

**RE-ELECTING NEOLIBERALS:
COMPETING EXPLANATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF FUJIMORI
AND MENEM**

(or, Why Menem is not a neopopulist)

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Prepared for delivery at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Continental Plaza Hotel, Guadalajara, Mexico, April 17-19, 1997.

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Abstract

This paper evaluates several theories for explaining how citizens respond to economic changes, in general, and why they voted for neoliberals in Peru and Argentina, in particular. It argues that the apparent similarities between Alberto Fujimori and Carlos Menem mask significant differences in their political situations. Explanations of the two presidents' re-elections that are rooted in "neopopulism" provide interesting conceptual clarifications, but are ultimately limited in their capacity to explain the changing popularity levels of supposed-populists. More useful approaches to explaining the way citizens evaluate neoliberal leaders are those that focus on political and economic reference points, trade-offs among different types of economic interests, and the credibility of political actors. As evidence, I analyze the 1995 election in Argentina and its aftermath, showing that Menem's victory at the ballot box was not an illustration of a comfortable victory by a neopopulist, but is better understood in terms of voters' evaluation of particular economic and political choices offered at the time -- choices which, in the aftermath of the election, have been rapidly changing.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to a number of people and institutions who facilitated this research. Manuel Mora y Araujo provided generous access to his firm's survey research results; Kurt Weyland provided many fruitful debates on the issues in this paper and also access to survey research data from Peru; Scott Smith and Belinda Creel Davis provided excellent research and technical assistance. Field work in Buenos Aires in August 1995 was funded by the Florida State University College of Social Sciences and Department of Political Science.

Introduction

Argentine President Carlos Menem and Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori have frequently been portrayed as similar political figures.¹ Each is a charismatic politician from a rural province, who won the presidency by campaigning with folkloric symbols, social justice themes, and -- most memorably (in retrospect) -- promises to revitalize the economy without the austerity of neoliberal. Running for office in 1989 and 1990, respectively, at moments when their countries' debt-ridden economies had nearly collapsed from inflation, recession, and disinvestment, each candidate obtained considerable electoral support from the lower socioeconomic sectors. Because of these traits, both have been seen as populists -- as a new version of an old motif in Latin American history.

The most noted similarity between the two presidents is that within weeks of winning their respective elections, Menem and Fujimori contradicted their campaign promises by hiring free-market apostles as advisors and initiating dramatic economic restructuring programs along neoliberal lines. In doing so, each earned the approval of the once-antagonistic business sectors in their countries and reversed tense relationships with international creditors.² Their policies won near-universal acclaim for eliminating the hyperinflation that had developed under their predecessors. The apparent similarities continued during their first terms, as both managed to orchestrate constitutional assemblies to rewrite their constitutions, with the transparent priority of amending the prohibition against presidents seeking immediate re-election. The new constitutions established ballotage (run-off) rules, but both Menem and Fujimori won re-election in 1995 on the first ballot. (See Table 1)

Due to the evident similarities, and the dramatic about-face on economic policy that each made between their first and second successful electoral campaigns, Fujimori and Menem have attracted considerable scholarly attention from those seeking to understand political support for economic restructuring, particularly among the so-called popular sectors. One of the most compelling arguments has been offered by scholars who see affinities between neoliberals and neopopulists, which would help explain the capacity of Fujimori and Menem to win re-election even after their switches on economic policy (Leaman 1996, Roberts 1995, Weyland 1994). The two presidents have also received considerable attention from the international press and business community, who have interpreted their first-round re-elections as evidence of strong public support for their bold neoliberal economic policies.³

¹Menem has acknowledged and welcomed the comparison FBIS-LAT-95-094, p. 25.

²Re. Peru, Mauceri 1995, esp. 19-20; Schmidt 1996; Wise 1994; re. Argentina, Munck 1994, 11-12; Smith 1991.

³For example, Calvin Sims, "Menem's victory seen as vote for free market," *New York Times* (May 16, 1995), A6.

In this paper, I argue that the apparent similarities between the two presidents mask significant differences in their political situations. Conceptualizing them as two “neopopulists” leaves us ill-prepared to explain changes in their political fortunes and is not as useful as alternative approaches that focus on political and economic reference points, trade-offs among different types of economic interests, and the credibility of political actors. As evidence, I analyze the 1995 election in Argentina and its aftermath, showing that Menem’s victory at the ballot box was not an illustration of a comfortable victory by a neopopulist, but is better understood in terms of voters’ evaluation of particular economic and political choices offered at the time -- choices which, in the aftermath of the election, have been rapidly changing.

Alternative Perspectives

Studies of Fujimori and Menem’s electoral success after implementing austerity policies are part of the sub-set of democratic consolidation literature that seeks to understand the political ramifications of economic transition in the developing world. This abundant literature has made significant gains in the last decade. The initial work on democratic transitions warned that the economic challenges facing new democratic regimes could be delegitimizing. Citizens might not tolerate economic pain -- whether it came from the ongoing and worsening inequities in the region, the costs of the debt crisis, or the costs of adjustment.⁴ Writing in the mid-1980s, when the Cold War was still alive and when the century’s previous decades provided ample evidence that economic dissatisfactions could engender highly polarizing, sometimes violent redistributive conflicts, scholars at first presumed that economic pain could provoke political crises for a new regime. Later, arguments emerged that democracy was a process of decision making not intended to have substantive benefits (Linz and Stepan 1989; Mainwaring 1992). Whether or not citizens would recognize that distinction was an empirical question for investigation⁵.

Over time, reiterated elections in Latin America during the throes of economic crisis showed that economic hardship was not in fact destroying the new regimes (Geddes 1995; Haggard and Kaufman 1995, 326-7; Remmer 1991), although the answer to *why* regimes can survive economic crises is still being studied. At a macro-level, it seems clear: in the post-Cold War era, both international actors and domestic ones see democracy as the only legitimate option; but at the micro-level, precisely why citizens and civil society are so tolerant of policies that seem to entail high costs is still being analyzed, as discussed below. In addition, political scientists continue to warn that over the medium to long term, democracies cannot survive the high economic costs, but rather, will have to prove themselves economically competent (Diamond 1992, 487; Haggard and Kauffman 1995, 334; Karl 1990, 40) and will have to address equity issues (Castañeda 1993, 338-9). If tolerance of economic costs is short-term, this just begs the question of precisely what is the relationship between economic conditions and political demands.

