Latin America’s New Turbulence
Benigno Alarcón, Ángel Álvarez, and Manuel Hidalgo
Noam Lupu • Marcus André Melo • Gustavo Flores-Macías
Forrest Colburn and Arturo Cruz S.

The Puzzle of the Chinese Middle Class
Andrew J. Nathan

Turkey’s Two Elections: The AKP Comes Back
Ziya Öniş

Arch Puddington & Tyler Roylance on Freedom in the World
Jacqueline Behrend & Laurence Whitehead on Subnational Democracy
Sheri Berman on Democratic Waves

Burma Votes for Change
Min Zin • Igor Blažević
Bridget Welsh, Kai-Ping Huang, and Yun-han Chu
Latin America’s New Turbulence

THE END OF THE KIRCHNER ERA

Noam Lupu

Noam Lupu, assistant professor of political science and Trice Faculty Scholar at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is the author of Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America (2016).

When Argentines went to the polls on 25 October 2015, they set up a first in their country’s political history. Never before had there been a presidential runoff (required if no candidate receives 45 percent of the valid votes in the first round), but there would be one in 2015. The Peronist governor of Buenos Aires Province, Daniel Scioli, was the top vote-getter with 37 percent, but closely trailing him was City of Buenos Aires mayor Mauricio Macri with 34 percent. A third major candidate, Sergio Massa, played the spoiler with 21 percent. A former powerboat racer turned politician, Scioli was the handpicked successor to the term-limited incumbent, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–15). He promised to maintain the achievements in economic and social policy that many voters credit to Kirchner and her predecessor (2003–07) and late husband Néstor Kirchner, who died in 2010. Scioli ran as the standard-bearer of the Kirchners’ wing of Peronism, the Front for Victory (FPV).

Macri, the first-round runner-up, was a prominent businessman serving his second term as mayor of Argentina’s capital and largest city. He was the candidate of a coalition of non-Peronist opposition parties known as Cambiemos (Let’s Change). Its members included Macri’s own party, the center-right Republican Proposal (PRO), as well as the historic Radical Civic Union (UCR) and a party that grew out of the country’s 2001–02 economic and political crisis, the Civic Coalition (CC) of Elisa Carrió, who had lost to Cristina Kirchner in 2007.

Massa, the mayor of Tigre in Buenos Aires Province, was a dissident Peronist. A onetime member of the Chamber of Deputies, he had served as chief of cabinet (a constitutional office somewhat resembling that of prime minister) during Cristina Kirchner’s first term. He had oppor-
tunistically broken with the FPV in 2013 when forming his own party
gave him better electoral odds. In 2015, his party joined other dissident
Peronists to form the United for a New Alternative (UNA) coalition.

Macri’s surprising first-round showing gave him momentum going
into the November 22 runoff. His party had retained the mayoralty of
Buenos Aires City while also taking the governorship of the populous and
politically powerful province of Buenos Aires, becoming the first non-
Peronist party to win there since 1987. Macri’s PRO also gained 21 seats
in the 247-member Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Congress,
while Scioli’s party lost 26. After twelve years of kirchnerismo
and amid

turnout was 74.9%, 81.2%, and 80.9%
respectively.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates (President and Vice-President)</th>
<th>Primary Vote Share (%)</th>
<th>First-Round Vote Share (%)</th>
<th>Second-Round Vote Share (%)</th>
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<td>37.1</td>
<td>48.7</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stolbizer-Olaviaga</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del Caño-Bregman</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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<td>Rodríguez Saá-Negre de Alonso</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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Source: Dirección Nacional Electoral.

Note: Turnout for the primary, first round, and second round was 74.9%, 81.2%, and 80.9%
respectively.

When it came time to make a final choice between Scioli and Macri,
Massa’s supporters broke disproportionately for Macri, as did most sup-
porters of minor candidates, and Macri won the runoff with 51.3 percent
of the vote. For the first time in over a decade, kirchnerismo lost and a
non-Peronist became president of Argentina, something that had seemed
improbable only a year earlier. And for the first time since 1946—when Juan Domingo Perón himself was first elected—Argentines had chosen a president who was neither a Peronist nor a Radical.

