by weak party cohesion. Mustapic (2002) states that there are two major factors causing this: low ideological density and decentralized structure (national, provincial, and local) (pp. 27-28). The party leader then relies mostly on his/her electoral potential (Mustapic, 2000, p. 580). Mustapic (2000) argues that winning elections become the decisive factor for obtaining party unity and cohesion, which hinges around its “successful” leaders. Cheresky (1990) even claims that when Alfonsín ran for the presidency, he represented a minority faction within the UCR; but he at least could count on strong support of the public opinion (p. 54). Thus, Alfonsín had to face a divided government and a non-always reliable party support, with no more tools than his “electoral success” and people’s support.

The divided government situation made possible that the Radicals were not able to pass important legislation. Greater interparty cooperation was hard to achieve given the internal struggles over the PJ’s leadership as a result of its electoral defeat in 1983 (Cheresky, 1990, p. 57). The historical close relation between the PJ and the *sindicatos* (unions) became evident during this period when the *Central General de Trabajadores* (CGT, the General Workers Central) and its leader, the moderate *Peronist* Saul Ubaldini, represented the “real” opposition to the Alfonsín’s administration (ibid.). Indeed, the role of the CGT in opposing Alfonsín was also significant for taking people on streets by organizing more than 13 general strikes (ibid.)

As soon as Alfonsín took office, he also had to deal with harsh economic conditions inherited from the military government: an inefficient and oversized bureaucracy (Llanos, 2010, p. 58); two consecutive years with negative economic growth (1981=-5.7%, and 1982=5.0%); an external debt that had increased more than five times in the last seven years (Argentina Independent, 2011), and hyperinflation (344% in 1983). In 1985, as the situation did not improve, one of the first major strikes came into action. The CGT and Ubaldini were able to gather around 200,000 people to protest for economic upheaval and to ask for Alfonsín resignation (Montalbano, 1985). The government implemented the Austral Plan so as to counterweight the effects of the economic crisis and to calm social mobilizations. The plan was very peculiar for it aimed to control inflation but simultaneously to maintain the current low unemployment rates and economic growth (Llanos, 2010, p. 58). The underlying idea of the plan was to avoid negative consequences on people in order to not put the democratic transition at risk (ibid.). The short term effects of the *Plan* *Austral* were positive though. The GDP grew up from -7.59% in 1985 to 7.88% in 1986; while the inflation went from 672% to 90% in the same period (World Bank, 2011). The immediate effects of the *Plan Austral* did work out. The first mid-term election turned out positive for Alfonsín’s government, in part owing to the Austral Plan. Whereas the UCR kept its share of seats in the lower house, the *Partido Justicialista* lost almost 5% of its seats. Notwithstanding the PJ’s electoral defeat, nothing changed in terms of Congressional majorities: the UCR kept controlling the lower house, whilst the PJ dominated/controlled the Senate.

At the end of 1986, the *Plan Austral*’s positive effects proved to be ephemeral. The economic situation became even worse. The economy decreased and inflation increased, plus the business sector and unions started to exert pressure over Alfonsín’s government (Llanos, 2010, p. 59). In response, the government launched the *Plan Primavera* (Spring Plan) in August of 1987. Yet, it was too late for increasing the UCR’s popularity. The second mid-term elections held in September of 1987 left the government even in a weaker position. The consequences of the 1987-elections were important. First, the PJ got 74.3% of the governorships (22.8% of increase), whereas the UCR only was able to retain three out of 22 governors (in Cordoba, Rio Negro, and the Federal District). Second, even though the PJ slightly increased its share of seats in the Chamber of Deputies (from 40.6% to 41.7%), the UCR’s share of seats declined to 44.7%, losing the majority in the lower house and arising as the first minority party. Third, the chances of a constitutional reform that would allow Alfonsín being reelected finally vanished (Llanos, 2010, p. 59).

At this point, the extreme scenarios described in the previous sections were about to meet and combine. In this new and more adversarial political scenario, Alfonsín’s options were drastically reduced. The divided government situation, in which his party at least controlled the Chamber of Deputies, had come to an end. Now, the executive faced a “no majority” situation in Congress (Negretto, 2006, p. 84). The economic woes resembled what happened in 1985, but in 1989 Alfonsín had fewer political resources to rely on. For instance, Alfonsín was not able to increase public spending since bills on tax increases and privatizations were not approved in Congress (Llanos, 2010, p. 60). Furthermore, unlike the 1985 crisis, the 1989’s was even worse. The dollar went up and its reserves almost exhausted (Llanos, 2010, p. 60); the GDP *per capita* declined from $3,977 in 1988 to $2,380 in 1989; two years of negative economic growth (-2.6% in 1988, and -7.5% in 1989); and the inflation skyrocketed scoring almost 40% monthly in the first semester of 1989.

