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Résumé de l'article

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Argentina's Politicized Bureaucracy: A Historical Analysis of Two Political Regimesⁱ

By María Verónica Elíasⁱⁱ

Abstract

This article employs the concept of “bureaucratic authoritarianism” (O’Donnell, 1978, 1988) to evaluate whether the character of Argentine bureaucracy has changed in the shift from dictatorial to democratic rule. A brief discussion about the political and administrative history of that country follows the characterization of bureaucratic authoritarianism in light of accountability and clientelism (Fox, 2000; Smulovitz & Peruzzotti, 2000, 2003). This article explores the possibility of bureaucratic legitimacy in Argentina through the enforcement of the rule of law, the system of checks and balances, and the fair treatment of citizens.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Authoritarianism, Argentina, dictatorial regime, democratic rule

Résumé

En examinant “l'autoritarisme bureaucratique” (O’Donnell, 1978, 1988) cet article évalue les changements dans la bureaucratie argentine sous le régime dictatorial et sous le régime démocratique. Une brève discussion sur l'histoire politique et administrative de ce pays suit la caractérisation de l'autoritarisme bureaucratique à la lumière de la responsabilité publique et du clientélisme (Fox, 2000; Smulovitz & Peruzzotti, 2000, 2003). L'article explore la possibilité d'un regain de légitimité bureaucratique en Argentine en appliquant la règle de droit, le système de contraintes et le traitement équitable des citoyens.

Mots-clés: Autoritarisme bureaucratique, régime dictatorial, Argentine, règle démocratique

Introduction

If Cristina [Kirchner] increases the retirees’ pensions, you too will get a bump.¹
Front-desk public administrator at a Social Security Administration regional office
(August 2014).

¹ “Si Cristina le aumenta a los jubilados, te aumentan a vos también.”

A recent encounter between the author and a public administrator at a regional Social Security Administration office (ANSES)² in Buenos Aires province, Argentina, serves as a prompt for questioning the role of bureaucracy in a democratic regime, specifically in the Argentine context. In that occasion, the author inquired about the status of a relative's social security pension case, vital to this person's needs.³ The front-desk officer's reply — that any increases were in the hands of the country's president — illustrates a widespread pattern of interaction between the public administration and its political brokers, whereby they provide favours to specific agents in return for votes for the political incumbent who granted them that position. Brokers may feel compelled to return favours to political officials by fulfilling specific individual citizens' requests with the hope that the status quo be maintained through reelection of those in power (Oliveros, 2016). Such patterns become exacerbated and commonplace in many Latin American bureaucratic arrangements where populist politics play a central role in the provision of social services, especially for society's neediest.

The example provided above highlights the close ties of partisan politics to public administration in Argentina by means of personalized service provision to citizens. The fulfillment of the implicit contractual agreement between political brokers and elected representatives evinces the loyalty of brokers within the bureaucracy toward political appointees or elected representatives to ensure the tenure of those in positions of power (Oliveros, 2016). Therefore, bureaucracy appears to act as a cog in a political machine that seeks loyalty to the regime as a means to maintain its hold on power. Finally, this example challenges the viewpoint that bureaucracy ought to be a dispassionate, objective, expertise-driven enterprise that is based on equal treatment and fairness principles.

The personalization of public administration in Argentina —through favours and political patronage—has been widely investigated (Calvo & Murillo, 2004, 2008; Oliveros, 2016; Szwarcberg, 2012; Zarazaga, 2014). Clientelism can be defined as the unequal relationship of power based on exchanges of political favours for material benefits, or “the proffering of material goods in return for electoral support” (Stokes, 2011, p. 649). A recent study (Oliveros, 2016), for instance, eloquently links clientelism with the powerful role of political brokers to provide services to citizens that *exceed* the exchange of mere goods and social benefits. A first approximation to the matter would lead one to believe that there is a tacit relationship between public administrators and elected representatives, whereby the former are pressed or coerced to comply with the political agenda of these groups in power (Calvo & Murillo, 2004, 2008; Oliveros, 2016; Szwarcberg, 2012; Zarazaga, 2014). However, a closer analysis unveils a complex political

² Administración Nacional de la Seguridad Social.

³ To protect my relative's privacy, some details of the case are withheld.

network behind the personalized interactions between public administrators and citizens as mediated by brokers. Political brokers possess a type of knowledge that many other political actors lack—a knowledge of neighborhood dynamics that allows them to influence local politics (Zarazaga, 2014). Whether citizens ask for help in any given area, those within the public administration who support the incumbent (who may have secured their jobs through patronage agreements) count on ample discretion to grant favours both inside and outside the bureaucracy by means of personal interactions (Oliveros, 2016). The example that opened this article hints at the effect of bureaucratic discretion over a recipient's request, especially when granted a favour by her public agency's contact person. As Oliveros (2016) argues, "The recurrent use of discretion ... in the everyday undertakings of public sector employees, and the consequent personalization of problem-solving, help give voters the impression that personal relationships are vital for getting things done in the public administration" (p. 374).