Macri took office on 10 December 2015. Like other non-Peronist presidents in contemporary Argentina, he will have to contend with large oppositions in both houses of Congress. In the 72-member Senate, the FPV enjoys an outright majority with 43 seats. In the Chamber of Deputies, Macri’s party and its allies can cobble together a majority only with the support of one or two small parties and the dissident Peronists. Perhaps most importantly, the FPV still controls half the country’s 24 governorships. Governors control party lists and purse strings, giving them enormous sway over provincial congressional delegations.² Despite its losses, the FPV and its allies are strong enough to make passing legislation through Congress difficult for the new president.

**Continuity or Change?**

Scioli was never an obvious heir to the Kirchner dynasty. Néstor Kirchner was first elected in 2003 and stepped aside in 2007 to allow his wife to succeed him. By some accounts, they planned to alternate in office as a way of circumventing the constitution’s rule that no one may serve more than two consecutive terms as president. But Néstor’s fatal heart attack in 2010 changed all that. Cristina found herself forced to choose a successor after two terms in office—after her supporters had unsuccessfully floated the idea of altering the constitution to let her seek a third term. Rather than choosing someone from her inner circle and hence a close associate of her husband’s leftist political faction known as kirchnerismo, she opted for a more moderate option. Scioli was a politician’s politician, a pragmatist who had never rocked the boat. When an earlier Peronist president, Carlos Saúl Menem, had been popular in the mid-1990s, Scioli was an avowed menemista. When Menem fell from grace and Kirchner’s star ascended, Scioli became a kirchnerista. Even so, he was never very close to the Kirchners. The electoral calcu-
lation, it seemed, was that Scioli would attract some votes from non-kirchneristas, middle-class voters who liked the Kirchners’ policies of subsidizing utility prices and legalizing gay marriage but disliked their confrontational governing style.

At the same time, Kirchner and Scioli needed to reassure the kirchnerista base that he would keep in place the Kirchners’ signature policy mix of
capital controls, government subsidies, and welfare benefits. That meant sending clear signals of continuity. Thus Scioli picked as his running mate the Kirchner loyalist Carlos Zannini. Days later, Scioli’s main primary rival, Florencia Randazzo, suddenly dropped out of the race while explaining that running against Zannini would be like running against Kirchner and hence unthinkable. Many pundits speculated that orders from Cristina Kirchner herself had put Zannini on the ticket and pulled Randazzo from the race. Whatever really happened, there is no doubt that these events fed the perception that Kirchner was calling the shots.  

Macri reacted astutely. Every chance he got, he painted Scioli as the incumbent, criticizing him for the Kirchner administration’s failings. In their televised debate a week before the runoff, Macri again and again asked Scioli pointed questions about Kirchner’s policies. An exasperated Scioli, eager to put some distance between himself and the outgoing president, eventually exclaimed “Debate with me, not with the administration that leaves office on December 10!”  

All this left Scioli the unenviable task of trying to reassure his base while also appealing beyond it. Particularly after the first round, he began deemphasizing continuity in order to back what he called “continuity with change.” It was never clear that he could have it both ways. He was neither close enough to Kirchner to make him thoroughly convincing as a guarantor of continuity, nor far enough from her to be the most credible change agent in the race. And the voters wanted change. Macri’s advantage was not having to play this double game. He was closely associated with Argentina’s business elite, had openly supported the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s, and had allied himself with right-wing politicians in the early 2000s. Yet as mayor of Buenos Aires and in the run-up to 2015, he surrounded himself with technocrats rather than ideologues. He portrayed himself as a pragmatist who could manage bureaucrats and get things done. Holding only a local office, he could avoid taking positions on national economic issues, though he took great pains to reassure voters that they would not lose their welfare benefits or subsidized utilities under a Macri administration. Even during the campaign, he refused to take specific positions on how he would address inflation, what he would do about the exchange rate, and whether he would renegotiate Argentina’s outstanding debts. Instead, his campaign radiated optimism, hope, teamwork, and (of course) “change.”  

