

Coping or Linking?:  
Explaining How Argentine Citizens Evaluate Economic Conditions

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### ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand when and why people judge the national government on the basis of their own economic conditions. It considers the literature on “sociotropic voting” in the United States and shows how that literature contrasts sharply with the findings of the social movements literature rooted in studies in Latin America. Both literatures focus on the politicization of citizens’ interests, but take those material interests as a given. I argue that to understand why people respond or do not respond to their pocketbook conditions requires understanding the particular material conditions people are experiencing, and how they cope with them.

Based on depth interviewing in Buenos Aires, the research finds three different ways of perceiving personal material interests in relation to politics: a micro-focus, a macro-focus, and a focus on the micro-macro linkage. The difference between those who link their micro-level conditions to their evaluation of national politics and those who have a macro- or micro-focus is based on whether or not the person is able to cope with his or her own material interests at the household or local level. Economic and political contexts, as well as the particular type of material interest, will shape perceptions of whether or not coping requires government policy changes or can be managed at the household or local level.

The relationship between coping and political views provides a theoretical basis for understanding why citizens seem to care more about certain economic issues than others--for example, why inflation proved a more important issue in the 1995 Argentine election than unemployment (when the latter was a real problem in 1995 but the former was not).

Argentina provides an important case study in the way mass publics react to material conditions under democracy. A brief socioeconomic portrait of the case will reveal why.

Argentine President Carlos Menem took office in mid-1989 amid hyperinflation and record poverty levels. In October 1989, 38% of households in Greater Buenos Aires had income below the poverty line--10 times the proportion in the early 1970s. In 1991 he instituted the Convertibility Plan, which has virtually eliminated inflation. Poverty levels shrank as wages held their values against prices. Eighteen months after convertibility took effect, the proportion of Greater Buenos Aires households in poverty was down to 14%--a considerable improvement, although still high by Argentine historical standards (CEPA 1993, 12; historical trends, per INDEC 1990, 38). Inequality peaked and then receded, in concert with hyperinflation, yet showed no improvement from the Convertibility Plan and remains above historical trends (cf. World Bank 1995, 20).

Growth rates soared from 1991-1994, but Menem's "productive revolution" did not bring his promised *salario*. Real wages remained well-below historical levels (ECLAC 1997, 107). Contrary to the promises of the productive revolution, unemployment and under-employment grew steadily following convertibility, with unemployment climbing from 6.9% in June 1991 to 18.4% in May 1995, the month Menem came up for re-election (INDEC 1998).

In the 1995 election, Menem beat out two opponents--one a relatively unknown from the second major party and the other from the newly formed FREPASO coalition. His victory was not overwhelming--he won just under 50% of the vote, suggesting significant dissatisfaction in the country (Powers 1997). His victory has been widely attributed to his successful policies against inflation (cf. Gervasoni 1997; Szusterman 1996; Weyland 1998).

Polls from May 1995 showed only 3% of those polled considered inflation a concern at the time of the election, while 85% named unemployment as a major problem (data provided to author by Mora y Araujo Noguera y Asociados). Nevertheless, at least half of the population did not punish Menem for the unemployment peak, did not punish him for his lack of a significant poverty program (despite widespread public criticism of his poverty programs; [cf. Powers 1995]), and did not punish him for the numerous corruption scandals that the opposition tried to make a major issue in the campaign. Beyond the voting booth, civil society was relatively quiet too. Only in the two years after the re-election, as unemployment continued unabated and opposition parties and unions began to find common ground among themselves, did significant public demonstrations and strikes break out.

No one in 1989 could have predicted that a Peronist president would undertake a radical restructuring of the economy along neoliberal lines, publicly deny that poverty was a public problem, oversee the largest rise in unemployment in the country's history, and nevertheless get re-elected. Saying that the supportive voters were 'voting the economy' does not explain very much. Why would inflation be a stronger motivating economic issue, than unemployment, inequality, or stagnant paychecks? Why did some people with significant economic problems hold Menem accountable for their problems, and others not?

A complete explanation of the Argentine elections and of public attitudes toward Menem's economic policies would require attention to partisan and class identities, the political and historical

context in which Menem was evaluated, and non-economic concerns of citizens, all of which are beyond the scope of this paper. Here, I focus on one question: to what extent did the people with unmet economic concerns think about those concerns when they evaluated their government's performance? I examine the theoretical literature that could offer answers to the question, provide a critique of its shortcomings, and then use my own research to pose an alternative model of how citizens think about political questions in relation to their own economic grievances.

### Competing Theoretical Perspectives

Two social science literatures that deal with questions of if, when, and how material interests are linked to political ones in grassroots-level political views are the public opinion/voting studies literature and the social movements literature. The former derives from study of the United States and western Europe, but is increasingly cited in study of the developing world as elections become widespread there. The latter has strong roots in scholarship on Latin America. They come to strikingly different conclusions about the conditions under which ordinary people would see their personal economic conditions as problems for which the state should take responsibility. That is, they differ on the conditions under which people link their personal material experiences (the micro-level) to their views of national public affairs (the macro-level).

*Public Opinion Studies.* Public opinion researchers have argued that personal ideology (and/or partisanship) is the strongest predictor of political position. To the extent that individuals evaluate politicians on the basis of material concerns, they look less at personal conditions (their "pocketbooks"), than at the overall economic conditions, past and prospective, of the country (Kiewiet 1983, 130-2; Eulau and Lewis-Beck 1985; Lewis-Beck 1988). This finding of "sociotropic" voting suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, voters experiencing personal economic hardships while the country experiences prosperity would vote in favor of the government that had presided over that national prosperity. Voters experiencing personal economic success while the economy sagged would vote for the challenger.

Some of the literature explains sociotropism in terms of blame. People tend not to see the micro-macro connection. They tend not to see the national government as *responsible* for their personal conditions, and consequently do not judge the government's performance by their personal material status. Where voters are able to attribute responsibility to the government (due to mediating institutions or direct policy impacts such as benefit cuts), studies suggest they will vote their "pocketbooks" (Feldman 1982; Feldman 1985, 154-9; Powell and Whitten 1993).

Some leading public opinion researchers, however, presume that no such responsibility exists. "The logical relationship between family finances and how the president is doing is . . . a leap," according to Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt (1996, 253). In other words, survey respondents who say their personal economic conditions are poor while the nation is doing well are assumed to be people whose finances have been hurt by individual-level circumstances, such as a divorce, new dependents, illness, bad decisions, or personal failures. These researchers argue that sociotropic voting is salutary, because it is unlikely that the condition of one's pocketbook, if it differs from the condition of the nation overall,<sup>1</sup> reflects the competence of a national leader (Goren 1997, 406; Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996, 254-5; also Kinder and Kiewiet 1979, 523, quoted in Weatherford 1983, 160). ]

Seeing sociotropic voting as the logical norm, this literature sets out to explain deviance from that norm. Pocketbook voting is explained not as an expression of a different political *interest* compared to sociotropic voting, but as the result of lacking the *information* needed to make sociotropic judgments.<sup>2</sup> For example, Weatherford (1983, 161-67) sees voters as “information processors” who fall back on their pocketbooks as indicators of governing capacity when they lack, or are unable to make sense of, national-level information. Goren (1997) claims that more knowledgeable voters are better able to judge national economic conditions and thus most often use sociotropic judgments as the basis for voting decisions. Mutz (1992) suggests that the mass media provides information that shapes how citizens prioritize their political interests. The media causes a “depoliticization of personal experience” by emphasizing the collective national conditions relevant to an election. Mutz concludes that only those who are less attentive to national news would be likely to respond to politics on the basis of personal economic needs. She fears that the media’s “widening [of] the gap between personal and social judgments may be dysfunctional to the extent that people’s social perceptions become independent of their aggregated personal experiences, and democratic accountability breaks down.” This concern about accountability is limited to a fear that “those who are not exposed enough to mass media” might not know enough about the state of the collective national economy and might make the inappropriate assumption that their personal reality reflects the collective reality (1992, 504). That fear is consistent with intellectual anxieties about misinformed masses, going back to antiquity. Mutz neglects the converse issue: that when the media depoliticizes the personal experiences of those who *are* “exposed enough to mass media,” it also undermines democratic accountability by redirecting their priorities away from the impact of government policy on their lives and toward issues that may have less personal relevance.