⁴There are numerous examples from the literature. A couple illustrative ones are Seligson 1987, 177-87; Garretón 1986, 78.

⁵Examples of such empirical work in Argentina include Catterberg 1989, chap. 3 & 4 and Powers 1995b, chap.7.

As regimes became more enduring, the level of analysis has also expanded: from regimes to the politics of elections and governance. Moreover, as governments have adopted neoliberal policies involving a variety of short-term shocks to consumers and workers -- overnight price hikes, increased and expanded consumption taxes, wage stagnation, factory closings -- the literature has turned to the study of the electoral and political impact of those economic policies. Because the Argentine and Peruvian cases offer vivid illustrations of the public voting against neoliberals at the beginning of the decade, but re-electing the born-again neoliberals five years later, those cases have been particularly fruitful grounds for research investigating the larger issue. How do we explain mass-level political responses to economic conditions, and to the economic and social policies that cause those conditions? More specifically, what factors explain the unanticipated acceptance by mass publics for neoliberalism? Recent research on the impact of economic conditions on political ones suggests several types of explanations.⁶

Explaining the Impact of Economic Conditions and Policies on Citizens' Political Choices

Explanation 1: Social Spending to Off-set Perceived Losses

The first set of explanations starts with an assumption that citizens are materialists who will object to any short-term economic difficulties. From this perspective, when economic restructuring requires liberalization of consumer prices, cut-backs in social spending, or other hardships, those hit hardest should be targeted for special social assistance. This is not only an efficient use of scarce resources, for policy makers involved in fighting poverty (such as the World Bank), but is considered a politically pragmatic way to “compensate,” for losses, as Weyland (1997) puts it, and thereby to undercut opposition to needed economic reforms. Classical populist politics were an earlier example of attempts to practice compensation -- offering the masses some desired pay-offs in exchange for support and cooperation on larger economic decisions.

The evidence that such compensation actually “works” is inconclusive. Roberts and Arce (1996) argued that it does. They argue that Peruvian popular sectors were unhappy with Fujimori’s initial neoliberal shock programs, but by 1995 had come back to support him because of economic growth and politically-targeted social spending in the two years prior to the election. In Mexico, however, Bruhn (1996) found little statistical support for the thesis that social spending buys votes. Studying the effects of Salinas’ PRONASOL program in Mexico, Bruhn found statistical analysis could not support the widespread belief that the social spending had assured the PRI’s success in the 1991 congressional elections or had undermined support for the PRI’s opponents on the left. Nelson (1989, 111) also concluded that targeted social spending’s “contribution to political sustainability is likely to be modest.”

Recently working from psychology’s “prospect theory”, Weyland (1997) has added a useful twist that may help explain the discrepant conclusions about the political pay-offs from

⁶My categories are similar to, although more comprehensive than, those in Geddes (1995, 203).

attempts to pay off the electorate with social spending. He argues that compensation is effective under limited and particular conditions. Specifically, when citizens are in a “domain of gains” (the economy is stable), they can be compensated with patronage spending, as rational materialism might expect. In contrast, when they are in a “domain of losses” (such as hyperinflation), public spending that does not directly address their losses will be ineffective. In that domain, they are primarily concerned with ‘rescue’ from their losses. Weyland has found some evidence for compensation affecting voting patterns in the post-inflation (“domain of gains”) era in Peru and Argentina, although the statistical correlations are not strong. In sum, the literature seems to suggest that compensation may win some votes, but certainly cannot guarantee support. Our other two types of explanations will be more useful to explain mass attitudes.

Explanation 2: Complexity of Citizens’ Interests

If an explanation based on social spending derives from the assumption that people will object to economic conditions and need to be compensated for their perceived losses, it is only an explanation of political behavior at the margin, since all voters cannot be adequately compensated. The electoral support for Menem and Fujimori, for example, must derive from something other than patronage.

The other explanations in the literature suggest that the support for neoliberal policies has been true support, not co-optation. The issue is: under what conditions does this support arise? What effects do citizens experience from the new policies? Which do they see as positive? Which do they perhaps not recognize as caused by national policies? What do citizens expect from their government, and is neoliberalism, perhaps, irrelevant to their real concerns? Are citizens convinced to accept short-term costs for the promise of long-term gains? Do they perceive no policy alternatives? If so, is that a result of: international realities? political leadership by the neoliberal? or, a lack of parties and grassroots organizations offering convincing alternative paths? These questions encompass the thinking of that part of the literature that seeks to explain the unexpected acceptance, toleration, or support that neoliberalism has met in Latin America. That literature can be divided in two broad categories.

Generalizing broadly, one set of findings recognizes that people support neoliberals in spite of certain austere aspects of neoliberal policy, because the neoliberal politician or policies have other appealing qualities. We can call this the “**complex interests**” explanation, because it recognizes that citizens’ political interests are not objectively knowable nor uni-dimensional. Neoliberalism itself involves a variety of different policies with varying impact upon different sectors in society; more importantly, citizens are complex in their needs and desires. If the austere wage levels of neoliberalism do not appeal to the citizen’s desire for higher wages, the inflation-fighting side of neoliberal policies might appeal to the citizen’s need for security. These types of explanations make no assumptions about what the political interests of people are or should be, but seek to identify and explain interests as they occur.

This category of explanation can be further divided into two types of insights in the literature about how citizens interpret their interests. The first insight involves **context** -- that is,

that citizens interpret their interests not in abstract and ‘objective’ terms, but rather, in light of reference points (cf. Dahl 1971, 95-104). Because they have complex interests, they recognize the necessity of trade-offs. Their sense of their own interests is also shaped by their memories of the past and their expectations for the future.