Scioli and his supporters mounted a forceful negative campaign that depicted the prospect of a Macri administration as a return to the bad old days of the 1990s and the neoliberal economic policies of the Menem administration. Ever since Argentina’s massive economic crisis of 2001 and 2002, “neoliberalism” had become a dirty word inseparable from the unemployment, inequality, and corruption of the late 1990s and early 2000s. During the November 15 debate, Scioli appealed again and
again to workers and average Argentines, portraying himself as their protector and Macri as the harbinger of economic hardship.

But Macri’s messaging proved superior. After the election, when the Argentine Panel Election Study (APES), a national public-opinion survey, asked respondents to place Macri’s PRO on a left-to-right ideological scale from 0 to 10, they put the party, on average, at 5.7, just right of center. They placed Scioli’s FPV at 5.3, indistinguishably further to the left. In programmatic terms, in other words, Argentines saw no real difference between Scioli and Macri. If Macri was the candidate of change, it was never clear to voters just what that change would look like.

Macri also successfully built a national electoral coalition via Cambiemos. In Argentina, the formation of new parties has not been rare, but such parties have historically failed to make the leap from local to national electoral success. In the 1995 presidential race, a leftist party called FREPASO vaulted to second place, but had little pull outside Buenos Aires and a few other cities. Kirchner’s rivals in 2007 and 2011 also suffered from precisely this problem. Macri seemed well aware of this challenge and began building a broad coalition early in 2015. Crucial to his election was bringing the UCR on board. The Radicals were founded in 1891, making them Argentina’s oldest extant party. After nearly a century as one of two major national parties, they remained locally competitive but had become all but irrelevant in national elections after 2003. Their continuing local strength meant that they could provide Macri with activists, operatives, organizations, and (crucially) election monitors all across the country. In exchange, Macri represented what the Radicals had not had since 1999: an electable presidential candidate.

The third major candidate, Massa, was also programmatically similar to the frontrunners, differing from them mainly in having less voter support. He had begun his political career in the late 1980s in a conservative party, joining Peronism in the 1990s under the neoliberal Menem. A pragmatist like his opponents, Massa joined the FPV in 2005 to ride the Kirchner wave, then broke away when doing so became politically expedient in 2013. During the 2015 campaign, Massa sought to distinguish himself by being more polarizing than either of the frontrunners. He took confrontational stances against the Kirchner administration and spoke often about the corruption scandals surrounding several of its officials and allies. As mayor of Tigre, a town on the edge of the Paraná River Delta not far west of Buenos Aires, he was also well positioned to take a hard line on the rising crime rates that concern so many residents of this densely urbanized part of Argentina.

Unlike Macri, Massa is a Peronist, so he could also attract Peronists unhappy with the Kirchners. But being a Peronist and a former kirchnerista may also have made him a less credible messenger of change. And it made it harder for him to forge electoral alliances with non-Peronist opposition forces such as the Radicals. Throughout the campaign,
national opinion polls rarely gave Massa more than 20 percent of the vote. But he knew that he would have an opportunity to play kingmaker in an eventual second round. After losing the first round, he threw his weight behind Macri. Now, he is both an indispensable ally for the president and a possible future leader of Peronism.

It’s the Economy . . . and the Incumbent

How did Macri manage to overtake Scioli and win a victory that had seemed improbable just weeks earlier? It was not voters’ policy preferences; the candidates were too close together for those to have mattered very much. On major economic issues, Argentines seem to be largely in agreement: Most believe that the government should regulate prices for basic necessities and public utilities, most think that the government should redistribute wealth to reduce inequality, and most want the country’s major industries in the hands of the state rather than the private sector. Given all this public agreement, it is unsurprising that Macri played down his past market-oriented economic positions and made noncommittal statements about his economic-policy intentions.

Argentine voters also seemed to be little swayed by the conspiracy theories and charges concerning kickbacks and other forms of corruption that had swirled about the Kirchner administration for years. Only 9 percent of APES respondents said that corruption was Argentina’s main problem, even though election season found Kirchner’s vice-president, Amado Boudou, on trial for taking bribes.

