

Weekly Asado

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Argentina Project



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Photo: Wendley Souza / Flickr

Electing Argentines

In 1993, Argentine President Carlos Menem was riding high after his Peronist party had maintained its majority in Congress through the midterm elections. After decades of economic stagnation, the country was enjoying a period of low inflation and rapid growth. Mr. Menem leveraged his popularity to amend Argentina's 1853 constitution to allow him to run for reelection.

Although Mr. Menem enjoyed a simple majority in congress, he lacked the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution. Without opposition support, he threatened to hold a [plebiscite](#) to demonstrate popular approval for his constitutional reform. Fearing the referendum would give Mr. Menem a free hand to reform the constitution, former president and leader of the Radical Party Raúl Alfonsín entered into negotiations with Mr. Menem to find a mutually agreeable set of amendments.

Mr. Alfonsín attempted to pass constitutional reforms of his own during his tumultuous tenure, but was thwarted by a severe economic crisis. He saw collaboration with his more popular successor as a way to reintroduce reforms he sought in the 1980s, and to repair the reputation of his struggling party.

On December 13, 1993, the party leaders agreed to the Olivos Pact, named after the presidential residence.

The most important reforms allowed consecutive reelection; reduced the presidential term from six years to four years; limited the use of executive decrees; scrapped the electoral college; and instituted a run-off system (ballotage), which requires a candidate to attract at least 45 percent of the vote, or 40 percent with a ten percentage point advantage over the closest opponent, to win in a first round.



As it turns out, the ballotage provision might be the most significant element of Argentina's 1994 constitutional reform.

A two-round electoral system mitigates against polarization and extremism, as it encourages parties to expand outside their base. In a ballotage, candidates must appeal to voters who may have viewed them as second best in the first round.

Argentina had its first ballotage in 2015. (In 2003, Mr. Menem dropped out of the presidential contest rather than face Santa Cruz Governor Néstor Kirchner in a second round.) The 2015 election involved a tight race between the Buenos Aires governor, center-left *kirchnerista* Daniel Scioli, and Mauricio Macri, the Buenos Aires mayor, representing a new center-right coalition, Cambiemos. After neither candidate won in the first round, Mr. Macri overcame his second-place finish to defeat Mr. Scioli in the run-off, with 51 percent of the vote.

Are all elections created equal?

Plurality

PLURALITY IS THE SIMPLEST WAY TO ELECT LEADERS

Candidates don't need a majority to win, just the most votes.

Paraguay
Venezuela



RUNOFF (BALLOTAGE) MAY REQUIRE TWO ROUNDS OF VOTING

Runoff

Since the 1980s, many countries in South America have amended their constitutions to adopt a run-off. Argentina's rules differ from those of its neighbors.

In most countries, if no candidate gets an absolute majority of the overall vote, it triggers a second round of voting between the two top vote-getters.

Brazil
Uruguay
Chile



In Argentina, a candidate must win 45 percent of the vote, or 40 percent with a ten percent margin over the number two candidate, to win in the first round.

Argentina



By Virginia Bullington



Although unlikely, Argentines may see another second-round election next month.

Aware of her unpopularity, former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is running for vice president, alongside moderate Peronist Alberto Fernández, on the ticket of the center-left Peronist Frente de Todos. Mr. Macri, who is also unpopular, is also running with a Peronist, Senator Miguel Ángel Pichetto.

The choices of running mates by Ms. Fernández de Kirchner and Mr. Macri show how Argentina's post-1994 electoral system does not reward political extremism. And for Ms. Fernández de Kirchner, the PASO amply rewarded her move to the center, with Mr. Fernández trouncing Mr. Macri.

Ms. Fernández de Kirchner’s willingness to integrate formerly anti-*kirchnerista* figures, such as Sergio Massa, also highlighted her strategy of tacking to the center.

For Mr. Macri, the decision to integrate Mr. Pichetto was less successful, or at least not successful enough to overcome the economic headwinds. Nevertheless, it offered further evidence of the appeal of centrism in Argentina’s balloting system, even amid the country’s infamously divisive partisan divides.



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@JuanManzurOK, September 16, 2019



Juan Manzur
Governor of Tucumán, Argentina



Benjamin Gedan is quoted in, “[¿Falló el FMI en Argentina? La agudización de la crisis dispara las críticas](#),” for the *AFP*

Benjamin Gedan is quoted in, “[Argentina election raises doubts about Trump’s bet on right-wing leaders](#),” for the *Los Angeles Times*

Benjamin Gedan is quoted in, “[Argentina: El pesado legado de Lagarde en el FMI](#),” for *La Tercera*

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