Thus, for example, Stokes (1987) finds that in Peru, the political context included concerns for public peace and security, which surpassed any concerns about economic interests. Polls from Peru show that Fujimori’s economic policies are not nearly as popular as he is. Thus, she argues, Fujimori’s support is best explained not as acceptance of his economic policies, but rather, as a vote for another, higher priority: security and political order. Here, Weyland’s (1996) use of prospect theory can add to the explanation by providing some explanation for *how* people choose among their competing interests in differing contexts. Avoiding loss is a higher priority, Weyland argues from prospect theory, than obtaining gain. Using that explanation, we could elaborate on Stokes’s conclusion to say that the Peruvian electorate’s tolerated low gains from the government’s economic policies, because they feared much more severe losses from political violence and anarchy without Fujimori. Note that since contexts can be framed by politicians, this line of research allows ample space for politics and agenda-setting by politicians.

A second way of understanding how people interpret their complex interests focusses less on the context of their interpretations of their interests, and more on the varieties of interests that people have -- recognizing that not all material or economic concerns become political ones. Thus, to understand how people evaluate their gains and losses, we need to look not at broad, aggregate changes in economic condition, but rather, at the specific aspect of material life that concerns the citizen. This focus on **type of material interest** shows up in the literature in several ways. For example, Cornelius (1974) argued that the urban poor tend to demand specific and concrete material goods (housing, water lines, etc.) rather than broadly objecting to conditions of poverty or inequality. Walton and Seddon (1994) found that protests against austerity policies in Latin America tended to occur where there were “palpable shocks,” as opposed to long-term declines. Relatedly, my own field research in Argentina (Powers 1995b) found that citizens did not tend to perceive a link between the poverty in their individual living conditions and the decisions of national politicians, unless those living conditions were the type that could not be remedied through individual or neighborhood level action. A certain implicit subsidiarity applies in which people seek action for their problems at the nearest level possible -- rather than holding the state responsible for their suffering. This focus of analysis can then explain why hyperinflation is such an electorally salient issue -- it is the *type* of economic problem that causes “palpable shock,” and that citizens cannot solve individually, but that has significant effects on the vast majority of the electorate.

A final way of looking at *type* of need comes from the studies of sociotropic voting in Europe and the United States. This literature argues that some types of economic concerns -- concerns about the national economy -- are more salient to voters than other types of concerns -- their own pocketbooks (Kiewiet 1983, 130-32; Eulau and Lewis-Beck 1985).

Explanation 3: Interests Mediated by Strong Civil Society

The other broad category of thinking about these issues presumes that whether or not politics is affected by neoliberal policies is not a problem of how policies and interests are framed or understood by citizens, but rather, a problem of the political context -- a problem of poor representation and collective action. Organizations or institutions must channel and express citizens' concerns about economic policy. We might call this the **civil society** explanation. Thus, for example, in a study of popular protests, strikes and riots in 39 countries, Walton and Ragin (1989) argued that one cause of riots may have been exposure to organized labor unions in urban areas. Within this body of literature is a strong current arguing that grassroots movements, which would be important channels for expressing citizen discontent with austerity policies, have been undermined by government policies. Mainwaring (1987) argued, for example, that in post-transition Brazil, the government deliberately pursued a policy of divide and conquer among grassroots movements making materialist demands on the state.

This sort of explanation may give ample room to politics and agency (cf. Roberts 1996), recognizing that public support for economic policies is driven by political leadership -- and, conversely, that a lack of public opposition to policies may reflect the lack of a vehicle for expressing such opposition. Consistent with Tarrow's (1977) conception of political opportunity structure, whatever the public's sense of its economic interests are, those interests need a credible opportunity for expression.⁷ Just as politics can open up opportunities, by repressing politics or putting obstacles in the way of political opponents, leaders may succeed in restricting political expression in order to assure popular acceptance of policies (Roberts 1995).

Combining the three? -- the neoliberal/neopopulist affinities argument

Some arguments note the structural causes for a weak civil society. As economies are restructured along market lines, important social changes occur which modify the space for social organization. Public and formal sector employment is reduced, weakening labor organizations, at the same time that a vast informal sector increases the isolation and competition among people in similar economic straits (Roberts 1996).

In an influential extension of the structuralist argument, scholars have noted that not only does neopopulism cause and encourage a weak civil society, but so too does *neopopulism*. Although there are variations in emphasis and definition of the latter term, Roberts' (1995, 88) careful conceptualization captures the key elements noted by others: 1) personalism; 2) a heterogeneous, cross-class base of support; 3) unmediated, "top-down" connections between leader and base; 4) anti-elitist and anti-establishment themes; and 5) clientelistic or redistributive practices. According to Roberts (1995), as neoliberalism "exacerbates" the weakness of civil society, it creates a vacuum into which neopopulists step, providing the public with unmediated and highly paternalistic links between leader and public. Thus, rather than oppose neoliberalism for its austerity measures, the unorganized public is mobilized by neopopulists to embrace it. The

⁷Tarrow is writing about social movements, but -- as I will argue below -- the argument about opportunity structure is equally applicable to other sorts of citizen action, such as voting.

diversity of interests within the popular sectors discourages formation of autonomous grassroots organizations (Oxhorn 1996). Furthermore, the autocratic tendencies of populists help assure the smooth implementation of the neoliberal policies they now propose (Mauceri 1995; Roberts 1995). Weyland's (1994) approach is less structuralist than Roberts, but he sees the same affinities, rather than antipathies, between neopopulists and neoliberals. Weyland argued that both neoliberalism and neopopulism appeal to similar groups in society (the informal sector and poor, rather than the organized working class), use similar top-down strategies, and rely on similar redistributive tactics (see too Oxhorn 1996; Leaman 1996). These arguments tend to lead back to "compensation" arguments, for they argue that clientelist pay-offs are a significant populist tactic for securing support for neoliberal policies.

Neoliberalism and Neopopulism: The Peruvian Case

The articles noting "affinities" between neoliberalism and neopopulism helped address the seemingly perplexing reality that neoliberal politicians have been re-elected with significant support from subaltern sectors. The explanation is very appealing in the Peruvian case and appears to have been highly influenced by conditions in Peru.