If the only question facing a voter is: *How is the government managing the national economy?* then it is a truism that an individual’s financial condition is a poor, anecdotal source of information upon which to evaluate how well the government manages the economy overall. Yet democratic citizenship implies a broader question. From the perspective of a citizen seeking a representative government and not merely an economic manager, the overarching question may be: *Does the government govern on my behalf?*<sup>3</sup> Most citizens have multiple interests they wish to see the government address on their behalf. These include managing the national economy well, but might also include “pocketbook” concerns such as low taxes, affordable health care, or preventing a plant closure that would leave the citizen unemployed; sub-national sociotropic concerns, such as for the welfare of children and the elderly; non-economic, national-level concerns, such as national security or the environment; and non-economic concerns affecting their personal security and welfare as well as that of other citizens, such as concerns about the human rights record of the police or the efficiency of the tax collection services. In other words, a person’s financial condition is more than a mere source of *information* about how the government performs, it also constitutes one of several potential *interests* that citizens might plausibly demand that a representative government serve.

The relevance of public decisions to an individual’s financial condition may be hidden during times of prosperity and peace (such as the times encompassed by the U.S. voting studies literature). In countries undergoing economic development and democratization, however, it is often painfully obvious whether government is working on one’s behalf. In situations where personal family finances are wiped out overnight by hyperinflation or devaluation, or where public employees and pensioners go

without paychecks for weeks due to government insolvency, personal finances are directly and overtly affected by public leaders.

Not all connections between government policies and an individual's pocketbook are so obvious or so direct. Individuals face markets and opportunities shaped by governments in ways that are hidden from casual view. Labor markets may be tight due to government regulations that slow growth. A deficit of affordable housing results from tax and lending policies favoring upscale development. Opportunities for upward mobility are cut off by the out-of-pocket costs of public education. In cases like these, the linear relationship between government policy and individual hardship may be strong, but not obvious in the absence of some interpretive assistance from political actors.

*Social Movement Studies.* Studies of new social movements recognize these objective connections between national policy and personal economic circumstances. They seek to understand the conditions under which citizens perceive those connections and act upon them. Some scholarship on new social movements, particularly studies of the Latin American poor, has suggested that successful grassroots mobilization occurs where political organizers, policies, or parties have led people to see those connections and to hold political leaders accountable for the material conditions in their own lives and neighborhoods (Cornelius 1974, 1131-4). In the absence of such "consciousness raising," people are susceptible to clientelist means of politicizing their personal material needs. From the perspective of this literature, if the national economy thrives while some social sectors remain in poverty, then it is *not* salutary that the poor would ignore their personal experience and reward an incumbent for successfully managing the national economy. Rather, through civic education and organization, individuals would learn to see the consequences that national-level policy decisions have upon individual lives and to demand that the government enact policies that better their lives and those of people like them (Alvarez 1990, 39 and 57-82; Freire 1972; Levine 1993; Mainwaring 1987; Neal and Seeman 1964, cited in McAdam et.al., 708; Oxhorn 1995, 135-9; and Stokes 1995, 68 and 116-7).

Studies of new social movements look at information as a means of focussing and defining interests. In contrast to the public opinion studies that see information and political awareness as means to depoliticize personal experience, social movement studies suggest that political awareness and access to information have the potential to create a *greater* sense of connection between the individual and the world of politics. Whether that happens or not depends on a variety of factors that shape which information people receive and how they interpret it (cf. Eckstein 1989). In other words, whether people see connections between political issues and their personal lives depends not merely on whether they are knowledgeable about national news, but on *how* the issues are portrayed in the news and by political actors. Grassroots organizations have sought actively to shape how citizens understand political conditions, so that citizens perceive connections that the news coverage of a national political debate or campaign might gloss over.<sup>4</sup>

By this reasoning, the expectation that government has an impact on individual lives is built on politics and ideas; it is not illogical nor ignorant.<sup>5</sup> If citizens do not expect the government to improve their own lives it may be simply because no credible actors in the political arena--politicians, social movements, nor media--have suggested ways by which government *could* address their personal-level material conditions. The sociotropic perspective, from this vantage point, results not from political

sophistication, but from particular political contexts that fail to politicize personal-level interests. For example, in the United States context in which much of the public opinion literature is written, the two major parties do not propose radical changes that would significantly improve the lives of individuals with substantial material needs. Within this narrow ideological context, it may *appear* that the president is not responsible for an individual's material welfare, simply because none of the alternative candidates is likely to affect the individual's welfare differently. If more radical alternatives existed in the party system, then voters could indeed hold a president accountable for failure to see his job as more expansive than simply managing the economic status quo. In multi-party contexts with many small parties of the left and right, citizens more often have the option to vote their dissatisfaction with the economic system overall--that is, in effect, holding the incumbent accountable for not spearheading radical change to improve life at the grassroots.

### *An Alternative Research Approach*

In summary, public opinion literature argues that personal economic conditions do not tend to affect political views (the literature differs on whether that is primarily because the connections between public policy and individual lives are irrelevant or because the media or the political context make it difficult for voters to see who is responsible for their conditions). Research on new social movements suggests that personal economic conditions do not affect political views *until* local organizers, parties, or politicians demonstrate for citizens the numerous connections between public policies and private conditions. Given these contradictory and incomplete theoretical perspectives, further research is warranted. Therefore, I approach the problem through a different level and method of analysis that enable individuals to explain their economic concerns, their political interests, and any connections they indeed perceive between them. I consider cases where political relationships and involvements shape citizens' views, but also evaluate the views of people without such relational ties.

I argue that in order to understand the connections or lack of connections that people make between their material conditions and their political views, we first need to examine the conditions themselves and how people live with them. The public opinion literature tries to explain pocketbook or sociotropic voting on the basis of citizens' knowledge of politics and perceptions of conditions in their group or community and the social movements literature focusses on collective organization around existing "grievances" (cf. Eckstein 1989, 14). All of these explanations focus only on the politicization side of the equation--they essentially take the "grievances" as a given. They discuss the political reasons why some grievances cause political reactions but other grievances do not, but they ignore the material reasons. I argue that to understand why people would vote for a politician such as Carlos Menem, who ended inflation but oversaw the biggest increase in joblessness in history, requires understanding something about how people live with inflation as opposed to how they live with joblessness.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the political views of those undergoing material hardships begins with understanding their views about the various hardships they experience.

### Researching Political Views

This paper is based primarily on eight months of field work and qualitative interviews with 41 people in Buenos Aires. These were in-depth, semi-structured interviews about political and economic conditions in Argentina, averaging nearly two and a half hours each, carried out in the first half of 1992. The interview questions asked about micro-level matters (their own income, work, education, and economic worries), macro-level matters (opinions of national parties, politicians, the democratic

regime, particular events, etc.), and whether the macro mattered to the micro (what, if anything, they perceived as the impact of the economic adjustments upon them, the impact of economic inequalities upon them, what they perceived as the state's proper responsibilities, etc.). The design enabled people to link micro to macro, or to discuss them as separate and largely non-linked, as their views led them. One fifth of the people were re-interviewed, informally, in 1995, and I found considerable consistency over time in their underlying values and political loyalties.

Through the words and explanations that people used in order to tell me what and how they think, concepts and relationships began to emerge. A database with dozens of items was used to summarize, codify, sort, and cross-tabulate the elements in each interview, in order to observe the patterns accurately. I examined each interview completely, for the overall focus of the person's discourse, and I then coded the discourse as micro-focussed, macro-focussed, or focussed on the micro-macro linkage.<sup>7</sup> Because these are ideal-types, no one is purely and wholly consistent with any pattern. Also, the unstructured interview format leaves some interviews incomplete or inconclusive on certain issues, so some interviews could not be categorized on the dimensions discussed in this paper.

#### A Typology of Responses to Personal Material Interests

The interviews revealed attitudes about the social role and actual capacity of the Argentine government; the material problems of daily life and the means to solve them; the people's hopes, dreams, and judgments about future prosperity; views about inequality, poverty, and the causes thereof; views about social justice, etc. These attitudes formed three patterns of how citizens thought about political matters in relation to their material concerns.

The first type of thinking about politics has a *micro focus*. This is a person whose discourse on politics does not demand government action on his or her personal material interests. To the extent that these citizens perceive a political solution to their material grievances, it is only through using clientelistic relationships or local-level petitioning to address particular material needs. The experience as a client or petitioner does not bring these citizens further into the political system nor enable them to perceive precise links between their material well-being and the activities of the national government, in which they remain largely uninterested. Overall, they pursue their specific material interests at the lowest feasible level of resolution. While they largely do not perceive government as relevant to their particular personal needs, they are also not "sociotropic," in that they do not express interest in national-level concerns. Their understanding of national politics and their preferences among national-level politicians and parties are rooted in very simply-understood identities of party or class and general experiences as consumers. Their sole interest in the national economy is in what it is doing to them personally (thus they are not "sociotropic") and yet they do not have the sort of precise understanding of the linkages between national political decisions and their own lives, which the social movements literature would expect of a "conscientized" voter who links pocketbook to policy. These may be the kinds of less-informed voters that the public opinion literature envisions when it disdains ignorant "pocketbook" voters who judge the government on the basis of their own circumstances; yet describing them as voting their pocketbook is unsatisfying, for it raises questions of "what section of their pocketbook?" As the examples will illustrate, these people may have very serious and immediate pocketbook concerns that they ignore when thinking about national politics.