The only missing element was civic action, that is, the social and political actors that will take advantage of the two interacting structural conditions. The number of street protests went up to almost 300 only in the first semester in 1989, one of the highest numbers in Argentina’s recent history (Schuster *et al*., 2006, p. 30). 71% of the street mobilizations were organized by unions, and only a 13% of them were led by civilians (Schuster *et al*., 2006, p. 36). This shows the political element that was at stake during the crisis. The *Partido Justicialista* might benefit from the *sindicatos’* actions by weakening the Alfonsín’s government and also the Radical candidate who was running for presidency in 1989. In fact, Llanos (2010) points out that *Peronist* right-wings factions might have instigated the looting that later on took place in May 1989 (p. 61).

The economic upheaval, social mobilizations and the institutional paralysis led the executive to a political crisis: the resignation of Alfonsín’s economy minister and his team in March 1989 (Llanos, 2010, p. 60). The newly economic minister’s appointment did not bring more consensus as expected, and finally the *Peronist* candidate, Carlos Menem, won the presidential election in May 1989. The increasing street protests, looting, and violence that left 15 people deaths, set in motion Alfonsín’s early departure from office. Alfonsín started negotiations with the elected president, Carlos Menem, so as to agree on the terms of the anticipated handover. Menem finally accepted Alfonsín’s offer and also secured economic bills approval in the lower house, where the Radicals were the first majority in the lower house, until the new Congressional elections in December 1989 (Llanos, 2010, p. 61). Alfonsín resigned on June 12th (five months earlier) among one of the most severe economic, social and political crisis that Argentina had experienced in the last 30 years.

Despite Alfonsín facing a divided government and poor economic conditions, his survival in office was only at risk when major social protests arose. Yet, it is important to note that the harshness of the economic woes was partially overcome owing to the *Austral* and *Primavera* plans. Still, their effects were short-lived. Alfonsín’s party losing its legislative majority and economic crisis worsening finally coalesced in 1989. Mass mobilizations took place claiming for better salaries and a lower inflation, putting the government in a weak position. When the president faces divided government situation, it is not only that the Congress would not provide a “legislative shield” to deal with social mobilizations; but the legislature might even let the president alone with no political support to stay in office.

**Carlos Menem’s Presidency (1989-1999)**

Even though Menem took office amid the worst hyperinflationary crisis since Argentina returned to democracy in 1983, the president could rely on the electoral support he received in the presidential election, and also in the idea his early beginning in office was necessary to save the economy. Furthermore, Menem was also counting on the *Justicialista* majority in the Senate (56.5%) and governorships (77.3%). However, the PJ did not control the Chamber of Deputies where it became in the first minority party (44.1%) after the Congressional elections held on December 1989. In turn, the UCR share of seats kept falling. In the lower house the UCR only controlled 35.4% of seats and in the Senate 30.4%. Therefore, even though the economic situation might threaten Menem’s stability, he still could count on the “legislative shield” and most importantly he had ensured that major economic reform will be backed up by the opposition. Menem definitely had more political and institutional resources to use than Alfonsín did during his whole term.

Yet, executive-legislative relations were not as smooth as expected owing to the Congress’s composition. Ferreira and Goretti (1998) state that Menem faced opposition in Congress especially after he started to issue decrees of necessity and urgency (DNUs) (p. 35). His argument rested upon the need for speeding up the law-making as the situation required (ibid.). Nevertheless, the DNUs approval required judicial revision, and since the Supreme Court’ members were appointed under Alfonsín’s administration, Menem was not able to ask for their removal. Instead, what he did was to pass a “packing plan” in the Senate, where the PJ has an overwhelming majority, so as to increase the number of members of the Supreme Court (Ferreira & Goretti, 1998, p. 36). In doing so Menem paved the road for issuing DNUs even during times of neither necessity nor urgency. In his first term in office, Menem used 336 DNUs compared with 25 that had been issued between 1853 and 1989 (Ferreira & Goretti, 1998, p. 33).