Fujimori fits the neopopulist characterization quite well. First, as a political outsider from an immigrant family, Fujimori won the presidency in part because he appealed to the non-white majority of Peruvians more than did the urbane and well-connected Vargas Llosa (Schmidt 1996, 328-9; Stokes 1987, 214; Wise 1994, 116). Fujimori campaigned -- and now governs -- with a strong anti-elitist, anti-establishment message. He is known, for example, for getting out into the countryside to meet the people, where he is photographed in traditional garb. To this common touch, he adds a fierce anti-establishment message, criticizing the leaders of Peru's older political parties. Using this theme, he sold the country on the argument that the congress members were corrupt, incompetent, and uncooperative and that this justified his *auto-golpe* of April 1992 (McClintock 1993, 115). In fact, he *could* not -- and McClintock argues he did not *want* to -- govern in cooperation with the party opponents he excoriates. Certainly, his rhetoric has tried to make a virtue of his failure to construct institutions:

The *partidocracia* has been eliminated from Peru. . . . [Ours] is a style of democracy that seeks efficiency, and efficiency is being achieved without political parties, because the rule of parties -- precisely because of their manipulation -- has ruined the country. . . . My government has not had, does not have, and will not seek to have any party organization. (FBIS-LAT-95-069).

Fujimori not only uses the imagery and language of populism, but also its clientelist tactics -- although he did not adopt these tactics immediately. Fujimori's main social spending program, FONCODES, was slow getting "off the ground," according to Wise, but in the last two years before his re-election, he began more intense and blatantly political distribution of social resources. He also embarked on a dramatic school construction spree, offering continuous opportunities for public appearances and positive press (Roberts 1995, 102-8; Weyland 1997, 17-19; Wise 1994, 103).

Fujimori uses these populist tactics in a situation more extreme than elsewhere in Latin America. First, the party system utterly collapsed by 1990 with the economic crisis and corruption scandals surrounding APRA President Alan Garcia.⁸ Secondly, because his own “party” Cambio 90 is primarily a personalist vehicle, Fujimori lacks the capacity to organize political support through normal democratic processes. Third, the majority of Peruvians work in the informal sector, creating a vast sector of people unrepresented by traditional organizations of civil society, such as unions or parties.⁹ The informal sector, it should be noted, preceded the onset of neoliberal policies, yet Roberts argues that neoliberalism furthers the informalization of the economy, which then furthers the opportunities for neopopulist relations with this new social sector. Thus, as Roberts (1995) describes it, given the size of both the economic crisis and the informal sector, Peru was ripe for the paternalistic, unmediated communication style of the neopopulist. Finally, in this vacuum of political and civil society, the president has advocated a strong and competent hand, making excessive use of decree powers,¹⁰ forging tight alliances with the military, and manipulating the electoral process in numerous ways (Mauceri 1995).

In sum, it is easy to move from the Peruvian case to the conclusion that popular support for neoliberals such as Fujimori is rooted in populist, authoritarian appeals that find space in a society increasingly atomized by economic changes. As appealing as the neopopulist/neoliberal synthesis is in the Peruvian case, it does not fare nearly as well in the Argentine case, for Menem operates in a very different political environment from Fujimori. Granted, “neopopulism” is conceived as a typology (Roberts 1995, 88) and as such may be heuristically useful even if a politician does not fit it perfectly. However, to the extent that “neopopulist” was an apt description for Menem early in his first term, that description is increasingly inappropriate, as events in the past two years illustrate.

Menem -- Occasional Populist?

No doubt Menem has shown some populist leanings. He is the leader of the party founded by a man who epitomized classical populism -- Perón -- and he appeals to Perón, when convenient, to legitimate his status as a leader for the common man or woman.

⁸For detailed analysis of the weakness of the party system and Fujimori’s ability to win in 1990, see Schmidt 1996.

⁹The size of the informal sector, of course, is not easily measured. One indication, however, is that according to World Bank figures on the *formal* sector in the mid-1980s, 75% of the population was either unemployed or underemployed (1994, 410). It is reasonable to estimate that in a country without significant social safety nets, most of that population was scraping by through informal sector work.

¹⁰ He issued 109 decrees during his first term, Graham , 56.

Menem entered presidential politics sporting long side-burns that imitated a nationalist hero of the nineteenth century and riding around in a “Menemobile” so that he could see and be seen by the crowd. In some ways, he continues to embody the anti-elitist themes of his predecessors and that fit the neoliberal typology. For example, he has been seen often on the evening news playing soccer with school kids or in a practice game with the national team. His provincial accent draws sneers from urbane affluent *porteños*, but engenders trust from lower socioeconomic sectors.

In some ways too, Menem embodied the neoliberal/neopopulist combination. His first inaugural speech offered harsh medicine: “it would be hypocritical to deny it. This emergency economy is going to have to be adjusted. A hard adjustment. A costly adjustment. A severe adjustment”. This was then sugar-coated with promises that the neoliberal policies were designed to serve the poorest of the poor : “I want you to know that these reforms are, more than anything, in favor of the most humble. For their improved job opportunities. For their dignity and personal fulfillment.” (Iturrieta 1990, 179-80; my translation).

Finally, Menem fits Roberts’ description of the neopopulist’s tendencies to use authoritarian tactics instead of building lasting institutions. Menem has used autocratic tactics to assure the continuance of his neoliberal model. Like Fujimori, in the early years of his first term, Menem frequently circumvented the legislative process with executive decrees in order to put through the essentials of his restructuring program. He interfered with the judiciary in various ways, including stacking the Supreme Court with his own appointees, he threatened the advertising revenues of his critics in the media, and took other journalists to court for libel.

Despite these similarities with neopopulism, Menem does not fit the typology in other ways. First, while he engages in some “populist” symbolism, these are not any more significant than an American president donning a baseball cap or cowboy hat and they are counter-balanced by other symbols that offer an aristocratic image. Menem has taken fewer pains to appeal to the subaltern sectors than a “neopopulist” is supposed to do. He exudes much less personal austerity, for example, than Fujimori. Menem has openly taken on the jet-set lifestyle of the rich and famous, playing frequent rounds of golf in a country where golf is considered sport for the very wealthy, flaunting the impeccable wardrobe that won him the “best dressed statesman” award, and traveling the world with an entourage of personal care assistants. Although he has been photographed during campaigns riding a horse in the Argentine countryside, he does not pretend that his preferences are not more expensive. When the press criticized him early in his term for taking joy rides in a Ferrari that was supposed to be a gift of state, Menem showed less than a minor attachment to the good things in life: “*es mío, mío, mío,*” he insisted. More importantly, from the beginning of his first term he showed none of the anti-establishment propensities that Roberts defines as normal for a neopopulist. His first two finance ministers were chosen from the Bunge y Born conglomerate -- a firm that epitomizes upper-crust Argentine society.