The second type of citizen is *macro-focussed*. Like the micro-focussed citizens, these also expect to resolve material interests through household-level efforts or perhaps local-level organizing and petitioning, and they do not demand that national government policies address their own particular material interests. These people do, however, see a role for national government in solving the material problems of other citizens. While they do not expect their particular needs to be resolved politically, they express concern for government policy that addresses the needs of their social class generally, and also of other groups in society whom they consider particularly vulnerable or deserving of public concern (egs., children, the elderly, the poor). These are the citizens that public opinion research describes as “sociotropic.” These citizens believe politics is relevant to the material lives of citizens, but at a very broad level of the macro-economy and the overall society. They recognize that macro-level policies, such as monetary stabilization or economic restructuring, have an impact on the economy in which they have to function each day, but for their own particular needs, they find household and local-level means to cope.

The third type of citizen is *focussed* on the *micro-macro link*. These citizens strongly demanded government action both to address their own specific material problems, as well as those of people like them. What joins them together is not their ignorance nor their enlightenment, their education, social-class background, deprivation relative to others in society, objective level of need, or level of political activism per se, but rather, their belief that their individual efforts are not sufficient to resolve the kinds of material problems they face.

While I suspect that psychological factors may help explain why some have a micro-focus and others a macro-focus (see below), it should be emphasized that I do not perceive people as cognitively prone to focussing on the micro-macro linkage or not focussing on it. In other words, this is not a typology of *citizens*, but of *responses* to particular material interests. The same citizen might be micro-focussed in response to some material interests, but focus on the link between government and his conditions, in other situations. What those situations are is addressed later in the paper. First, I elaborate on each of these types of thinking, using two illustrative interviews for each, in order to demonstrate the diverse ways in which each focus manifests itself.

### Micro Focus

Citizens are micro-focussed when they simply do not perceive macro-level behavior (such as national political activity) having much impact or significance to their current material interests. They may be involved in politics as a means to obtain specific things they want for their own families. They may discuss public affairs using anecdotal stories of particular people’s personal problems and the impact of government upon them. The focus of their interest, however, is their individual material problems. The examples of Jorge and Cecilia provide insight into this type of thinking.

Jorge, a skilled tradesman and father of seven, lived in a *casa tomada*--in this case, a large public building that had long ago been vacated and, early in the new democratic regime, had been taken over by 100 families. He and his neighbors engaged in a multi-year struggle to legalize their tenancy, eventually convincing the municipal government to award them title to the property. In the process, Jorge became a savvy leader of the housing cooperative, meeting with politicians, helping to organize protest marches, and speaking to the press. For many months, he worked constantly, often asking his boss for days off, so that he could help lead his community’s housing struggle.

Politics was part of his everyday life. Yet Jorge said he was completely uninterested in any political issue other than housing. His declared lack of interest was corroborated by two hours of conversation, during which he mentioned no political opinions beyond concern for other people needing housing. His thinking about his own and others' housing interests was particular; that is, he did not put his material interest in housing into a larger ideological or social context about the purpose of government, the goals of public policy, or the conditions of the working class. Jorge and his neighbors won a victory for their house by arguing for a specific group of people needing housing in a particular piece of disposable city property. The specificity of his thinking is exemplified by a conversation filled with a vocabulary that asserted material interests as shortages experienced by individuals.<sup>8</sup> He did not see his family trapped by social structures, but rather, believed that with him as a hard-working role model and his children's diligence in studying, they could make their way in the world.

If participation has the transformative effects that have been attributed to it by the social movements literature cited earlier, then collective political action to get housing for one's family should lead the actors to put their housing needs in a broader context of social justice claims and public policies to meet basic needs. In Jorge's case, although he had become a seasoned political strategist through the housing cooperative, he nevertheless remained thoroughly uninterested in any other political affairs. He said that the only news he had time to read was that relating to getting ownership of their house and that he had no interest in partisan politics.<sup>9</sup>

Cecilia, a domestic worker and mother of school-age children, provides a second example. Cecilia, Jacobo and their children had been evicted from a *casa tomada* where they had lived for almost eight years. They ended up with temporary shelter in a building owned by a community activist organization associated with dissident Peronists (who later joined FREPASO). Through that organization, they learned about a movement organizing squatters and tenants, through which they managed to obtain housing. As a legal resident from Uruguay, Cecilia could not vote in presidential elections. Asked about her political interests, she admitted to weak knowledge about political affairs. Yet pressed about whether she had any particular political concerns, the first thing she mentioned, even though she was optimistic that her own housing problem had just been resolved, was housing. Her sense of what the government might do about housing, however, was not specific. Her mention of housing quickly turned into a general description of the Argentine economy. She implied that the president was responsible for economic performance, but did not specify how:

*They promise a lot to the people, but we'll see what happens. There are so many people walking about the streets. The president says 'yes [we'll do something about housing]'; but we'll see. The truth is that we didn't vote in the presidential election when Menem ran, but we wanted him to win. He seemed like a good person. I don't know. It seems that he has done a lot, that's what I say. I don't know. It seems that way to me. Other people say that he hasn't. . . There's no lack of work. People who aren't working here don't want to work, because there are jobs. Cecilia [4 June 1992, t, 4]*

So Cecilia said that she wanted the government to do something about homelessness, but there was no evidence that she evaluated the government on the basis of whether it had done so. Likewise, she implied that the government might have some role in promoting the economy and fomenting jobs, yet she dismissed those who criticized the government's performance in these areas as lazy individuals.

Precisely because of her limited knowledge of the political world and her focus on individual agency, we might expect her views to be based on simple reactions to personal circumstances. This is the expectation in the public opinion literature that sees pocketbook voting as a function of ignorance. Likewise, the populism literature would lead us to suspect that she would be supportive of any political actors that had helped meet her most severe material need. Yet contrary to both of these expectations, Cecilia's miserable personal housing experience did not negatively affect her evaluation of the government, in spite of her professed belief that housing is an issue politicians should address. The fact that Menem had not yet addressed the housing deficit did not cause her to reject him. The fact that during Menem's term her family arrived home to find themselves evicted from their house and unable even to retrieve their furniture from the padlocked building did not lead her to blame the government for the desperation suffered during its tenure. Of course, she may simply have been feeling optimistic because they were about to have a home of their own, at last, but the fact that the people who helped her family find a means to permanent home-ownership were vocal anti-Menemists did not seem to influence her or her husband's political loyalties.

*To me, [politics] doesn't affect me much. I don't know how other people feel. In Argentina, we're living. If we were in Uruguay, there are many things that we wouldn't be able to buy, because it's more expensive. When my husband went [to visit Uruguay], the prices were horrible. The meat was very, very expensive. Here, we eat meat every day. When we were living there, we only ate meat at the end of the month when he got paid. . . . And we only bought sodapop for my daughter's birthday. Here, we buy sodapop every day. Cecilia [4 June 1992, t, p.4]*

As the quotations reveal, Cecilia talked about politics in material terms, and specifically, in terms of her own pocketbook or micro-level concerns, rather than sociotropically. She claimed not to see the direct effects of government in her life (i.e., denied a micro-macro link). Forced to talk about a macro-level issue--her view of national politics--she based her answer on the quality of her consumption possibilities. Rather than speaking of the economy's health on the "sociotropic" basis of evidence in the news or the social conditions she witnessed around her (others' poverty, homelessness, etc.), she instead judged it favorably on the basis of her personal experiences as a consumer and worker.

The recent public opinion literature might see Cecilia simply as responding to her "pocketbook" and explain this response on the basis of her low level of education and political socialization (Mutz 1992; Goren 1997), but that would be an unsatisfactory explanation, for three reasons. First, it is empirically quite reasonable to perceive government actions in Argentina as strongly affecting consumer prices, so Cecilia's sense that the government is good if prices are low, however vaguely she may understand the linkage, should not be attributed to ignorance. Secondly, neither the public opinion literature (nor the education/socialization explanations it relies upon) can explain why one kind of "pocketbook" concern (as a consumer of food and clothing) would be used as the basis for her political views instead of another (as a parent needing shelter for her family). That literature does not distinguish between *types* of pocketbook concerns or types of pocketbook voting.

Most importantly, by describing Cecilia's vague consumer concerns as a response to her pocketbook, the public opinion literature would miss the most important thing about her political perspective: her over-riding sense that national politics is not meaningful to her daily worries about feeding and sheltering her children. Cecilia's way of "connecting" politics to her personal material needs is so non-mobilizing that it has little in common with the political thinking of the micro-macro linkers, described below.