The goal of consolidating the democratic transition that characterized Alfonsín’s government was of secondary importance for Menem and the citizens. Even though Menem was elected on the basis of his populist promises of *salariazo* (increasing the salaries), as soon as he took office, he carried out the largest neoliberal reform ever implemented in Argentina. In August 1989, Menem supported also by the Radicals enacted the State Reform Law, which basically allowed privatizing most state assets (Ministerio del Interior de Argentina, 2008, pp. 157-158). People believed that state intervention in the economy was responsible for the egregious economic outcomes of the *Austral* and *Primavera* plans (Ferreira & Goretti, 1998, p. 38). Then, when Menem took office, people were much more concerned with reducing inflation and the state role in the economy (ibid.). These demands were incorporated by Menem when adopting several market-oriented policies e.g. on deregulation and privatization, and also reduction of fiscal spending. This was done due to the increasing concentration of power in the executive owing to the DNUs, the Delegation Act authorized by Congress (controlled by the *Justicialistas*), the “packing plan,” and citizens that constantly requested fast solutions (ibid.).

In 1991, the ongoing economic situation significantly improved. The GDP *per capita* went up to $5,733 (2,381 in 1989) being higher than at any point during Alfonsín’s administration; the economic growth reached a historical two-digit number (12,67%); and the major issue in the last decade, inflation, seemed to be controlled (172% in 1991 compared with 3,080% in 1989). Whereas the large-scale privatizations were mostly responsible for increasing the state revenues; the Convertibility Law, which pegged the peso to the dollar (one-to-one) was responsible for controlling the skyrocketing inflation. In 1994, the annual inflation rate was 4.2%, the economic growth hinged around 6% annual, and the GDP *per capote* kept increasing up to $6,967. On the other hand, the unemployment rate, which historically had been low in Argentina (one digit), started to go up in 1994 (12.1%). Nevertheless, the period 1991-1994 did not witness significant number of mass mobilizations (Schuster *et al*., 2006, p. 31). This might have been so since people preferred low inflation rates over full employment, therefore, exhibiting “higher tolerance for recession” (Schamis, 2002, p. 84).

In electoral terms, the PJ strengthened its dominance in the Senate after 1992 mid-term elections by controlling 58.3% of seats. In 1993, the *Justicialistas* also achieved an almost absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies (48.2%). With a majority in the Congress and the governorships, and an economy that finally took off, Menem’s stability in office was not under discussion. The two major structural determinants of *presidebilismo* provided a secured political, economic and social environment not only for Menen’s survival in office, but also for his reelection. In 1995, Menem was reelected thanks to the “Pact of Olivos,” between the PJ and the former president Alfonsín as leader of the Radicals, which reformed the constitution 1994. Menem’s second term begun with the *Justicialista’s* electoral victory in the mid-term election held in 1995. The PJ obtained an absolute majority in both the lower house (51.4%) and the Senate (55.5%). The undesirable consequences of a divided government seemed to have gone.

However, the economy started to exhibit some setbacks. The GDP *per capita* had stagnated above $7,000; the economic growth fell down to -2.5% in 1995; and unemployment reached 18.8%. The state revenues from the privatization proved not to be long-lasting. For instance, the privatization of the social security begun to require more resources that the government did not posses at that moment. Levitsky and Murillo (2003) point out that the social security deficits led the government to a “spiral of borrowing” (p. 153). Schamis (2002) explains that as the public systems of social security had lost “contributors,” the government still had to deal with “beneficiaries;” thus, Menem was compelled to contract new debt (pp. 84-85).

Public finances became more limited at the same time that the executive had fewer policy tools to react under economic woes. The Convertibility Law that had successfully whipped out inflation now arose as a great limitation. The Convertibility Law required that the Central Bank had to back all the Argentinean monetary base with international reserves, which means that the government only could inject money into the economy when international reserves increased via “trade surpluses or net capital inflows” (Schamis, 2002, p. 83). No stimulative mechanisms remained under government’s control (Schamis, 2002, p. 82). Basically, the Convertibility Law eliminated the possibility of the executive using monetary and exchange policies to counteract “economic shocks” (Levitsky & Murillo, 2003, p. 153).