In January 2015, federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman alleged that Kirchner had been covering up Iran’s involvement in the 18 July 1994 car-bombing of a Buenos Aires Jewish community center in which 85 victims had died. Kirchner had signed a memorandum of understanding with Iran in 2013 to jointly investigate the case, but Nisman claimed that the real purpose of the joint investigation was to (wrongly) absolve Iran of culpability in the attack. On 18 January 2015, hours before he was scheduled to testify to Congress about his claims, Nisman was found in his thirteenth-floor apartment in Buenos Aires with a fatal gunshot wound to his head. Draft arrest warrants for the president and her foreign minister, Héctor Timerman, were reportedly found in his trash. The government quickly called it a suicide, but opposition leaders accused the administration—and what was then Argentina’s national intelligence agency, the Secretariat of Intelligence—of murder.

The Nisman story made world headlines, but like other allegations of corruption and malfeasance surrounding Kirchner and her government, it only reinforced voters’ prior opinions. Kirchner supporters believed either that Nisman had indeed committed suicide or that opposition forces had murdered him in an effort to undermine the president. Her detractors, on the other hand, were certain that she had ordered Nisman
to be killed. Although Macri promised to rescind the 2013 memorandum of understanding with Iran and investigate Nisman’s death, the issue remained largely absent from the campaign.

It was not clashing views about scandals that set Macri’s voters apart from Scioli’s, but differing evaluations of the economy and Cristina Kirchner’s handling of it. Many had become concerned in 2014 when unemployment had begun to rise as consumption and investment fell. Exports had slipped, public debt was growing, and inflation was nearing 25 percent. Growth had almost ground to a halt. Argentines sensed the arrival of a period of stagnation, with decline just ahead. In the first wave of the APES, fielded just before the primary vote, nearly 80 percent of respondents said that they felt the economy had stagnated or declined in the prior twelve months. By the end of the campaign, another 5 percent held that view.

These economic evaluations were crucial in determining voters’ choices. As Figures 1 and 2 show, Argentines who liked Kirchner and thought that the economy was on the right track voted for Scioli, whom they viewed as her successor. Those who disliked Kirchner and saw a stumbling economy in need of a jumpstart supported Macri, the candidate of change. In the absence of clear policy differences, voters relied on the classic “valence issue” of incumbent performance in making what they viewed as a choice between continuity and change.

This could also be read in the territorial distribution of Macri’s votes. In the small provinces that have long been Peronist and Kirchner bastions, Macri drastically underperformed his 51.4 percent nationwide showing. But he did better in interior provinces that have major urban centers, including Mendoza and Santa Fe. By far his best showing was in the landlocked province of Córdoba, northwest of Buenos Aires. The residents of Córdoba gave Macri a whopping 71.5 percent of their votes. Indeed, the province was crucial to Macri’s victory. Had the distribution of votes in Córdoba, with its population of 3.5 million (only Buenos Aires Province, with 16.3 million people, is larger), been the same as the national distribution, Scioli would have won.

Why did Córdoba go so overwhelmingly for Macri? True, the Kirchneristas were never huge vote-getters there, and they had no favorite-son or favorite-daughter appeal (both Néstor and Cristina had previously represented the southern province of Santa Cruz). Yet kirchnerista losses in Córdoba were never by dramatic margins, either. Moreover, none of the province’s major political figures were affiliated with Macri’s Cambiemos coalition. So what explains the province’s 2015 voting behavior? The answer is two acrimonious conflicts that flared up between the province and the Kirchner government.

The first was Cristina Kirchner’s 2008 clash with the rural sector. Anxious to shore up the central government’s foreign-currency reserves, her administration had imposed variable export taxes on agricultural products such as wheat and soybeans. This move sparked months of
protests by farmers, who ceased production and erected hundreds of blockades around the country. Kirchner’s policy had alienated rural producers and their powerful trade organizations, and her handling of the conflict angered many middle-class voters. They blamed her confrontational style for endless traffic jams and empty grocery-store shelves in a country that boasts some of the most fertile food-growing regions on the planet. Some citizens even joined farmers in protesting, banging on pots and pans (a traditional show of discontent called a *cacerolazo*) in the streets of major cities. Córdoba, whose agricultural sector is larger as a share of its economy than the national average, was at the center of the dispute. Since then, provincial leaders complain, the central government has been punishing the province, sending it fewer federal resources and making its people pay higher utility rates.
The second conflict came in December 2013, when Córdoba’s provincial police officers went on strike to demand pay raises in the face of mounting inflation. Since 2007, the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) had been reporting unreliable inflation estimates that were far below the actual rate of inflation. Since the government is contractually obligated to adjust public employees’ wages for inflation, the underreporting allowed it to hold down raises. Public employees, watching their real incomes shrink before their eyes, were not pleased. The police strike left Córdoba exposed; serious looting and violence broke out on December 3. The Kirchner administration blamed the governor, a political rival, and waited two days before agreeing to his request for federal police. He later claimed that Kirchner’s aide Carlos Zannini, Scioli’s running mate, had caused the delay.