Secondly, Menem has not only *not* been particularly concerned about the *symbolic* appeals to the lowest socioeconomic levels, he has also not put emphasis on *substantive* appeals. Menem

has engaged in some overtly clientelist spending, particularly prior to the last election (Weyland 1997, 19-20), but not nearly as extensively or blatantly as someone like Fujimori. Menem's public position on poverty and equity has never been populist. Frequently criticized for his inattention to social policy and for the regressive redistribution taking place in the country, Menem has not responded even symbolically with claims to care about the interests of the poor. Rather, he has toed the neoliberal line without a dash of neopopulism: poverty will be solved through economic growth; joblessness will be solved by labor flexibility. Neopopulists have been conceptualized as anti-elitist, providing material bases for popular support, and focussed on subaltern sectors (Roberts 1995, 88) -- but Menem has repeatedly claimed that poverty was not even a problem in Argentina (Powers 1995).

Third, Menem is very different from Fujimori and the neopopulist model in terms of his relations with civil society and mass publics. Although Argentina's party system is showing signs of fractionalization (Cabrera 1997), it is not the institutional void observers find in Peru. For one thing, the majority of Argentines continue to vote for one of the two political parties that have dominated Argentine politics for the past fifty years. Furthermore, while it is true that Menem has manipulated the labor movement and prevented a fuller institutionalization of the Peronist party (McGuire 1994), he has not succeeded in all of those efforts.¹¹ His heavy-handed tactics led to the disaffection of elements of the labor movement (the teachers, public employees, and other mostly white collar unions) and elements of Peronism (including Chacho Alvarez and José Octavio Bordón), who had joined forces by 1994 to become a significant opposition force called FREPASO (*Frente del País Solidario*). Pensioners have mobilized against Menem's quite unpopulist denial of their rights to a pension, and right-wing nationalists were briefly successful in the electoral arena with the MODIN party (*Movimiento por la Dignidad y la Independencia*). The rise of these and other *new* political options in Argentina, and the revitalization of older ones (the human rights movement) are indications of a responsive and autonomous civil society -- not the destroyed, coopted, and dependent civil society described by Roberts (1995).

Third, Menem's social base is rather different from Fujimori's -- a point not sufficiently acknowledged in the neopopulism literature, which seems overly influenced by the Peruvian case. Weyland argues that "neo-populists and neo-liberals coincide in their efforts to attract the victims of the ISI model, i.e., the informal sector," (1994, 4). Roberts (1995) too puts substantial emphasis on neoliberalism's creation of a vast informal economy ripe for exploitation by neopopulists. This picture suits Peru better than Argentina, because although the latter has a growing informal sector, it is much smaller than Peru's -- and thus provides a less coherent audience for appeals to the informal sector. More importantly than size, Menem did not *need* neoliberalism in order to create conditions for the politicization of the informal sector. Peronism was never attached merely to the organized working class, but from the beginning has had strong

¹¹ Moreover, manipulation and co-optation are age-old political techniques -- not the sole domain of populists. Politicians are prone to seeking to weaken their enemies and to keep close tabs on their supporters.

appeal with the very poor -- the *descamisados*. Peronism has always expressed an identity with the popular sectors generally, not merely the organized working class.

An Unpopular Populist?

On May 14, 1995 Menem was re-elected president with 49.8% of the vote in an essentially three-way race. His nearest competitor, José Octavio Bordón of FREPASO, got 29.3%. The constitutional amendments the president had pushed through in 1994 established two ways to win the presidency on the first ballot: either with 45% of the vote or with only 40%, but 10% more than the nearest competitor. Thus, by the latter threshold, Menem had obtained 10 percentage points more than the minimum needed to win on the first ballot -- or, as one British periodical put it at the time, "Menem coasts to victory."¹² Speaking from this perspective, both scholars and journalists reported that Menem had won "overwhelmingly" (Levitsky 1995, 14) and "resoundingly" (Hanke and Hanke 1995, 127).¹³ Not surprisingly, Menem was not about to deny this assessment, as illustrated at a Buenos Aires press conference two days after the election:

Journalist Daniel Navarro: Mr. President, does this overwhelming victory imply a greater responsibility for you and your administration in this upcoming government term?

President Carlos S. Menem: Based on my extensive political experience, I wish to explain that no matter the type of victory obtained -- close or overwhelming as you have just said -- our responsibility has always been the same. . . . We will continue to act with the same responsibility . . . as when I assumed the presidency in 1989, under very different circumstances, under much more difficult circumstances than the ones we are experiencing today. (FBIS-LAT-95-094, p. 26).

Of course, half of the Argentine electorate had *not* voted for Menem's re-election. At an interview with the Argentine newspaper *Clarín*, Menem was particularly sensitive to suggestions that the victory glass was half empty rather than half full. The interviewer (representing a newspaper that had turned very critical of Menem early in his first term) asked a question on the role of the media in democracy. Menem answered with an implicit criticism of the newspaper's critiques and concluded with the following exchange:

¹² "Menem coasts to victory." *The Manchester Guardian Weekly* (May 21, 1995): 3.

¹³ These are just two illustrative examples. It should be noted that the Hanke and Hanke interview in *Forbes* magazine was not the opinion of a disinterested journalist. Steve Hanke, *Forbes* columnist, was a Menem confidante whose 'interview' offered the president a forum for sending his message to a U.S. investor audience.

- Menem: The opinion published by various media -- not all of them -- obviously did not favor us. But public opinion disagreed on May 14. We received 50 % of the vote.
- Clarín: Public opinion, Mr. President, is an aggregate. It adds up to 100%.
- Menem Listen, I am actually interested in achieving victory. And 50% of public opinion voted me here. And *don't tell me that if I won with 50% of the vote, it means that 50% are against me.* (FBIS-LAT-95-133, p. 19, emphasis added).