Cecilia, Jorge, and other "micro-focussed" respondents were preoccupied with their own households' material interests. Their efforts to provide for those interests occurred through personal effort and community-level organizations. National-level politics appeared irrelevant to their material needs and so they paid little attention to it. As one "micro-focussed" respondent put it (without intending irony), when asked if she voted, "Normally yes. At times yes--when it's very obligatory" (Bianca, domestic worker and mother, 8 June 1992, t, 7).<sup>10</sup>

### Macro-focus

Citizens are macro-focussed when they discuss national-level political matters in broad, impersonal terms, without drawing connections to their own worries, needs, and current anxieties or to the anecdotal personal problems of people they know. Macro-focussed thinking concentrates on the national or global economies; relationships between social classes; treatment of vulnerable social groups to which they do not belong, such as the very poor, pensioners, or schoolchildren; as well as non-materialist concerns such as nationalism or foreign policy; crime; and human rights. These issues certainly can affect each citizen's own life, but macro-focussed thinking does not dwell on the personal impact. Rather, it speaks of the good of a large community (be it a social class or a nation) to which the person belongs. Andrés and Atilio provide illustrative examples.

Andrés was born into poverty in a northern province, but managed to get some post-secondary education and training in computers. He used this skill in several large corporations until economic crisis and corporate restructuring left him unemployed. A divorce left him without his only capital asset, his apartment, and eventually, job loss and the exorbitant rental fees of single-room occupancy "hotels" left him homeless. In an effort to resolve his housing situation, he became involved in the same local housing movement that had helped Cecilia. He eventually recognized that the housing movement's primary focus was not rental situations so much as building occupations, but to my knowledge he never found a substitute vehicle for political action on behalf of his own housing need. When told during the interview about an ideologically-oriented activist working on his sort of housing concern, he rejected getting involved with anyone who might be pushing a partisan or personal agenda.

When Andrés discussed politics, he never referred to his personal interests in housing or anything else. More knowledgeable and sophisticated about politics than Cecilia, and more interested in the news than Jorge, Andrés employed a coherent and thoughtful worldview akin to social democracy. Although it was evident that pride prevented him from discussing his personal needs in more detail, one would expect that if his own needs were uppermost in his mind, he would discuss them in general terms, such as talking about the problems of homelessness and unemployment in the country. Yet Andrés discussed politics in terms of the interests of those he considered much poorer and more vulnerable than he. Over several hours of conversation and several meetings, his political

views were expressed in global terms, based especially on his concern for poor children and pensioners. He attributed his political empathies to having been poor and abandoned as a child.

A few weeks after our first meeting, still homeless and living with yet another friend who had taken him in, he put aside advocating his own housing needs and decided to help those who suffer the life he long ago endured and cannot forget. He informed me:

*I resigned my position in the Squatters and Tenants Movement. I think that those who squat in houses have economic problems, but they possess sufficient strength to take over an empty house to make their home. I wanted to help those who do not have strength, those who are alone and need affection. Therefore, I started working in the children's section of the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights.<sup>11</sup>*

Atilio provides another example. An older man born with a physical disability, he had lived a comfortable childhood but his disability and elementary school education had prevented him from economic comforts as an adult. He had depended upon relatives, street vending, and a tiny disability pension to support himself. He was not substantially more knowledgeable about politics than those classified as “micro-focussed” but he differed from the latter in that he was interested in macro-level politics and he did not base his political judgments on his own experiences as a consumer. Atilio said he had always lived simply and had few material expectations. When he talked about politics, he focussed on broad national concerns, such as civil “order,” presidential leadership, corruption among President Menem’s cronies, and his complaint that the government did not serve “the people” and “the country.” He had limited expectations of improving his micro-level conditions and did not perceive the government as responsible in any specific way for his standard of living. His focus was purely and fully macro or “sociotropic”.

The reason for a micro-focus versus a macro-focus appears to be largely idiosyncratic, rooted in particular family cultures and individual-level values, personalities, and motivations, rather than sociological causes. There was no consistent difference between the two groups in terms of formal education or of the level of economic anxiety or severity of need in their households. Asked about the basis of their macro-level concerns, people would say that one of their parents was active in a political party, or that they were empathetic toward poor children because of their own childhood in poverty. Those who were micro-focussed were not necessarily facing greater material problems nor were they more socially isolated than the others. They were simply people who were preoccupied by a quest to improve their families’ circumstances, to the point that all other matters were of little concern.

### Micro-Macro Linkers

People who focus on the micro-macro link are those who perceive a connection between their micro-level material interests and macro-level politics, and whose material interests then motivate the content of their political views. They do not perceive their material interests as ones to be resolved through clientelism, or petitioning of local government officials, but rather, as rooted in decisions, or even systems, at the national level. When they express concern for the impact of public policies upon the class to which they belong, they do so in a way that personalizes the impact. They perceive themselves not merely as citizens expressing opinions about what the government ought to do for the country, but as citizens who are affected by the government’s policies and who are frustrated by their inability to do more to redirect those policies. Unlike the macro-focussed discourse, which may express concern for class or for national community out of a generalized sense of identity with the

interests of a larger social group, the micro-macro linkers *specify* the causality by which people like them are affected by government action or inaction.

At age 32, Carlos lived with his pregnant wife and two sons in a one-room stucco dwelling, which he spent his weekends working to rehabilitate. With a formal sector job in a garment factory, some secondary school education, an employed wife, and secure, free housing, Carlos enjoyed human and material assets considerably greater than those in which he had been raised. He worked very hard so that his family could live “in the best way possible, given our possibilities”[t, B, 5.2], but he saw these efforts as making little difference given a political system organized to support a capitalist system that he saw as limiting his “possibilities.”

Although aware that he had the meager basics that others lacked, he was clearly not satisfied with having his basic needs met. He frequently contrasted himself with the non-poor, whom he described as people who were "comfortable" and had “all their problems resolved." He sought relief from the weariness and anxieties that his material level guaranteed.

Carlos had tried to rise above educational and social disadvantages that he saw as typically leading to diminished political awareness. He was current on political affairs and he used concepts and arguments drawn from marxist ideology, with which he had become familiar as a member of the Communist Party (an old, orthodox, perennially tiny force in the Argentine party system). Despite his efforts to be an active citizen participating in society, Carlos still felt strongly excluded by barriers that he could not overcome. He credited his militancy in leftist parties for teaching him the importance of reading, but he was bitterly aware that he could not afford all the books, newspapers, and other elements of Argentine middle and upper class culture that he considered necessary, not for physical survival, but for civic survival.<sup>12</sup> He bought the *Clarín* newspaper daily, but could only afford to do so by sacrificing something else, like lunch or cigarettes. He resented the social elitism from above, that excluded people like himself from political influence and he was frustrated that the economic “system” put workers into a grinding lifestyle that left little time for them to be active and effective citizens:

*Even in the parties of the left, there's a social class that runs things--the bourgeoisie. That's why I said that it's very difficult for a worker to end up in the leadership of something. Why is it difficult? Because of all the problems they have. We've got housing problems, children problems, problems with [garbled], family problems, we have to work 16 hours. What time do you have left to think? If when you get home from work you go to sleep. . . . The working class here doesn't think. Why doesn't it think? Because they aren't allowed to think. The system doesn't let them think. . . . The guy who is at the factory for twelve hours--what time does he have to think? He's sleeping on the bus on the way home and when he turns on the television, what does he see?--nonsense. (28 April 1992, [t])*

Contrary to the views of the recent public opinion literature, Carlos was not blaming the macro-level “system” for his problems on the basis of political ignorance nor because he failed to understand how individual-level effort could improve his pocketbook. Carlos knew what individual-level effort had brought him compared to his childhood, and he planned to continue those efforts to improve his sons' chances; but he also perceived severe limits to micro-level effort. He had a complex way of thinking about the macro-level political and economic systems that he perceived excluding those who did not

have the material resources to participate in it, despite their best micro-level efforts. Not only were macro and micro levels linked in his discourse, but the linkage went two ways: micro-level material conditions were perceived as a product of the larger political and economic systems, but also as a hindrance to his capacity to affect those systems.

Another example of thinking focussed on micro-macro linkages is that of Tomás, 68, a retired professional accountant living with his wife in a dark and cold apartment, that he owned. Like the micro-focussed people described above, Tomás was single-minded in his interest in resolving his own particular material problem: the government pension of \$350/month that he received was only one third of what he was legally due. Unlike the micro-focussed citizens, Tomás did not see his material hardship as something to be resolved through his own efforts. The size of his income was directly caused by decisions of the national government, which argued that fiscal constraints prevented the treasury from meeting its legal obligations to pensioners (see Powers 1995, 107-9). He described his micro-level conditions as “the greatest possible indignity” and linked that indignity to macro-level decisions which he termed “genocide” of the elderly [24 May 1992, n, 1]. Not only was the attribution of responsibility clear (a factor identified by Feldman 1985), but it was also clear that the *solutions* to his problems were not ones he could create by himself.