Voters in Córdoba thus had their own reasons for wanting a change in the national government. Other Argentines yearned for change to address a national economy that appeared to be stagnating, if not already in decline. Ultimately, the outcome of the presidential race had more to do with the government and the economy that Cristina Kirchner was leaving behind than it did with Scioli or Macri.

On December 10, Macri took office along with hundreds of mayors, governors, and legislators. Just over half the deputies in Congress’s lower house were new to their seats, and over half the elected governors were as well. For the first time in Argentina’s history, a woman was elected governor of Buenos Aires Province. And a younger generation of Argentine politicians—with few memories of the 1976–83 military dictatorship—appears to be taking on more and more powerful positions. Massa is only 43, and among the prominent FPV legislators is Máximo Kirchner, the 38-year-old son of the two former presidents.

Yet despite all this turnover in political personnel, much will remain unchanged. The new Chamber of Deputies, like the previous one, is overwhelmingly affluent. Only 9 percent of deputies in the new Chamber come from working-class backgrounds. In a country where roughly 70 percent of voters work in manual-labor or service-industry jobs—as construction workers, day laborers, maids, and the like—91 percent of the newly elected deputies are white-collar professionals or businessmen. The president himself, of course, is a millionaire businessman. Argentina continues to be governed by the rich.

We Are All Pragmatists

For well over a decade, Argentine politics had been primarily a conflict between an economically successful center-left government and an ideologically heterogeneous and hopelessly uncoordinated opposition. Both Macri and Scioli, but also Massa, broke that trend. For many voters, Scioli was just a pragmatist, likely to abandon the kirchnerista project if doing
**THE PHENOMENON OF AFFLUENT LEGISLATORS**

Does it matter that so few of Argentina’s deputies are workers? We often assume that it does not, that regardless of their backgrounds or personal preferences, politicians respond to pressure from public opinion, interest groups, and their party leaders. And they do. But scholars are increasingly noticing that politicians respond much more to the opinions of wealthy constituents than to those of poor ones.12

Zach Warner and I studied a unique survey that was put to Argentine voters and to a sample of Argentine politicians in 2014.13 Using these data, we looked at the degree to which voters and politicians held similar opinions on a range of policy issues; that is, we measured the degree of congruence between voters and their elected representatives. Crucially, we also disaggregated mass opinions between poor and rich voters. What we found is disheartening: Argentine politicians’ attitudes, regardless of party, are consistently closer to the views of wealthy voters.

Of course, these are just the views that politicians express in a survey. When it comes to making policy, legislators face a wide range of external pressures that mute the influence of their own views: parties, constituents, interest groups, social movements, and the like. Even so, Nicholas Carnes and I have found that these personal views shape the policy agenda.14 When we looked closely at one legislative session in Argentina, we found that legislators from the working class tended to introduce economic-policy bills that we coded as substantially more progressive (in the sense of providing more government spending or regulation) than average. In a typical legislative session, the shortage of Argentine legislators from the working class translates into roughly fifty fewer such progressive bills being introduced. It is impossible to know exactly how these “missing” bills might have affected economic policy, but we do know that the policy agenda would have looked more progressive.

