



Grassroots Expectations

of Democracy and Economy

ARGENTINA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Nancy R. Powers

GRASSROOTS
EXPECTATIONS
of DEMOCRACY
AND ECONOMY



*Argentina
in Comparative
Perspective*

Nancy R. Powers

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Abbreviations and Glossary

- ajustes*—from *ajustar* meaning both adjust and fit tightly; the word refers to structural adjustment policies, but has the added connotation of belt-tightening.
- ATE—Asociación de Trabajadores del Estado (Association of State Workers), an anti-Menemist trade union
- autogolpe*—self-coup; describes Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's closure of the Congress in 1992
- Barrio Norte*—an elegant and affluent section of the city of Buenos Aires
- casa tomada*—a building taken over by squatters; also called *casa ocupada* (lit., occupied building)
- caudillo*—political boss or strongman
- changas*—odd jobs, such as performed by a handyman
- comité*—in the Radical Party, the neighborhood-level organizing unit
- Conurbano*—the urbanized area, encompassing the nineteen counties in the province of Buenos Aires that surround the Federal Capital
- conventillo*—colloquial term for *inquilinato*, connoting an old, crumbling, noisy tenement building
- Federal Capital (*Capital Federal*)—the city of Buenos Aires, which is also the country's capital; it has full representation in Congress and is autonomous from the province of Buenos Aires that surrounds it
- FONAVI—Fondo Nacional de Vivienda (Housing Fund of the national government)
- FREPASO—Frente del País Solidario (Front for a Solidaristic Country)
- hotel—as used in this book, the word refers not to tourist lodgings, but to long-term one-room rentals, known in the United States as SROs (single-room-occupancies).
- inquilinato*—tenement building (rooming house)
- inquilino*—tenement renter
- IPA—Investigación Sobre Pobreza en Argentina (Study of Argentine Poverty), carried out at end of the Alfonsín government
- MAS—Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism)

- MODIN—Movimiento de Dignidad e Independencia (Movement for Dignity and Independence)
- MOI—Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (Squatters and Tenants Movement)
- ñoqui*—slang for an employee with political connections who is put on the public payroll but not expected to work
- Padelai—Patronato de la Infancia; an abandoned state orphanage in the San Telmo neighborhood
- PAMBA—Programa Alimentario de la Municipalidad de Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Municipal Nutrition Program)
- la Patria*—the Fatherland
- PJ—Partido Justicialista; the Justicialist Party, informally known as the Peronist Party
- salariozo*—a huge payraise, promised in Menem's 1989 campaign
- UCeDé—Unión de Centro Democrático (Union of the Democratic Center)
- UCR—Unión Cívica Radical (the Radical Party)
- Unidad Básica* (U.B.)—in the Justicialist Party, the neighborhood-level organizing unit
- villa miseria* or *villa*—shantytown
- villero*—a shantytown resident
- voting *en blanco*—to submit a blank ballot; meant to demonstrate participation in the process but disapproval of all choices

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My first visit to Argentina was in 1978. As a student on an exchange program that needed to shelter its charges from troubles, I had little awareness of the country's political situation. Nevertheless, I became fascinated by Argentina, thanks to the kindness of the Saya family, with whom I lived in the beautiful city of Córdoba.

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Introduction

Con la democracia, se come.

RAÚL ALFONSÍN, 1983

In late 1983, following a brutal military regime, Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Party was elected president of Argentina with 52 percent of the vote, in a free and competitive election. An experienced politician and human rights lawyer, Alfonsín faced the challenge of building democratic institutions while revitalizing an economic system in ruins. He was an inspirational orator who argued that the democratic political system provided both freedom and the best means to assure economic progress. “With democracy, people eat,” he promised.

By 1989, as the next presidential election took place, the country’s debt-ridden economy was in hyperinflation. People were eating less, not more. Food riots broke out in several cities and soup kitchens were set up around the country. Democracy was not providing very well for the population’s material needs, and yet the electoral process continued and was supported. Alfonsín’s party was thrown out of power, but the democratic regime was not.