### **Explaining Citizens’ Focus**

To understand why some people would link their personal needs to their political views and others--more often--do not, we first need to understand those personal needs and how people live with them.

#### Coping Mechanisms

Most Argentines in the early 1990s managed to make ends meet despite low salaries, low pensions, or unstable employment. The majority interviewed discussed their material interests not as responsibilities of the government, but as problems to be handled themselves. They were able to handle these problems by frugally watching how they spent their wages, but more importantly, by supplementing and stretching those wages using personal, family, and community-level resources and assets.<sup>13</sup>

*Human and Material Assets.* Some people are better able to cope with low income than others because of human assets. These include emotional as well as material support from family and friends. Comparing individuals living alone to those with family, the additional family members create additional expenses, but also additional opportunities for wage-earning and for finding solutions when one family member’s income is insufficient. The people interviewed who had spouses who could work were better able to cope with their material circumstances than those whose spouse was ill or who had only themselves to rely upon.

Perhaps the most important asset people have is their own capacity for labor. In the early 1990s, low income Argentines frequently employed the strategy of working more hours, second jobs, or odd jobs known as *changas*, in order to help make ends meet. The increased household income often came at an exhausting price. For example, Paula’s husband got up at 4 a.m. to go to the first job and returned from the second at 11 p.m. Elena took care of eight children still at home and worked

four days a week cleaning houses, while her husband worked over ten hours at his day job and another four at his night job. These cases were typical. A study of households whose incomes were below the poverty line in 1991, but above the line a year later, found that 25% moved above the poverty line by increasing the number of hours worked and another 31% moved up by increasing the number of family members working (Minujin and López 1994, 101-3).

In 16 of the 40 households studied, some or all of the household income came from work in the informal sector (defined here as sources of income without a “relation of dependence,” as the Argentines refer to legal employment with employee benefits). These jobs included such activities as housekeeping and care-giving, making crafts, skilled construction work, under-the-table arrangements to work in retail establishments, various skilled and unskilled odd jobs (*changas*), electrical work, and in one case, owning and driving a taxi. Each of the jobs categorized here as “informal”--even the high-earning cabdriver--operates under conditions of precarious and fluctuating earnings. If the informal market changes (such as, for the cab-driver, if the proliferation of cab-owners visible in Buenos Aires creates a glut of competition), then these workers do not have the protections of either on-going employment or severance pay or unemployment compensation, which formal sector workers would have.

The other human assets which help people cope are their own education, skills, and experience. The dignity and pay of *changas* are better when one has a specialty to offer other than mere manual labor, such as Bianca's husband with his electronics training and Pablo, an experienced amateur photographer.

In addition to human assets--family, friends, education, skills, good health, and hard work--material assets, or the lack of them, make a tremendous difference in the security a person feels on a low income. The most important such asset is owning one's housing. Since most Argentines do not have monthly rent or mortgage payments, the government does not even consider rent as a normal expense in its calculation of the poverty line.<sup>14</sup> Those who are paying rent live considerably below the standard that their income level would otherwise seem to indicate. Those who do own their own apartments enjoy a level of relative material security that non-owners were struggling to achieve.

*In-kind Goods from Formal Sector Employment.* Argentines supplement the level of living enabled by their income in a number of ways. One is through *in-kind goods*, which sometimes provide for basic needs when income cannot.<sup>15</sup> These goods may come from political parties, private charity organizations, labor unions, or private businesses, and include anything from food packages, to free lunches, bus passes, school uniforms, discounts on consumer products, help with funeral expenses in an emergency, etc. None of this assistance is sufficiently regular or substantive for people to count on it to change their quality of life over the long term. No poor person attains a middle-income lifestyle on the basis of in-kind goods and fringe benefits. Yet these goods and benefits can ameliorate the sense of desperation, by enabling people to make ends meet week to week.



*Charitable and Partisan Patrons.* Human assets and in-kind employment benefits are used by middle and lower income people to cope with and improve upon their material conditions. For poor people simply trying to cope with food costs, charitable or partisan patronage provides some relief. The food distribution outlets in Buenos Aires provided neither pride nor permanent relief to their beneficiaries, but they did constitute "a help" as one interviewee put it. In some neighborhoods, the municipality sponsored a soup kitchen where children were given free meals. Need did not *entitle* access to a government-funded meal. The soup kitchens existed in ad hoc fashion, subject to political whim. Beyond prepared meals, food staples and other goods were distributed by both philanthropic institutions, such as the *Caritas* program of the Roman Catholic Church, and by neighborhood political party offices building their local clientele.

*Indemnifications.* Some 95,000 people were laid off as part of the first wave of privatizations in Argentina between 1990 and 1993 and another 19,000 retired (World Bank 1993, 14-5). The impact of the lay-offs on these workers' pocketbooks was ameliorated by laws dating from Perón's time, which required substantial severance pay. Workers were indemnified one month's pay per number of years with the employer, which enabled many people to maintain their household income level for several months after a lay-off. In addition to legally mandated indemnifications, some companies down-sized by offering early retirement buy-outs.

Severance pay meant that despite the record unemployment levels caused by privatization of state industries, unemployed workers did not all hit the streets, jobless and broke, at the same time. Many workers took their indemnification in a lump sum and used it as capital for a self-employment venture, as evidenced by the proliferation of taxis and kiosks in the capital city in the early 1990s. The saturated market made it increasingly difficult for such ventures to prosper, but it took some months for failure. Meanwhile, some former co-workers would have found new employment. Thus, indemnifications served to soften the blow of the government's restructuring of the state in the early 1990s, and to spread out the impact of large-scale lay-offs.

*Public Programs.* The welfare state safety net in Argentina is weak, and few of those interviewed benefitted from public programs. Unemployment compensation programs were initiated during Menem's first term, but did nothing for the unemployed and underemployed who had previously worked in the informal sector.

The Argentine state has at times been a source for food support, but not a reliable or adequate one. From 1984-88, the Alfonsín government ran a national program (PAN) for distributing boxes of staples to poor people. President Menem restructured the program into a food stamp system and gave local authorities administrative responsibility, but eventually it was phased out (Midre 1992; Lo Vuolo 1997, 39). Only a few of those interviewed had benefitted from the food assistance programs. They said the food was somewhat helpful, but neither frequent, convenient, nor plentiful enough to constitute a reliable nutritional supplement. While they held inaccurate beliefs about the programs' funding and administration, they tended, like many opposition politicians as well as researchers, to be cynical about the programs' political intentions.<sup>16</sup> In 1993, new food assistance programs were incorporated into a poorly funded "Social Plan" that included vaccinations, job creation, sanitation systems, and other social development programs, as well as at least eight different nutrition programs targeted at particular

groups, such as mothers and infants, the structurally poor, children, and the elderly without pensions (Lo Vuolo 1997, 40).

Because a state-funded safety net has not traditionally been an important means for coping in Argentina, no one interviewed anticipated that an improved social safety net ought to be the solution to material hardship. To the extent that people demanded solutions from the state, they sought economic policies that would protect and create jobs, raise wages, maintain monetary stability, and equitably utilize national resources and tax revenues, and social policies that would fund schools and public hospitals.

*Coping via Credit.* Credit is one of the tools that people the world over use to try to live beyond the level permitted by their income.<sup>17</sup> High inflation cuts poor people off this coping tool. When President Menem's convertibility plan lowered inflation, credit on consumer goods became widely available. At the same time, trade barriers on imports were dropping. The result was that lower-income consumers were able to afford electronic and kitchen appliances for the first time in their lives. They also stretched limited budgets by purchasing school clothes, shoes, and other personal items with lay-away-type plans that charge exorbitant total prices for the privilege of affordable monthly *quotas*.

Living on credit is ultimately not a sustainable solution to making ends meet nor for moving forward. As students of poverty have long known, however, poor people often face worse choices than more affluent consumers, so they accept the future burdens and risks of credit as a means to get by in the present.

### Reliance on Coping Mechanisms

In an economy where wages were virtually frozen and purchasing power had been decimated by the crisis of the late 1980s, household and local-level remedies were important in the lives of those interviewed. Table 1 lists some of the varied and multiple strategies, resources, and assets upon which the people interviewed depended in order to keep themselves and their families fed and sheltered,<sup>18</sup> Table 1 groups the mechanisms according to the societal level at which they can be pursued, revealing that Argentines were primarily relying on household-level efforts, and then assistance and activism within their local community. The list includes only physical resources (time, work, aid, assets). Psychological capacity to cope is not the issue here.