That policy tends to be biased toward the preferences of the amply represented rich is hardly a circumstance unique to Argentina, of course. Governments all over the world are disproportionately run by wealthy politicians. Across Latin America, only 10 percent of national legislators come from working-class backgrounds, even though 80 percent of the electorate holds working-class jobs. Nor is this a new phenomenon. Argentina’s deputies have probably always been far more affluent than the people whom they represent. At least since the early 2000s, the proportion of working-class deputies has hovered in the single digits. For all the change that Argentines brought about with their choices in 2015, Argentina will still be governed by people who are significantly, even wildly, more affluent than the voters who elected them. And that has real consequences for who wins and who loses in democratic politics. On that score, continuity prevailed.
so were to appear politically useful. Macri, for his part, wore his self-proclaimed pragmatism like a badge of honor, portraying himself as a truly postideological candidate. And Massa, like many contemporary politicians in Argentina, has always been a chameleon, changing coloration to match the popular leader of the day. In fact, all three candidates traced their political roots to the ideological right; some had disavowed that past, while others chose to ignore it.

What made all this possible is the fragility of Argentina’s political parties. A party system once considered among the region’s most stable, with Peronists and Radicals the perennial foes, became after 2003 something deeply fragmented and volatile. Since that year, parties and alliances have come and gone with each new election, and parties allied in some provinces compete vigorously against each other in another. Even experts cannot keep up. Carlos Gervasoni concluded a recent description of the dizzying array of parties and alliances this way: “If the reader feels confused, the point has been made. Not even scholars of Argentine parties thoroughly grasp this extremely complex scenario.”

Through all this fragmentation, Peronism has persisted, but has not remained unscathed. In an earlier era, Peronist voters would have balked at the idea of casting a ballot for a non-Peronist. And anti-Peronists (or “gorillas,” as they are called) would have recoiled at the thought of electing a Peronist. Today, fewer such rock-ribbed partisans exist, party machinery is weaker and decentralized, and Peronism is associated with a wide variety of factions and personalist leaders. Politicians and voters are far more comfortable crossing the historic divide between Peronism and its opposition: Witness all the Massa supporters who unreservedly cast votes for Macri in the second round. And Macri carried traditional Peronist strongholds such as Jujuy and La Rioja Provinces and did surprisingly well in the industrial areas near major cities.

Argentina’s current party system is a mixture of weak party organizations and personalist vehicles. Ephemeral party labels abound, and are all but meaningless. Popular politicians with local or national reputations form parties that are little more than campaign organizations. These politicians make and unmake alliances according to necessity and expediency, shifting as their desire to win election dictates. The FPV has maintained a fairly coherent program, but even it is just one faction vying for control of the larger current of Peronism. Following Scioli’s defeat and Massa’s better-than-expected electoral performance, kirchnerismo is likely to face intense competition for control of the Peronist
Noam Lupu

apparatus. Massa has already laid the groundwork for this conflict: During the campaign, he attracted key Peronist mayors and their machines to his camp. In February 2016, a dozen FPV legislators broke with their party and are likely to join his alliance.

This fragmented system of weak parties strengthens the powers of individual politicians, especially the president. With no strong parties to discipline them, politicians find it easier to change policy positions and harder to solve coordination problems. As long as the opposition fails to coordinate, the executive can pick off enough individual legislators to get its proposals approved. A fragmented opposition within a fragmented legislature is unlikely to put strong checks on the executive.

Despite some notable stumbles, Cristina Kirchner was adept at taking advantage of this situation to achieve her goals. Over her two terms, she centralized ever more legislative and fiscal authority within the executive branch. She won emergency powers from Congress to make momentous fiscal decisions such as nationalizing public pensions and the oil sector. And her administration only selectively enforced the Supreme Court’s rulings against it. Faced with heavy media criticism during her unpopular clash with the rural sector, she imposed new regulations on the country’s media conglomerates. And when the independent INDEC published unfavorable economic figures and the Central Bank refused to provide the government with cash, she ousted their leaders.

Macri inherits an executive branch considerably more powerful than it was before the Kirchners ran it. He and his allies spent much of the Kirchner era criticizing hyperpresidentialism in general and Cristina’s confrontational and polarizing style in particular. Macri promised a more consensual, compromising approach, but how different a president will he turn out to be? In some ways, Macri has already shown a very different style of governing. He talks about his “team” and seems to run the executive branch, as he did the City of Buenos Aires, through trusted technocrats.