Was the 1995 election glass half full as Menem saw it -- or half empty? The mood in the country after the election suggested the latter. The election had generated little enthusiasm from Menem's supporters and the usual election night street celebrations in the capital city were absent.¹⁴ In the following months, the half of the country who had voted against Menem gained strength and adherents. In the following section, analysis of public opinion survey results through the election, and of subsequent political events, will be used to argue that the 50% vote was indeed one stop in a declining trajectory of public support, rather than evidence of "resounding" strength.¹⁵

Is the Glass Half Full?

One of the striking differences between Menem and Fujimori is that Menem never reached nor sustained the levels of approval that Fujimori did. The latter retained majority approval ratings month after month following his 1992 "self-coup". For the two and a half years prior to the start of the campaign, however, neither Menem nor his government had enjoyed the approval of the majority of Argentines.¹⁶ Secondly, while both men's approval ratings are roughly

¹⁴According to reports of some residents interviewed in August 1995. Field work in Buenos Aires at that time included re-interviews with several of the neighborhood leaders and poor and lower middle class voters whom I had previously interviewed in 1991-2.

¹⁵The distinction between 'half full' and 'half empty' is not merely semantic, for it constitutes a measure of the dependent variable to be explained. Researchers who see Menem as successful want to explain that success, while those who see decline, will need to explain the decline.

¹⁶These statements are based on comparison of public opinion data from the APOYO firm in Lima (provided me by Kurt Weyland) and the Mora y Araujo Noguera y Asociados firm in Buenos Aires (provided me by Mora y Araujo). Stokes (1997) reports the same APOYO findings.

parallel to approval for their economic plans, until his presidential campaign began in earnest,¹⁷ Menem's approval as president was slightly *below* approval of his economic policies (Figure 1).¹⁸ In Menem's case, his victory in the 1995 election is widely attributed to his economic policies, particularly to his success in fighting inflation (Szusterman 1996; Levitsky 1995, 16). In this section, I examine the survey evidence and literature more closely to understand what might have been going on in the *cuarto oscuro*.

The highpoint of Menem's record, from almost anyone's perspective, was his success in controlling inflation. In April 1991, Menem implemented a Convertibility Plan that used Central Bank reserves to guarantee a fixed value for the austral/peso. By December 1991, monthly inflation was down to 0.6% and the press was talking about an "Argentine miracle" (Starr 1995, 1). The stability brought by the convertible currency came without increased unemployment at first, thanks to robust growth (FIEL 1994, 3). These are the kinds of economic developments that have universal benefit and they yielded widespread approval, as Figure 1 shows. By the end of that year, as confidence grew that the monetary stability might become permanent, public approval of the economic program and of Menem, reached 74% and 70%, respectively.

Such dramatically high approval ratings are rarely sustainable over time and while Fujimori has proven the exception, Menem did not. Within three months, approval for his economic plan and himself had dropped about 15 approval points. The initial drop was just the beginning. The robust growth rates of 1991 and 1992 did not last. The next year, unemployment and underemployment grew to historic highs and then continued to climb as the 1995 election approached. As Figure 1 shows, from June 1993 through December 1994, neither Menem nor his economic plan went above the 50% approval level.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that when Menem took the lead in rewriting the constitution in August 1994, he asked for a 45% threshold for winning election on the first ballot -- that is precisely the range of support he had received during the previous two years. Moreover, to lessen the possibilities that growing disenchantment among core supporters could keep him from the threshold, Menem decided not to include 'blank' votes, a traditional form of expressing protest in Latin America (Szusterman 1996, 112).

¹⁷ The improvement during the campaign is to be expected, since survey respondents asked their opinion of a politician tend to make comparisons to an idealized standard, but once the campaign is in progress, they are more likely to offer their opinion in light of the actual options, and most often, the incumbent looks better compared to the options than to an ideal. I thank Bill Claggett for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁸ In contrast, Fujimori has been substantially *more* popular than his economic policies. Stokes (1997, 222-3) argues persuasively that this discrepancy shows that Fujimori's re-election was not due to support for his economic policies, but rather, for his security policies.

Public opinion surveys provide some insights into the voters' opinions. Did they like Menem personally, as well as, his economic policies? Surely the voters included Peronist loyalists who saw the positive aspects of the economic program because they were predisposed to any Peronist supported policy. Similarly in wealthy districts with historical antipathies to Peronism, the pro-Menem vote can be explained as people who came to support the man because of his neoliberal policies. Yet the data suggest that Menem's re-election cannot be explained by people whose approvals of the incumbent and his economic plan came to be mutually reinforcing. Just before the election was held, that sector of the electorate who approved of *both* the economic program and the incumbent was only about 30% (see Figure 2). Presuming that people who expressed approval both of Menem and his economic plan would vote for him, we are left with about 20% of the total vote unexplained. Just as Fujimori's margin of victory is not matched by levels of support for his economic policies, so in Argentina, this crucial fifth of the vote must have consisted of people who favored Menem for reasons other than their approval of his overall economic plan. (Conversely, according to the same polling data, polls at the time of the election found about 60% disapproval for Menem's economic policies, yet clearly that 60% did not all vote for the opposition on May 14.)

Why did people vote for Menem if not for his economic policies? Unlike Peru, where the president's popularity can be traced to a second significant policy success that had near universal salience (guerrilla violence -- [Stokes 1997]), in Argentina, the other issues on the agenda were not in Menem's favor. In the six months leading up to the election, polls showed voters were most concerned about the job market, followed by low wages, impoverished pensioners, and corruption (Mora y Araujo 1994, 1995). Menem was not winning votes with these issues. His record on job creation was poor, and the pension and corruption issues had plagued him since early in his term. He could not win on any of the most salient secondary issues. His position was very different from Fujimori's. He didn't have a vicious guerrilla movement to fight and the Congress was dominated by his own party, so although he routinely threatened to go over their heads with executive decrees, he was not in a position to run for office by running against Congress (to misappropriate a phrase from the U.S. politics literature). His victory must have been rooted in: 1) support for one portion of his economic policies -- his anti-inflation plan; 2) Peronist partisans and/or 3) disapproval of his opponents.