The mechanisms listed are those that interviewees volunteered in the course of explaining their lives and their political views (i.e., I did not bias or limit the list toward household-level action; the weight of household-level activities in the list is a reflection of how people explained their lives). It is possible that the list undercounts community-level sources of support, since people would hesitate to admit relying on charity and would forget to mention goods-in-kind or patronage. Since charity, patronage, and goods-in-kind are generally small items and *ad hoc* means of support, undercounting those would not substantially misrepresent the picture of how people cope. I am confident that the number of national-level mechanisms and the incidence of grassroots activity are accurate reflections of the mechanisms being used by those interviewed, based on the extensive interview conversation about national-level politics, personal political activities, and national economic conditions. Political action to secure material interests was a strategy taken by squatters and homeless people involved in housing movements and by four people involved in organizations to promote community activities in their

neighborhood. At the national level, the public employee's union with which five of those interviewed were involved to varying degrees constituted a form of political action to protect their salaries and benefits. Given my sample, which included only a few of the very desperately poor, and given the weakness of the Argentine welfare state, it is not surprising that few of those interviewed received substantial aid through the state's social policies.

Table 2 indicates the frequency with which the individuals interviewed relied upon, or benefitted from these assets and resources, and the range of reliance across the sample. It shows that they typically relied on 3 assets, resources, or strategies. At the upper extreme, Cecilia relied on 8 of the 13 mechanisms listed. I have counted as a "coping mechanism" anything that provides the person with a tool to make ends meet. So, if a person works a *second* job in the *informal* sector, I counted *two* coping tools, since coping requires both the effort of working the second job and the access to that job via informal means.

These coping mechanisms are not, of course, all of equal value or kind. Owning a home adds much more financial security to a person's life than getting food packages from a local political party. Yet while buying a home would solve the major strain in the life of an employed homeless person, being a homeowner diminishes, but does not solve, the problem of the pensioner with a small pension check. Because all coping tools do not bring the same measure of relief to all people, more coping tools does not necessarily mean greater perceived capacity to cope. Nevertheless, those who did *not* perceive themselves as coping successfully tended to be those who had access to fewer assets and coping resources than others. As Table 3 shows, for every category of coping mechanisms except national-level, the average number of mechanisms used by those who felt they were *not* coping is below the mean for the total set of interviews, while the average number of mechanisms used by those who felt that they *were* coping is well above the mean.

### Coping and Political Views

Scholars of social policy, poverty, and development are familiar with the multiple means that poor and downwardly mobile people use to survive. What is surprising is that the *political* importance of these coping measures has not been theorized. My analysis of interviews in which people explain their political views and priorities reveals that *the difference between those who focussed on the micro-macro linkage and those who did not is rooted in whether or not they feel they are coping with their material troubles adequately and at reasonable personal cost.*

The majority of those interviewed *did* feel they could cope with their material concerns at a household or local level. They might be struggling, but they perceived their material struggles as normal, surmountable, manageable, etc. They felt they were finding ways to make do. This majority did not blame (nor credit) government for their material problems (or successes) nor did they express a demand that the government do something to resolve the particular material needs they were facing. They were either micro-focussed or macro-focussed. Conversely, those who strongly focussed on the links between their micro concerns and politics were people who also felt frustrated and angered by what it took to try to cope with their personal material circumstances. They felt their material conditions were too much to handle, were unusually stressful, required unacceptable choices or efforts in order to manage, or could not be meaningfully improved upon despite their efforts. Table 4 provides the data from the interviews and Figure 1 depicts these relationships.

Cecilia, the micro-focussed individual described above, voices the importance of being able to manage. Note her explicit statement that her coping capacity kept her from blaming the government for her poverty:

*I get help from all over. I can't complain about the government because they give me the PAMBA box with food. I go to another church this year where when I go they also give me food and clothes for the kids--new clothes, you see?--and also clothes for me. The truth is that I can't complain, neither about the government nor about Argentina, because to me, they've treated me well. I don't know. I don't know about other people. Lots of people complain. . . .The truth is I've been helped a lot. I've never ended up in the streets even though I've been evicted, [I've always been given a place]. The truth is we can't complain. The kids have everything. They eat every day. They don't lack for anything--sodapop, juices, whatever they want. So, one can't complain. . . .We don't lack for anything; quite the contrary, sometimes we go around giving away clothes because the closets are full. . . . We don't go out very much, you see?--because my husband works {such long hours}. Sometimes during vacation time, if there's something at the theater my husband takes them, if there's something for the kids to see. . . . Of if they're invited to a birthday party, I bring them. But I'm not one to go out much. So that's why the clothes get too small for the kids and we give it away. And on top of that, the Church gives us so much besides what we buy ourselves. So really, I can't complain. Cecilia, domestic worker and mother; 4 June 1992 [t, A.3.7]*

It might seem obvious or even tautological to say that the person who feels able to cope with his micro-level problems will not link them to macro-level solutions and vice versa. In fact there is no logical necessity that the two attitudes be connected. A person could feel able to cope without government aid and yet believe on principle that the government ought to be implementing economic and/or social policies that would make the person's life more manageable. A person could feel unable to cope with problems individually and yet not feel that the national government has any responsibility or possibility for helping to resolve those problems. As Table 4 shows, 4 people interviewed had these outlying positions.

#### Adequacy of Coping Mechanisms Depends on Type and Context of Material Need

I did not find consistent patterns of political thinking by poverty versus near-poverty nor by long-term versus new economic needs. Some poor people (egs. Cecilia, Atilio) felt that they were managing to cope, while others, who were no worse off (eg., Carlos) did not. Some people with above-poverty level incomes (such as several public employees interviewed) felt frustrated and angry by their circumstances, while others were confident they could get through their moment of economic hardship. So the subjective feeling that one was managing to cope at an acceptable level of strain was not associated with the absolute level of living as might be measured with poverty lines or basic needs indicators, but rather, was associated with the kinds of material problems the person perceived and whether or not s/he had means to cope with that kind of problem at the household or local level.

Whether coping mechanisms exist at the household or local level depends on what the particular material difficulty is. For example, pensions are set by national law and their disbursement depends upon the executive branch deciding that it has the resources to comply with the pensions law. Clearly, a low pension is solely a matter to be addressed by national leaders. Age discrimination,

diminished mobility, and health problems leave senior citizens with considerably fewer options for self-help via supplemental employment. No one in my sample--whether a pensioner or a sympathetic fellow citizen--expected pensioners to solve their low incomes through individual self-help. The one pensioner interviewed who was trying to do so (through an under-the-table late-night job as a clerk) felt his coping effort was completely inadequate and he perceived a clear link between government policy and his own misfortunes.

In contrast, housing--although widely understood as a right of citizenship for which the constitution demands the state take responsibility--was not, in fact, something that people expected the state to provide, and it was, unlike pensions, something that people could try to obtain for themselves without the aid of the national government. Therefore, even people for whom housing was their most severe material preoccupation did not react against the government's failure to implement an effective housing policy. Based on *context* (in this case, the history of housing policy in the country), they did not expect the national government to take care of their housing and based on the *type* of material interest (housing) they did have self-help and local-level possibilities for resolution.

Hyperinflation is a problem with which people cannot cope at a household or local level. It clearly demands national-level policy to resolve. Citizens' fear and anxiety under hyperinflation are greatly related to their incapacity to find individual level means to save themselves from its cruel effects. Their punishment of Alfonsín's party at the polls in 1989 and their reward of Menem in 1995 was not based on sociotropic or macro-level thinking, but rather, based on linking their micro-level need for price stability to the macro-level state which oversaw monetary policy. Menem was rewarded for helping people to cope, in a situation in which they could not cope by themselves.

Menem was not punished in 1995 for stagnant wages, growing inequality, or growth in unemployment, because each of these problems was one with which the "victims" would attempt to cope at a household level, such as by working more hours or doing odd jobs on the side or finding part-time work in the informal sector. These are not mechanisms that individuals will find sustainable nor liberating, but they are available at the micro-level and so people do not tend to look to the macro-level for their remedies.

In sum, *the particular material difficulties* experienced are crucial to explaining a citizen's political focus. A person is less likely to focus on what the national government ought to do to meet her material concerns if those concerns can be handled through efforts at the household or local level. Not income level, but *type* of material problem and *capacity to address it* determine whether the person will expect remediation from the national government.