As he did during his campaign, Macri displays a certain folksiness, eschewing the image of a detached, monarchical chief executive. In late December 2015, he traveled to a flood-stricken part of the northeast—a flat, low-lying region dominated by its location between the mighty Paraná and Paraguay Rivers—to visit victims and meet with local leaders about infrastructure projects that might prevent future disasters. He has made it a habit of telephoning people who write him letters. And he retired the presidential fleet of planes in favor of flying commercial. Setting himself apart from his predecessor on the international stage, he also criticized Venezuela’s detention of political opponents and attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the first Argentine president to do so since 2003.

Politically, however, Macri enters office a relatively weak president. The FPV, as noted above, has a Senate majority, a Chamber plurality, and half the 24 governorships. Cristina Kirchner’s foes were weak and
fragmented; Macri faces a more cohesive and potent opposition. As a result, Macri will have less room to govern unilaterally. Necessity will make him more of a coalition-builder than his predecessor was.

Above all else, though, Macri is a pragmatist. He needs to form those coalitions from a position of relative strength. And he needs to move quickly to reinvigorate Argentina’s economy. Projections suggest that the economy will contract in 2016. Macri’s plan seems to be to promote foreign investment as a means of generating employment and economic growth. He has every incentive to avail himself of the substantial powers of the presidency. Argentina is unlikely to become much less hyper-presidential during his term in office.

Macri hit the ground running. Within days of taking office, he changed the peso from a fixed to a floating currency, lifted restrictions on foreign currency, removed most export taxes, reasserted the INDEC’s independence, and began renegotiating Argentina’s outstanding debts. He also made good on promises to gut Kirchner’s signature media law and rescind Argentina’s memorandum of understanding with Iran. And he did all this through presidential decrees while Congress was in recess. He even attempted to make two appointments to the Supreme Court via decree, but backed down in the face of public pressure. None of this is particularly surprising: Voters care more about outcomes than process. If Macri’s economic agenda starts to bear fruit in 2017, his party and his coalition partners will gain in the midterm elections.

Ironically, Macri seems to be following the political strategy of none other than Néstor Kirchner. Elected with only 22 percent of the vote, Kirchner took office in 2003 with a legislative minority and a splintered Peronist party. So he allied himself with Radical governors, legislated by decree when necessary, and rode his early economic successes to victory in the midterms. Then he used his new political majorities to cement his power. Argentines voted for some important changes in 2015, but much of Argentine politics will remain the same. Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

NOTES

1. In a postelection survey conducted by the Argentine Panel Election Study (APES), 57 percent of Massa supporters reported voting for Macri in the runoff. See www.noam-lupu.com/data.html.


3. Scioli was seen as the incumbent choice. Recipients of government welfare programs such as Kirchner’s Universal Child Subsidy were far more likely to vote for him, even controlling for wealth and demographics (analysis available from the author).
4. In the post-2000 era of Latin America’s “left turn,” one way in which rightist parties and candidates across the region have succeeded seems to have been by changing the conversation away from policies and toward these kinds of valences.

5. Noam Lupu, Carlos Gervasoni, Virginia Oliveros, and Luis Schiumerini, 2015 Argentine Panel Election Study, available at www.noamlupu.com/data.html. These data are averages from the postelection wave of the survey. The question was: “In politics, people talk about the ‘left’ and the ‘right.’ Using a scale where 0 means left and 10 means right, where would you place FPV/PRO?”


8. Lupu et al., 2015 Argentine Panel Election Study. The survey asked respondents’ level of agreement with three statements: (1) “The government should regulate the prices of basic consumption products”; (2) “The government should reduce the income differences between people”; and (3) “The government, rather than the private sector, should own the most important companies and industries in the country.”

9. Lupu et al., 2015 Argentine Panel Election Study. The question was as follows: “Would you say that in the last twelve months the economic situation in Argentina has improved a lot, improved some, neither improved nor worsened, worsened some, or worsened a lot?”


11. Members of Congress did not hesitate to adjust their own salaries to the actual level of inflation as estimated by private firms.


16. Whereas Cristina Kirchner carried many of these regions, including the industrial belt in greater Buenos Aires, with well over 60 percent of the vote in 2011, Scioli attracted only small majorities.