The new president was Carlos Menem, a Peronist who had promised a *salario* (a huge wage increase), a sound economy, and a “productive revolution” premised on “our absolute priority that every Argentine has a dignified job” (Menem and Duhalde 1989, 19). Six years later, Menem had indeed resolved the inflation problem, but had not delivered the wages, which remained, on average, lower than they had been during the first five years of the Alfonsín administration. While food prices were now stable, jobs had become scarce. The productive revolution had increased productivity, but joblessness

reached levels unknown in modern Argentine history. Polls during the 1995 campaign showed 70 percent of the voters considered unemployment the principal issue for the campaign,¹ and yet Menem won reelection even as unemployment soared. Afterward, analysts widely attributed the win to Menem's defeat of inflation four years before.

Why would past achievements against inflation override the apparent failure to solve unemployment problems citizens considered critical in the present? Why would inflation be a decisive issue, but inequality, poverty, and low paychecks not be? To pose answers to these questions requires asking more general ones: What considerations do citizens use in judging their economic goals and the government's performance? How do they balance their economic expectations of government with their nonmaterial ones? If people did not expect democracy to feed them, what *did* they expect of it? To what extent did materialist concerns affect their evaluation of the regime? And when they did not, why not?

Answering those questions for the Argentine case, or similar questions for other societies undergoing rapid economic and political change, requires a finely tuned understanding of citizens' perceived interests, both political and economic. We need to know how those political and economic interests are interrelated, and how political and economic contexts affect the perception of interests. This book examines the material concerns of those who objectively have considerable material hardships—the less affluent members of society—and analyzes the relationship between those material concerns and their political views. I argue that to understand how people's material interests affect their political views, we first need to understand how they think about their material interests. Perceptions about material interests are shaped by objective material conditions, access to mechanisms for coping with those conditions, and expectations about what conditions and coping mechanisms are normal in their society and their lives. Only once we understand these perceptions about material conditions can we begin to understand how those conditions influence people's ideas about what they want from the political system.

Research Method

This study uses inductive methods and qualitative data to examine the relationship between perceived material and political interests. This relationship is explored through interviews with people of low to modest means in Argentina. Argentina had experienced dramatic transformations in the years just before this research. Both the political and economic systems continued to evolve rapidly, providing a case in which politics *and* economics could be ex-

pected to be highly salient to nonelites. The country has a long history of populism and redistributive conflicts that incapacitated and then destroyed its democratic regimes. This history of materially based grassroots politics, combined with the dynamic policy and political environment of the early 1990s, provided an ideal situation for observing the interaction between material and political interests at the grassroots level.

The heart of the data is a set of lengthy informal interviews with forty-one people, primarily during the first half of 1992.² (In further fieldwork in 1995, I was able to follow up with about one-quarter of those originally interviewed.) In order to understand fully the living conditions of those interviewed and the political and economic contexts of their lives, I included in the fieldwork observations of meetings of grassroots organizations, church groups, political parties, a public employees' labor union, and neighborhood groups, as well as eighteen brief preliminary interviews in two lower-middle class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. In addition, I interviewed over seventy political elites during fieldwork in 1990 and again in 1991–1992 and 1995. These included scholars, social workers, journalists, community organizers, elected officials, neighborhood party leaders, and social policy makers, among others. These interviews provided essential political, social, and cultural background, and a comparative perspective through which to consider the views heard at the grassroots. The appendices provide substantial details on the interview methodology, background information about those interviewed, and discussion of the specific goals of a qualitative research design.

Qualitative methods and fieldwork are powerful means to discover unanticipated relationships and to reframe basic questions. As an example, I should say that I did not start out to write a book on interests. The initial research proposal presupposed that people would be either materialistic, opposing politics that failed to serve their material interests, or idealistic, ignoring their material interests. Only in the field—by listening, observing, questioning, and then by reformulating my listening, observation, and questions in light of new insights—did I gradually realize that the question was not whether people thought materialistically or idealistically. Rather, the questions are: How do people think about material problems in their lives? How do they think about politics? And how, if at all, do they connect those two things?