Social mobilizations were not absent during Menem’s administration. Indeed, his government faced one of the largest numbers of street protests in the period 1989-2003. The rising unemployment and the declining economy were the driving forces of street protesters. Even though the high number of street protests especially in 1997, it did not affect Menem’s survival in office. During that period, Menem’s party enjoyed of an advanced and secured position within Congress that counterweight the effects of street protests. It is worth noting though that the main difference between mass mobilizations that took place under Alfonsín’s and Menem’s (second term) administration was their organization. Whereas 71% of the street protests under Alfonsín were organized by *sindicatos*; during Menem’s second term only 36% of them were union-led (Schuster *et al.*, 2006, p. 38). Coincidence or not, about 25% of *Justicialista* deputies were also labor leaders during the 1990s (Corrales, 2002, p. 34)

Internal struggles took place within the PJ when Menem announced that he was seeking a third presidential term. Despite the fact that a third period was unconstitutional and that 80% of the population opposed to it, Menem thought that as far as his party backed him up, the Supreme Court would not be an issue (Corrales, 2002, p. 33). Still, *Justicialista*’s leaders that deemed Menem’s third period as a threat to their own political careers stood up and rejected Menem’s second reelection (Corrales, 2002, p. 33). The PJ’s intra-party conflict turned out in a spending race, which led to the loss of control on the rising national debt (Corrales, 2002, p. 32). As a matter of fact, in 1998 Argentina’s external debt was $75,524 million, a 45.7% increase from 1989. Menem’s populist message remerged and instead of cutting spending, he proposed to increase the 1998 budget (ibid.). Finally, the internal resistance against Menem’s desires for a third term turned out successful and deterred him from seeking a second consecutive reelection. Eduardo Duhalde, one of the strongest opponents to Menem’s third period, was chosen as the presidential candidate for the 1999 election. Whereas the democratic principles prevailed; the fiscal irresponsibility of Menem and provincial authorities put the economy at risk, “increasing… [its] vulnerability to the external shock of 1998” (Corrales, 2002, p. 34).

Menem second terms enables to understand how the two structural determinants of *presidebilismo* –a divided government and economic woes- may affect president’s prospects of survival. During Menem’s first term the presidential stability was not at stake even when inflation was not under control in 1989-1991. Still, the legislative support, the growing economy and the lack of significant mass mobilization led Menem to his reelection. The second term shows that even when one of the structural determinants turns out threatening to presidential stability the other can act counteracting its negative effects.

**Fernando de la Rúa’s Presidency (1999-2001)**

Fernando de la Rúa became the second Radical president, after Alfonsín. The successive electoral defeats suffered during the 1990s had weakened UCR’s popular support. Therefore, so as to defeat the PJ in the 1999 election, the UCR formed the “*Alianza”* (Alliance) with the newly created conglomeration “*Frente Pais Solidario”* (FREPASO, Country in Solidarity Front). The ideological diversity of the FREPASO, composed by some leftist and former *Peronistas* groups, was mostly recognized by its two major leaders Carlos “Chacho” Alvarez and Graciela Fernandez Meijide (Llanos, 2010, p. 62). The potential of the *Alianza* rested upon the combination of each partner’s strengths. The FREPASO lacked of well-developed internal rules and structure, which could be overcome by the UCR’s “national organizational structure” (Llanos and Margheritis, 2006, p. 81). On the other hand, the FREPASO’s leaders enjoyed of well-spread popular support and media communication skills (ibid.), which were one the major flaws of the UCR. The *Alianza*’s electoral promises encompassed to break with corruption, increase transparency, invest in social sectors (Corrales, 2002, p. 34), keep the Convertibility Plan, and improve “democratic governance mechanisms” (Llanos, 2010, p. 62).

The *Alianza* turned out successful since Fernando de la Rúa easily defeat the *Justicialista* candidate and won the presidential election in 1999. The *Alianza* was the first coalition that had taken office in recent Argentina’s contemporary history (Llanos and Margheritis, 2006, p. 78). Still, the *Alianza’s* popular support did not translate into the Congress. Despite the *Alianza* advantaged the PJ for about 1% in the share of seats in the lower house, it was only able to control the 39.7% of its seats, becoming in the first minority. The PJ, in turn, had the majority in the Senate (55.5% of seats) and governorships (62.5%). Again, the same unfavorable situation faced by Alfonsín’s administration seemed to take place under De la Rúa’s.

Soon after taking office, the coalition started to evidence signs of divisions. De la Rúa’s relation with the FREPASO became complicated since the president only gave secondary positions to its leaders (Schamis, 2002, p. 87). More surprisingly, De la Rúa excluded influential Radical leaders from his inner circle, which was formed by “friends and family” (e.g. his son and his brother) and only a few young Radicals who had no influence within the party (Schamis, 2002, p. 87; Llanos & Margheritis, 2006, p. 92). De la Rúa not only faced an unfavorable environment in Congress, but now he had also limited the political resources he might borrow from the two partners of the *Alianza*.