Regarding the first issue, the "complexity of interests" explanations for support for neoliberalism are helpful. These explanations are best able to make sense of the survey evidence showing weak support for Menem's "economic policies" with the conventional wisdom that inflation was key to Menem's support. People have multiple, sometimes conflicting interests, which led to dissatisfaction with the economic plan, as registered in the opinion surveys. Yet elections force voters to choose between imperfect options, rather than express an opinion against an ideal. At the moment of decision, the former ruled. Further evidence for this interpretation is provided by Fabian Echegaray's (1995) voting analysis in 17 Latin American countries, which found that most of the variance in the electorates could be explained by two factors, the character of the candidate and the economy. The latter was only significant, however, if the voters' economic concern was inflation. Other economic issues, such as unemployment, were not

significant determinants of the vote. Hyperinflation has dramatic consequences that few citizens can easily forget, but Menem made sure that they would not. His public comments and speeches frequently remind voters of the economic failures of his predecessor (Powers 1995a). Thus, in Weyland's (1996) terms, Menem reinforces the memory of how he 'rescued' the country from hyperinflation. Faced with two unknown quantities or the person who saved the country from *la hiper*, risk averse voters -- even those who did not approve of the direction of economic policy generally -- chose "the devil they knew" as one Argentine put it to me.

Secondly, the strength of Peronist party loyalty should not be underestimated. Except for the congressional elections of 1985, Peronists have always counted on a base of approximately 40% (cf. Cabrera and Murillo 1994, 155; Catterberg 1989, 119). Menemism has changed the constitution of that voting block somewhat, as socioeconomic elites who once voted for the neoliberal Center Democratic Union (UceDe) now vote for Menem, and progressive sectors of organized labor, such as the teachers and public employees unions who are part of the CTA, have joined forces with FREPASO. Nevertheless, party identity rooted in family, habit, and class identities assured Menem of a comfortable foundation from which to build (Catterberg 1989, 127; Leaman 1996; Levitsky 1995, 24; Powers 1995b; Ranis 1992).

Finally, Menem's opponents were weak (in social movements terminology, voters faced a poor opportunity structure for expressing opposition if they felt it). As the changing polling data on voting intention in Figure 3 show, the candidates' campaigns did little to undercut Menem's core support.¹⁹ Rather, FREPASO's impressive gains came at the expense of the UCR (who had steadfastly refused suggestions in the press that an alliance with FREPASO would be to both their benefits). Neither Massaccesi nor Bordon offered a credible, satisfying alternative to the status quo. Their economic policies were, at heart, neoliberal, with some greater emphasis on social policy.

Massaccesi was an embarrassingly weak candidate with no national stature, who was relatively unknown even by party militants. Rumors within the party claimed that Menem had financed Massaccesi's primary campaign.²⁰ In 16 of the 24 provinces, including the province of which he was governor, Massaccesi received a lower percentage of votes than his party's congressional candidates.

If the Radicals were "a party without a leader", as Szusterman (1996, 110) has put it, FREPASO was "a group of leaders without a party." After much wrangling and an [open] primary, Jose Octavio Bordon was named candidate. A senator and former Peronist, he had more national stature and polish than Massaccesi, and was regarded (before the scandals that hit him after the election) as an honest politician. The only reason FREPASO had become a credible

¹⁹Menem offered this same assessment in his post-election press conference FBIS-LAT-Szusterman (1996, 114) and Levitsky (1995, 27) concur.

²⁰Per interview with UCR neighborhood 'comite' leader, August 1995.

opponent at all, instead of tangled among the myriad minor parties of the left that come and go on each ballot, was that Constitutional Assembly elections of 1994 had provided an unusual opportunity to improve their credibility. National leadership was not at stake (Clarín, April 11, 1994, 3) and proportional representation rules were operative, so in that race, voters could safely vote for their preferred candidate rather than engage in strategic voting. Moreover, both Menem and Radical leader Raul Alfonsín had been discredited by the *Olivos* pact that they made prior to the election (a pact in which they defined the constitutional amendments before the convention had even been elected). Given this window of opportunity, outside the usual winner-take-all voting logic of previous presidential races in Argentina, FREPASO surprised everyone by winning 12.5% in 1994. This made it less “wasteful” to cast one’s vote for FREPASO in future elections -- and enabled FREPASO to be seen as a serious challenge to the UCR and to cut into the UCR’s vote.

Nevertheless, not since the expansion of suffrage in 1916, has a third party candidate become president. Argentina is a two-party dominated system, with at least 70% of the vote having been captured by the Radicals and Peronists since the transition to democracy (cf. Cabrera and Murillo 1994, 155). Although the new two-ballot system facilitates a multiparty system, such a system presumes that parties will form alliances for the second round and that voters, but the UCR and FREPASO had shown little interest in allying. Moreover, voters will not change their strategic sense overnight. In Argentina, the voter’s experience was that voting for a third party presidential candidate was a wasted vote (Powers 1995b). Thus, Bordón never constituted a credible challenger to Menem, but did become an option for the half of the population who disliked Menem to express their preference for a more significant challenge than the UCR was providing. One final note on the voters’ calculation of options in the ballot booth: In the final days before the election, Menem’s first round victory was still uncertain (as the polls cited above make clear) and so Menem upped the anxiety ante by implying that a second round contest would undermine the country’s governability (Szusterman 1996, 113).

From this perspective then, Menem’s victory -- and his popularity -- appear less than overwhelming. Neither opponent was electible and together they divided the opposition half of the electorate. Despite the margin between himself and his nearest opponent, Menem’s victory under these conditions was not a sign of popularity and strength, but the first sign of the troubles that lay ahead. Poll data suggest that people who opposed the direction of his economic policies at the time of the election nevertheless voted for him. These voters would constitute a potentially receptive audience for the more combative opposition that Menem has faced since May 1995 -- the emptying of the glass, so to speak.