### Expectations, Ideologies, and Coping

The subjective feeling of being able to cope is a product of many things, including expected standard of living and expectations about whether one should make numerous efforts just to cope. These expectations can be caused by personal experience with poverty and coping and/or normative ideas about justice. For example, Cecilia has struggled her entire life and does not question having to do so. This is not fatalism. She *has* hope, albeit modest, that her family can improve their standard of living and she feels pleased and relieved that she and her husband have found ways to keep their family afloat. Carlos has also struggled his entire life, but having been exposed to marxist discourse through

his political affiliations, he does not accept his struggles as normal or inevitable. He wants to participate more fully in the life of his community and is angry that not only are his efforts insufficient to bring him out of the margins of society, but those efforts require so much time and energy that they further exclude him from having the possibility to participate in politics. He feels that radical social change is necessary to make his life comfortable and his own efforts to cope are utterly inadequate to the problem.

Expectations about what level of coping effort is “normal” and tolerable are not merely personal or idiosyncratic. They may be promulgated by political organizers, as the social movements literature predicts. Among those interviewed who focussed on the link between their own needs and the political system, several were like Carlos, having been exposed to such criticism through leftist parties or through their dissident trade union (the public employees’ ATE union). However, others who were so-exposed were macro-focussed, but not micro-macro linkers. My interviews revealed that exposure to political organizers was not necessary nor sufficient to making that linkage. A person’s subjective sense of coping is shaped by a number of factors, only one of which is organized attempts to convince participants that their struggle to cope is unjust.

Expectations about what degree of coping is normal and reasonable can be shaped by a country’s economic history, political discourse, and dominant ideologies. As a land of opportunity for immigrants, Argentine political culture has an individualist, self-help tradition. On the other hand, Peronism left a legacy that presumes “solidarity” and “social justice” are public virtues (Catterberg and Zayuelas 1992, 200-1; cf. Turner and Elordi 1995). The Argentine constitution guarantees social rights such as housing and education. So while some expectations of self-help exist, they are not present in Argentina in the same way as, say, in the United States. Nevertheless, nearly two decades of economic turmoil have substantially dampened expectations about the government’s capacity to live up to promises of social justice. Of the people interviewed for whom a perspective was clear, 21 understood Argentina’s economic decline to have been a long-term process, predating the Menem government. Only 6 discussed their country’s or their own economic difficulties as occurring solely under the current government and its policies. Because of this widespread recognition that economic turmoil and change have been a long-term process, Argentines have learned not to depend on the government for quick answers to their particular problems. They have also had a great deal of time to become accustomed to using household-level coping efforts as the means to survival and progress.

In a context of a fiscally-depleted state, individual-level solutions, depending at least in part on a person’s own initiative, appeared to those interviewed as the most feasible means to take control of their lives. Neighborhood and municipal level politics appeared as the next plausible level at which to take action, if individual efforts were unsuccessful or insufficient. National-level politics appeared to citizens as the solution to material problems only if the specific type of problem could not be solved at a lower level. Citizens sought solutions with the most readily available means, thus implicitly following a principle of subsidiarity (seeking local-level solutions where possible).

A subsidiarity principle is compatible with the neoliberal ideology of the Menem administration, with its emphasis on downsizing the state, individual entrepreneurship, and decentralization (Prévôt Schapira 1996, 89; also cf. Neunreither 1993). Yet the Argentines interviewed for this research were not seeking household and local-level mechanisms out of an

ideological conviction that such was the appropriate level at which to solve their material problems. The majority spoke ardently of the national government's responsibilities for "social justice" and when asked what that entailed, they mentioned housing, education, health care, pensions, and other areas of social policy that a neoliberal would believe can be handled by the private sector or at the level of the local community. In short, the people interviewed expressed their implicit sense of subsidiarity as a matter of practicality, not ideological conversion.

### Conclusions

This research found that the people interviewed take their serious material problems into their own hands, rather than depending on government amelioration. This does not mean they do not perceive a responsibility for the state in social and economic matters--for the macro-focussers clearly do. What it means is that, to the extent they are able to cope with their own material interests at "lower" levels, those interests are not driving their evaluations of how the state handles its responsibilities.

This conclusion differs from the public opinion literature that seeks to explain economic voting. That literature focusses on what information citizens use to determine how the national economy is doing. I focus, instead, on what citizens *want* from their national government, without presupposing what that is, nor presupposing which wants are "logical" or sophisticated. My method left open the possibility of finding that citizens want the national government to handle the national economy well (as the public opinion literature argues), but it also left open the possibility of finding that citizens demand more from government than simply a caretaker for the national economy. I left open the possibility of finding that citizens want the government to work on particular problems affecting their own lives. This is normatively a different view of citizenship than presupposed by the public opinion literature and more in common with the view embraced in the social movements literature.

Using the social movements literature from studies of Latin America, I expected that simply because national level political discourse ignores the impact of public policy on individuals' lives does not mean that to perceive such an impact is illogical or unsophisticated, as some of the public opinion literature would have it. Rather, such a perception might be outside the framework of political discourse simply because political actors neglect to acknowledge the impact of their decisions upon citizens. Inflation, social policy, public employment conditions, pension policies are not merely issues of national-level economic performance--they have a direct impact on individual citizens. Thus, it may take more sophistication to recognize a micro-macro connection than to ignore it.

My findings, however, while not supporting the public opinion literature's explanation for 'sociotropic' and 'pocketbook' thinking, also did not find that those who linked micro-conditions to macro-views were solely those exposed to social movements and political activism. Rather, I found that the distinguishing characteristic between those who perceived government decisions as affecting them personally, and those who did not, was what kind of material problem they were experiencing and whether they could cope with that problem without changes in state policy. This finding takes the explanation of economic voting or "consciousness" away from a focus on the cognitive abilities, interpretations, or knowledge levels of the citizens and towards the practical considerations that citizens make about what the government can do versus what they can do for themselves.

Understanding that citizens' interests will be expressed not based solely on their political sophistication, but on the basis of their capacity to handle their interests without national-level action can help why there was not more political opposition to the Menem government in the early and mid-1990s, among people in poor or deteriorated circumstances. President Menem had reneged on his promised *salario* and he showed little interest in addressing the problems of poverty (Powers 1995). Nevertheless, by eliminating hyperinflation and by constantly reminding the public that he had done so, he was perceived to have alleviated one of the worst anxieties associated with life on a poverty budget. The reduction of inflation also made consumer credit available, thereby lessening the constraint of a small monthly paycheck. Inflation was clearly a problem that individuals could not resolve individually. In contrast, non-state remedies exist for other kinds of personal material problems. Therefore, despite the severity of their needs, many people interviewed did not use their personal difficulties as the basis for a harsh evaluation of Menem.

By the mid-1990s, some of the coping mechanisms discussed in this paper were no longer available, or were headed to extinction. Menem has so far been unsuccessful in pushing through the final phase of his "labor flexibility" plan, but it would end the system of indemnifications in favor of the new system of unemployment compensation. This takes away the lump sum payment that so many laid off workers used to start new businesses. More importantly, the unemployment crisis has made it much harder to cope by working a second job, an informal sector job, or having one's spouse or child work. As unemployment levels soared, competition for extra and odd jobs increased. In May 1998, 8.2% of the economically active population were working part-time but actively seeking additional work.<sup>19</sup> Those fortunate enough to have full-time employment found themselves asked to work more overtime hours in order to keep their jobs. The average work day in Argentina's private formal sector by 1997 was 10 hours.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Menem's declining popularity in the late 1990s may be explained by conditions that undermine citizens' capacity to cope on an individual basis, leading them to link their economic dissatisfactions with their views of the macro-polity.



**Table 1: Coping Mechanisms Used**

| <b>Solution</b>   | <b>Interviewees (n=40) using that solution</b> |
|---|--|
| <b><i>HOUSEHOLD-LEVEL MECHANISMS</i></b>                  |  |
| Working extra job or extra hours                          | 14   |
| Spouse works for pay                                      | 17   |
| Children (living at home) work for pay                    | 4  |
| Relatives or friends providing shelter or material aid    | 10   |
| Dependent on informal sector job                          | 16   |
| Educational or skill assets (in use)                      | 11   |
| Capital assets (home ownership or savings)                | 13   |
| <b><i>LOCAL and COMMUNITY-LEVEL MECHANISMS</i></b>        |  |
| Goods-in-kind (eg., from employer)                        | 10   |
| Charitable organizations                                  | 2  |
| Local political party patrons                             | 4  |
| Grassroots action in housing or neighborhood organization | 11   |
| <b><i>NATIONAL-LEVEL Mechanisms</i></b>                   |  |
| Social welfare programs                                   | 4  |
| Indemnification following lay-off                         | 1  |
| Involvement in ATE labor union                            | 5  |

**Table 2: Reliance on Coping Mechanisms**

| <b>Type of Solution</b>                                  | <b>Average per interviewee (n=40)</b> | <b>Range</b> |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b><i>HOUSEHOLD-LEVEL Mechanisms (n=7)</i></b>           | 2                                     | 0-5          |
| <b><i>LOCAL and COMMUNITY-LEVEL MECHANISMS (n=4)</i></b> | 1                                     | 0-2          |
| <b><i>NATIONAL-LEVEL MECHANISMS (n=3)</i></b>            | 0                                     | 0-1          |
| <b>Total Mechanisms used</b>                             | 3                                     | 0-8          |