Furthermore, the executive also had problems when negotiating with the opposition. Llanos and Margheritis (2006) point out that the PJ was unwilling to cooperate with a “weak executive,” and then share the costs of adopting unpopular policies (p. 89). The *Justicialistas* opposed De la Rúa’s bills in the Senate, especially those related with labor issues. In fact, the PJ was not willing to approve any labor reform under Menem’s administration. Nevertheless, De la Rúa achieved a twofold victory on this area. His bill on labor reform was finally approved, although resisted by his coalition fellows, in the lower house, and then passed in the Senate, breaking the *Peronista* majority (Llanos & Margheritis, 2006, pp. 89-90). This arose as the major political victory of De la Rúa in a clearly unfavorable scenario. Yet, the initial excitement was quickly replaced by concern. The *Alianza* was involved in a political scandal as the government had been accused of bribing senators so as to get the labor reform passed (Llanos & Margheritis, 2006, pp. 89-90). The Vice-President and FREPASO leader, Carlos “Chacho” Alvarez, requested immediate investigation on the accusation. As the government failed in doing so, in October 2000 Alvarez resigned, generating the first political crisis within the executive (Levitsky & Murillo, 2003, p. 154).

When De la Rúa took office the economy was already in trouble. In addition to De la Rúa’s political isolation, the country exhibited high unemployment rates, negative economic growth, and an increasing external debt. Alvarez’s resignation did nothing but increase Argentina’s risk rate by the fear of political and financial stability (Schamis, 2002, p. 87). After this, the risk of default arose which made the scenario for De la Rúa even worse (Llanos and Margheritis, 2006, p. 93). The Convertibility Plan had already taken away most important tools for dealing with economic crisis from the executive. De la Rúa attempted to address the economic woes via issuing DNUs and asking the Congress for discretionary power for his economy minister (Schamis, 20020, p. 88). This not only did little to improve the economy, but also contributed to exacerbate De la Rúa’s political isolation (Llanos & Margheritis, 2006, p. 91).

External help became urgent. However, external funds, in specific from the IMF, were conditioned to not use “counter-cyclical deficit spending” (Levitsky & Murillo, 2003, p. 154). Consequently, De la Rúa was forced to implement unpopular austerity policies that restricted the public spending to balance the public deficit (Llanos & Margheritis, 2006, p. 94). De la Rúa compromised to lower the public deficit to zero and to negotiate a “debt swap” (Corrales, 2002, p. 38). Both efforts did not work out. Owing to the De la Rúa’s broken relations with his party fellows, his attempts to use tax revenues and spending cuts for lowering the public deficit failed in Congress (ibid.). Public opinion had started to harshly criticize De la Rúa’s decisions to adopt austerity policies. De la Rúa’s stated that he was “to pay the debt under all circumstances” (Schamis, 2002, p. 82), which increased public discontent since the president seemed to be more worried on reducing the public debt than on satisfying people’s needs.

In 2001 the economy underwent its third consecutive year of negative growth, the unemployment rate was at the highest again (18.2%), and the external debt seemed to not have a ceiling ($82,994 million). To make things worse, in March 2001, the FREPASO leader, Graciela Fernandez Meijie, minister of social-welfare minister, also resigned (Schamis, 2002, p. 87). The back-then weak political capital of De la Rúa kept diminishing. As De la Rúa’s first electoral test became closer, street protests started to come into action. The provinces were greatly affected by the economic downturn and the executive financial mismanagement. Llanos (2010) explains that the central government was not even able to deliver the “minimal monthly sum…of revenue-sharing tax scheme” to the provinces, unleashing the popular outrage (p. 64). As expected, De la Rúa’s government did not pass the mid-term elections test. The PJ won more seats in the lower house at expenses of the *Alianza*. The *Justicialistas* presented a stronger opposition to De la Rúa since there was no willing to share the cost “with a government that everyone else had shunned” (Corrales, 2002, p. 38). Executive-legislative’s prospects for cooperation were extremely difficult. This was so due to there were widespread social demands for injecting more resources into the economy and, on the other hand, there was the unlikelihood of the opposition-controlled Congress agreeing in cutting more than $4 billion in social spending and salaries for 2002 budget (Krauss, 2001). Moreover, the PJ even threatened De la Rua by using the *Ley de Acefalia* (so-called Acephaly Law) (Llanos, 2010, p. 64); whereby the president of the Senate may take office when the elected president is declared “not able.”