Since Menem’s re-election, it has become increasingly evident that whatever neopopulist trimmings may have initiated Menem’s presidency, the substance of his political position is not that of a neopopulist. He is not operating in an institutional vacuum. Rather the labor unions of the General Federation of Labor (CGT) have become increasingly willing to act autonomously, as they find Menem’s commitment to neoliberal policies surpasses his pay-offs for their political support. The CGT even helped lead rallies at a September 1996 general strike -- co-sponsored by

a coalition of anti-Menemist parties and unions (Reuters 27/9/96). Working together, against Menem, the labor unions and their supporters in the Peronist party managed for more than four years to delay passage of the full “labor flexibility” legislation that Menem and his international advisors seek. Menem claims flexibility is the key to lowering production costs and thus encouraging investment and job creation, but labor sees “flexibility” as the revocation of Peronist-era worker protections. Despite threatening several times to use his executive decree powers to get flexibility into law, Menem did not do so -- apparently aware that he lacked the political support to legitimize use of the decree. Menem has lost support from his party members in other ways too, as trusted advisors have defected to create new opposition movements for the 1996 mayoral election in the Federal Capital.

Not only is Menem losing the support of his close allies, but the opposition of his enemies has become more intense and better organized. Shocking evidence of Menem’s declining support came just four months after his re-election victory, when his party came in third place in the election for a new senator for the Federal Capital. The FREPASO’s candidate, Graciela Fernández Meijide, took the 1995 election easily and 77% of voters *did not* support the Peronist candidate (Szusterman 1996, 111). If Menem had believed that the country was with him in May 1995, he soon found that politics was getting away from him. The moribund Radicals too came back to life in 1996 under new leadership. Where former leader Raúl Alfonsín had been willing to negotiate with Menem to assure some minor input in the constitution-writing process, Terragno has pursued a more militant anti-Menemist line, that is less prone to co-optation. By 1996, public opinion polls reported Menem’s approval ratings had fallen to 20% (reported in Reuters 27/9/96). Clearly, the glass was emptying fast.

Conclusion

The significance of Menem’s victory in 1995 might have been open to several interpretations at the time, but since that election, his declining political fortunes suggest that new political voices are finding receptive audiences in the Argentine public arena. The 1995 election did not offer FREPASO a realistic opportunity to win, given Argentina’s historic two-party system and voter reticence to risk their votes, but it offered the opposition a chance to improve its credibility as an electible force -- and the opposition has risen to the occasion since then. Menem’s declining popularity is not merely a sign that he is not a particularly effective populist or that he’s simply a washed-up populist. He is a politician -- he uses populist appeals from time to time, but mostly he has worked an insider-politics game of persuading partisans and labor unions to side with him, and that game is failing him. For mass support, he relied less on his own populist appeal than on that of his party’s founder -- he was able to count on a strong core of Peronist partisan identity among the working class and poor. As five years of Menemism gradually showed that constituency that it was being abandoned, they gradually began to be receptive to opposition messages.

The neoliberal/neopopulist affinities thesis suggests that neoliberalism helps to destroy civil society and diminish opportunities for the building of credible opposition to neoliberal

policies. The Argentine case shows that this is not necessarily the route. The opposition movement began to gain strength mid-way into Menem's term, after inflation had been controlled long enough for the stabilization to seem permanent. The opposition arose as other aspects of the restructuring process began to take effect: provincial governments were pushed to adjust themselves, and unemployment continued for months at a time at once-record levels. Where unemployment could be expected to be demobilizing,²¹ in Argentina it has become the opposite. Menem has repeatedly insisted on more neoliberalism -- a deepening of the model through labor flexibility -- as the solution to joblessness. This has just hardened the resolve and increased the support for those who believe that the model itself must be adjusted. In short, neoliberalism is *not* weakening civil society in Argentina, but rather, has helped spark an upsurge in political participation and in new competitors for power.

I conclude that these changes are not explainable by the neopopulist/neoliberal affinities model, which anticipates that neoliberalism creates structural changes that suppress parties, unions, and autonomous political activity, and that neopopulists operate in that void. By linking the conditions of civil society to a particular policy in structuralist fashion, the neoliberal/neopopular thesis *does* point out interesting short-term affinities, but cannot explain medium-term *changes*. The neoliberal model hasn't changed -- but the political reaction to it in Argentina is changing.²² The emptying glass in Argentina can be better explained by the other categories of explanation described in the beginning of this paper: the complexities of interests and the political competition and strategy that create new contexts -- new alternatives for citizens to consider in civil society. These explanations can explain a Fujimori *and* a Menem -- and can explain what happens to public support for these leaders. These explanations, rooted in people's political and economic options, can help us understand cases where the leader continues to look like a populist, such as Fujimori, but also cases where the leader is increasingly tied both in public and private, to elites, as is Menem.

Both Fujimori and Menem have been voted upon by citizens who have multiple concerns -- personal security, government stability, monetary stability, job security, national economic security. These different *types* of concerns are evaluated *in the context* of other economic and political interests. The type of concern (personal or national; something that can be handled alone or something beyond my capacity, etc.) and the context in which that concern is interpreted by the citizen matter a great deal to whether there is any political response at the voting booth or elsewhere. Thus, as Weyland suggests, crisis conditions make citizens feel a need for "rescue," and as I have argued elsewhere (1995b), the level of vulnerability citizens feel (the inability to "cope" alone, and thus the need for government help) also determines whether needs

²¹Geddes 1995, 204 cites Edward Epstein for this point: "Austerity and Trade Unions in Latin America," in *Lost Promises: Debt, Austerity, and Development in Latin America*, ed. William Canak (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1989).

²²Not that the major parties are advocating reversal of the model, but simply that they oppose the latest social consequences of the model and seek a more progressive social policy.

become political demands. These concepts can help understand Argentina's unexpected mobilization against to unemployment. Short-term unemployment seems like a personal level problem. It leaves the jobless feeling that they will find a way to cope and leaves those with jobs feeling untouched; but on-going historically-high unemployment is more clearly a concern for the government, not just for individuals -- and it is more clearly a problem that affects the entire country, not just the unfortunate jobless.

Finally, the public responds not only based on the type of economic problem and the context to which it is compared, but also to the credibility of the options in *civil society* for meeting that need. Here, the reported demise of civil society in Argentina due to neoliberal restructuring, to paraphrase Mark Twain, may be premature.

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