**Table 3: Coping Mechanisms by Attitudes toward Material Interests**

| Average #<br>Mechanisms<br>Used<br>(n)         | Household<br>Level | Local<br>Level | National<br>Level | TOTAL<br>Mechanisms |
|--|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Strong<br/>Linking/Weak<br/>Coping (8)</b>  | <b>1.88</b>        | <b>0.63</b>    | <b>0.50</b>       | <b>3.0</b>          |
| Non-<br>Linking/Weak<br>Coping (3)             | 2.67               | 1.67           | 0.67              | 5.0                 |
| <b>Strong<br/>Coping/Weak<br/>Linking (21)</b> | <b>2.67</b>        | <b>0.81</b>    | <b>0.19</b>       | <b>3.67</b>         |
| Strong<br>Coping/Strong<br>Linking (1)         | 3.0                | 0              | 0                 | 3.0                 |
| <b>MEAN (n=33)</b>                             | <b>2.48</b>        | <b>0.82</b>    | <b>0.3</b>        | <b>3.61</b>         |

**Table 4: Focus and Perception of Capacity to Cope**

|  | Micro or Macro Focus | Focussed on Micro-Macro<br>Link |
|--|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Coping Perceived as Sufficient and<br>Normal | 21                   | 1                               |
| Coping Perceived as Inadequate or<br>Onerous | 3                    | 8                               |

n=33

**ENDNOTES**

1. If personal conditions *match* national/societal ones (for example, if inflation hurts the individual voter as it is hurting fellow citizens), then the operational distinction between sociotropic and pocketbook voting falls apart. Nevertheless, the researchers assume that the basis of the voter's political evaluation remains sociotropic--that is, the basis is not personal well-being, but rather, information gleaned from observing how the government is managing the economy society-wide. I thank Jeff Mondak for

several personal conversations that have helped shape my understanding of this point and the sociotropic literature generally.

2. Unfortunately, some of the work does not clearly differentiate between “information” and “interests.” “Relevant” information is sometimes used as a synonym for “of personal interest.” For example, Conover writes that, “Presumably *information about the interests* of salient groups will have more *personal relevance* for an individual than assessments of national well-being” (1985, 140, emphasis added). Yet the vocabulary of “information” puts a narrow focus on the *means* to pursue interests, not the interests themselves--the *ends*. Focussing on sources of information about government performance (pocketbook, neighborhood, class, nation, etc.) and on quality of information (education level and media access) begs the questions of how people interpret the information they get, what they *want* from government (that is, what they perceive as good economic performance or unsatisfactory performance), how relevant they expect government to be to their lives, and *why* they think about government in those ways.

3. The latest public opinion scholarship has moved toward studying sub-national sociotropic judgments--that is, the neighborhood or class-level observations that give people information about government performance (Mondak, Mutz, and Huckfeldt 1996; Mutz and Mondak 1997; Conover 1985). The focus is still on information sources, which I find problematic for the reasons given in endnote 2, but the effect may be to uncover some of citizens’ sub-national and non-economic interests, that is, the variety of things that citizens might wish to have taken care of on their behalf.

4. The contradictory findings in Mutz (1992) and Mutz (1994) could be resolved by recognizing that the media may depoliticize the pocketbook by emphasizing sociotropic issues (Mutz 1992) or the media may politicize the pocketbook by showing people the connections (Mutz 1994). The point is that contrary to the conclusions in both articles, it is not the degree of media awareness and political sophistication that promotes either sociotropic (1992) or pocketbook (1994) thinking, but rather, the substance of what people are aware *of*. That is, the insights from the social movements and populism literatures suggest that what matters is *whether* the media and other political actors, through their political discourse, have created pocketbook-to-national connections or, conversely, have depicted politics as only relevant to national-level issues.

5. Interestingly, public opinion scholar Stanley Feldman (1985, 155) has also observed that sociotropic thinking reflects norms about self-sufficiency and individualism.

6. Note that my work complements, and is not necessarily inconsistent with, the most recent movement in the public opinion literature toward understanding sub-national sociotropic judgments (cf. Mutz and Mondak 1997). If citizens make judgments about government on the basis of observing how their class, neighborhood, or group is doing, or how some other group is treated, as this new literature is beginning to suggest, then we still need to know *why* citizens judge that class, neighborhood, or group to be doing well or poorly. We still need to understand the interests themselves--how are particular material and non-material conditions experienced, how do people cope with them, and what do they expect government to do about them.

7. Note: one of the advantages of qualitative research is that the variables are not pre-determined by the researcher, but rather, arise gradually out of the insights that emerge from qualitative data. Thus, I set

out to understand the political thinking of those with material hardships; I did not set out to find and explain micro, macro, and micro-macro thinking. These categories emerged from the interviews. At the point that certain possible relationships among ideas or attitudes began to emerge, I re-analyzed the interviews systematically by coding some 27 attitudes, ideas, and demographic traits. The micro/macro/linked attitude was just one of these. Afterward, I used the resulting database to evaluate common patterns. Consequently, I am confident that my coding of these three focusses was not biased by pre-existing expectations.

8. Jorge's word choices: "pobres," "carenciada," "bajos recursos," "trabajador," "rico" (to describe a particular person). Words not used: "el pueblo," "la gente," "clase media," "burguesia," "los obreros."

9. In a forthcoming book, *Talking about Interests: Grassroots Views of Economy and Politics in Argentina*, I elaborate on the views of Jorge and other leaders of the housing cooperative and explain how their non-partisan political strategy became an obstacle to the conscientizing effect that the social movements literature would predict their political participation to have. For purposes of this paper, I have limited myself to using Jorge to illustrate the micro-only focus of his political views.

10. Since voting in Argentina is mandatory, I found her answer amusing and asked her if some elections were really more obligatory than others. Bianca assured me: "certainly, yes, yes."

11. Andrés' personal correspondence with author, 26 October 1992. Previous interviews with Andrés confirm the connection I've made between his political views, his volunteer activity, and his own childhood.

12. Author's second (28 April 1992 [t]) and third conversation with Carlos, 13 May 1992, [n, 7].

13. Because household budget surveys cannot count these resources and assets accurately, they constitute small reserves that people are using to live better than statistical surveys of household income or poverty rates would indicate. Nelson (1992) identifies some of the same coping strategies as here, although she focusses on differences in coping capacities between classes in order to judge differential costs of economic adjustment, whereas I am focussing on coping difficulties that are not necessarily defined by class, and I am using coping capacity as part of an explanation of cross-cutting political attitudes.

14. The reason that the poverty line calculation does not take account of housing costs is that the Permanent Household Surveys (EPH) are carried out in Greater Buenos Aires, an area where housing costs are a minor percentage of the average family budget. The EPH shows food is the major item in the budget of lower income households (Teubal 1989, 96). The EPH is used to determine the percentage of the average family budget spent on food; the reciprocal of that percentage is used in the calculation of the poverty line. The result is that the poverty line is set too low to identify many renters living in poverty. Neither of the major government studies of poverty (IPA in 1988 or CEPA in 1993) corrected their methods to accurately measure poverty among renters, although because the number of renters in the populous suburbs of Buenos Aires is low, the failure to correct did not significantly miscount the incidence of poverty overall (Beccaria and Minujin 1991, 30-1).

15. María del Carmen Feijoó reminded me of this point in a personal conversation. Also, see Townsend (1970), who incorporates in-kind employment benefits into his conceptualization of the types of resources the lack of which identified poverty.

16. Re. the PAN program, see Del Franco (1989) and Midré (1992). The latter also describes Menem's short-lived National Emergency Solidarity Bond program. Auyero (1995) provides a fascinating analysis of how politicians and policy makers in different periods of recent history have shaped the image of poverty and the discourse on the rights of the poor, including under the PAN program.

17. Credit does not show up in Table 1 because I did not collect sufficient data on which of the people interviewed were relying substantially on credit.

18. On an index where 1985 = 100, real earned salaries in 1992 were 67.2 and PPP was 76.2 (FIEL, *Indicadores de coyuntura* [July 1994], 17).

19. Figures from the Permanent Household Survey (EPH), May 1998, available from the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos* at [http://www.indec.mecon.ar/comunica/c\\_eph/cp81000.txt](http://www.indec.mecon.ar/comunica/c_eph/cp81000.txt).

20. Per Ministry of Labor data from October 1997, reported in Ismael Bermudez, "Los argentinos trabajan más horas y ganan menos," *Clarín digital*. 9 March 1998.

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