Grassroots-level fieldwork was an inextricable part of the process of fine-tuning questions as well as finding answers. The concepts emphasized in this book—coping, subsidiarity, identities, contexts—differ from the concepts emphasized in works based on studying electoral outcomes or opinion surveys. The concepts here are those that arose in citizens' own discourse rather than those that citizens chose under conditions structured by others, such as voting

or polling. The concepts derive directly from hearing how people explained their lives and their political views. Fieldwork, and in particular, qualitative interviewing, is not merely a method of data collection but a process of discovering what the right questions are. The frequent and lengthy excerpts from qualitative interviews, which appear throughout this book, are intended to enable readers to hear and understand the complexities of the interests of the governed.

Why Study Nonelites?

The last twenty years have been a period of vast economic and political change in the world, with democracies emerging, or reemerging, throughout Latin America; in southern, eastern, and central Europe; and parts of Africa and Asia. The change in political regime often took place amidst significant economic turmoil caused by foreign debts, inflation, and stagnant production. Consequently, democratization was accompanied by dramatic economic changes. Concurrent with the establishment of electoral processes and political rights, economies shifted away from state-led development and inward-focused industrialization toward market economies based on export-oriented production and a diminished role for the state.

The democracy literature is replete with analysis of the relationships between these economic and political changes, but primarily at the national and elite levels.³ Research has focused on the economy and elections at national levels, as well as on the political parties, domestic and international financial communities, and bureaucrats who affect the state's economic and social policies (Baloyra 1987; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Nun and Portantiero 1987; O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Remmer 1991, 1996; Sabato and Cavarozzi 1984). Not coincidentally, the focus on elites and institutions complements the procedural conceptions of democracy generally employed in these works. Democracies are understood as legally instituted processes that protect citizens' civil and political rights while assuring free and fair competition for leadership (Dahl 1989; Schmitter and Karl 1991). Starting from that definition, researchers naturally focused on elites, since they were the ones who engaged in competition for leadership or who had the potential to undermine citizens' rights.

If democracies emerge and survive due to competitions and decisions among elites, then why research nonelites? In particular, why bother to understand the ideas of the politically weak, the economically less affluent, and the less-organized members of society?

The first reason for studying nonelites is that the political and electoral

rights inherent in democratic processes are founded on assumptions of equality of citizenship (O'Donnell 1998). That means that weak citizens in a democracy have a claim on the political system equal to the claims of more politically powerful citizens and institutions. Therefore, the study of common citizens' views about how politics affects them will reveal something about the quality of the democracy. If we take democratic processes seriously, including their foundations in universal citizenship, then we must take seriously the political ideas and reasoning of nonelite citizens. This is a normative concern, but also an empirical one. Empirically, paying attention to the views of nonelites expands the narrow academic purview of what is politically meaningful. As Daphne Patai puts it eloquently, "There are no pointless lives, and there are no pointless life stories. There are only life stories we have not (yet) bothered to consider" (1988, 1). Political life involves not merely the means to power, but the consequences of the pursuit and use of power. Therefore, if political science is to provide a complete account of political life, it should "bother to consider" the impact that political competitions and policy decisions have upon the governed. Recent literature has studied that impact in terms of the objective effects of policies and the accountability of the powerful to the electorate. Largely missing from the literature is research on how people who are not in positions of power perceive and evaluate the effects of policies and political practices.

A second reason for studying the views of nonelites is that, as James Scott (1985) recognized with his pioneering work on the "weapons of the weak," those who are excluded from the institutions of power are nevertheless not irrelevant to political life, at either the regime or government levels. Nonelites are not the necessary and sufficient actors to either sustain or bring down regimes (Remmer 1991, 615), but nonelites create numerous interaction effects. They influence political life as consumers, as their plight captures the attention of more powerful actors (such as journalists or the Catholic Church, who advocate for the poor), and as part of the public support upon which politicians stake their strategies and policy choices.⁴ Recognizing these forms of influence compels us to understand more about consumers, voters, and potential supporters of policies and politicians. For example, we need to understand whether the poor and the working class in Argentina share in the criticisms made on their behalf by small parties of the left, intellectual critics, and the progressive wing of the Catholic Church hierarchy.

The third reason to listen to how those without power understand and evaluate the conditions in which they live is that such understanding is the basis of future economic development. As Jorge Lawton (1995, 22–31) reminds us, the "people-centered" development called for by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) will only occur if the people "below" are full