In November 2001, as a response to the ongoing capital flights, the Economy Minister limited the “bank withdrawals and currency movements” (Levitsky & Murillo, 2003, pp. 154-155). This policy well-known as *Corralito* (financial corral) proved to be highly unpopular by basically depriving people of their saving (ibid.). In December 2001, *Corralito*’s immediate consequences were people protestin on the streets, riots, looting, *piqueteros* (road blockers), eighteen people killed, and mass mobilizations in across the country (Llanos, 2010, p. 65). De la Rúa declared state of siege. On December 19th, the Economy Minister resigned, and so did the whole cabinet at the next day. De la Rúa’s last attempt to remain in office was to propose a “government of national unity” to the *Justicialistas*, which they rejected (Schamis, 2002, p. 85). The reasons? They argued that when they took De la Rúa’s offer to the UCR leaders, the latter refused to “take part in any government [De la Rúa] might head” (p. 85). After brutal police repressions against protester in Buenos Aires that left several deaths, De la Rúa finally resigned in December 20th, 2001, at the middle of his constitutional term.

“Fernando de la Rúa fell in precisely the same way he had governed: cut off from the larger political society, at odds with his own party, and surrounded by a clique of unelected, nonpartisan advisors, several of whom had no previous political experience of any kind” (Schamis, 2002, p. 86).

After analyzing De la Rúa’s presidency, it is possible to identify the two structural determinants of *presidebilismo* and the human element. A divided government, a broken economy, and few but very powerful mass mobilizations reduced the chances for De la Rúa to stay in office. Even though he inherited the adverse economic conditions from Menem’s irresponsible administration, De la Rúa also inherited a weak electoral and political legacy from the UCR. Nevertheless, the president himself whipped out the only few political alternatives when breaking relations, first, with the FREPASO, and later with its own party. The street protests worked as expected, as the last element that finally led the president to his political demise.

1. **Conclusions**

The question “what drives *presidebilismo*?” has been partially answered. Executive-legislative relations and economic conditions arise as the major determinants of presidential survival. The role of mass mobilizations is mostly circumscribed in the last part of the causal mechanism. Street protests tend to appear once economic conditions have worsened by accelerating the presidential ouster. Whereas executive-legislative relations and economic conditions act as major structural determinants of *presidebilismo*, mass mobilizations work as “precipitant.”

The three cases described and analyzed enable to understand how the factors that drive presidential stability interact and then how they might impact on the dependent variable. Under Alfonsín’s administration economic crisis and the divided government situation only met at the end. Only when the hyperinflation crisis took place, important street protests came into action, triggering Alfonsín’s anticipated departure from office. The case of Menem provides several examples about how the two structural determinants offset each other. His first term was characterized by cooperative relations between the executive and the legislative and hyperinflation during 1989-1991. Even though Menem tended to act unilaterally, which somewhat marginalized the legislature, parties in Congress did not oppose to his performance. He had enough time (2 years) to solve the inflationary crisis without being threaten even once. Menem’s second term offers more details about how presidential stability starts to weaken when either the legislative support or the economy fails. Still, Menem made his way to remain in office and almost to run for his second reelection. Finally, the case of De la Rúa best represents a “perfect storm” for presidential survival. Not only there were economic woes as soon as he took office, he never could enjoy of legislative support. In addition, he made his on contribution to his ouster by giving up the only political resources that he had in Congress: the *Alianza.*

Further research is needed so as to analyze the role of non-partisan political actors and unions. Indeed, one common feature shared for the two non-*Peronistas* parties was their lack of influence on *sindicatos* (Corrales, 2002, p. 34). Political leadership, especially in De la Rúa’s administration, proved to play a major role between the president and his own party/coalition. International forces also put pressure and conditioned the set of policies available to deal with the crisis. These three issues have been overlooked in the literature of presidential stability.

Finally, from a methodological viewpoint, it is important to understand and take into account the historical development of the events that finally affect *presidebilismo*. For instance, without considering the fiscal irresponsibility and economic reforms that took place during Menem’s administration is not possible to comprehend why and how De la Rúa was so extremely conditioned when he took office; and also why and how Menem did not fall. Quantitative studies basically tend to assume that the political system, the economy, and people beliefs reboot every calendar year. This is where the strength of path dependence approach rests: in explaining how past events still can affect current outcomes.

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