The present study seeks to contribute to the connection in the literature between political brokers and democratization processes in Latin America by exploring the relationship between state bureaucracy and regime change in Argentina over time. It delves into the role of partisan politics in Argentina's public administration under two opposing political regimes, authoritarian and democratic. The selection of these two periods of Argentina's recent history are important to understand Argentina's transition to a democratic state. The methodological approach taken here includes a careful review of the existing scholarly literature on the topic, complemented by archival research (government reports and newspapers), personal observation of situations in public agencies, and informal interviews with citizens and public officials.

When discussing authoritarianism in Argentina, this article focuses on the military dictatorship of 1976 to 1983, while the democratic period discussion emphasizes the three consecutive administrations controlled by the Kirchner family (2003-2015). Democratically elected governments (Ricardo Alfonsín, 1983–1989; Carlos S. Menem, 1989–1999; Fernando de La Rúa, 1999–2001; Néstor Kirchner, 2003–2007; and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, 2008–2015) have governed Argentina since 1983. However, this study will focus solely on the Kirchner administrations due to their overwhelming bureaucratic authoritarianism, especially the lack of accountability and enhanced clientelist practices. These three administrations in some fundamental ways were built under specific political and policy ideals that make sense to study together, especially when concerning public service and the widespread provision of social benefits to the poorest social groups.

The thesis presented here is that while one might expect a significant contrast in the character of the bureaucracy under dictatorial versus democratic governments, the

differences observed across critical dimensions are not substantive under either type of regime. This has enormous implications for public administration on a day-to-day basis that still linger around nowadays, post-Kirchner administrations.

The first section of this investigation discusses important aspects of Argentina's political history concerning democratic and authoritarian governing values. Second Argentine political theorist Guillermo O'Donnell's (1978, 1988) concept of "bureaucratic authoritarianism" (BA) is applied in light of the main question posed here: to what extent has the character of Argentine bureaucracy changed or remained the same under authoritarian and democratic rule? Third, two key components of the BA state as distilled from O'Donnell's theory, clientelism (sometimes called particularism) and accountability guides the argument. It assesses how an overwhelming presence of the former and lack of the latter affects administrative practices in public agencies. Finally, the study points to the implications of politicized bureaucracy for Argentina's public administration in the context of democratic governance ideals.

1. Research Inquiry in Context: Argentina's Political Regimes in Recent History

Argentina returned to democratic rule in 1983 after seven consecutive years of a dictatorial regime. Many analysts have already provided a perspective of this transition (Ansaldi, 1992; Catoggio, 2010; O'Donnell 1988, 1999, 2007; Romero, 2001, 2002). However, little has been said as to whether the public administration was also reformed from an instrument of dictatorial rule to one of democratic governance. Through a bibliographic and testimonial investigation, this study considers that question via a comparative analysis of two periods in Argentina's recent history, focusing on key elements of the relationship between public administration and politics in that country's governance tradition. Finally, this article questions the necessary conditions for public administration to uphold democratic governance values. In that sense, what should be the proper internalization of democratic politics for public service?

A federal constitutional republic with representative democratic ideals, Argentina underwent intermittent authoritarian political regimes for a great part of the twentieth century. Notwithstanding the country's unstable democratic path, the public bureaucracy has largely preserved a continuity of character.⁴ What is more, bureaucracy can evolve along different pathways, and this research suggests that Argentina's public

⁴ By character, the argument here refers to the way that bureaucracy internalizes the political tensions of the form of government, meaning the manner in which the public administration serves the political and economic interests of those in power while managing the opposition out of power.

administration is at a crossroads of very distinct trajectories, one of them far less democratic than the other is. The key political process that makes a difference in choosing the more democratic pathway is the institutionalization of rule of law as bureaucracy's primary mission. The proper institutional structure must guarantee that bureaucracy becomes defined by the dual role of performer of political will—as manifested in law—and check on political power (Terry, 2003).

In exploring Argentina's governing tradition, this study argues that its public administration upholds the figure of the ruler in its daily public service practice over and against the letter of the law. However, the bureaucracy should reach a balance between a mindless technocracy (unaware of the socio-political context, as well as its own limitations) and loose patronage (oblivious to the established rule of law as well as the principles of quality and fairness). Finally, the proper or desired character of a public administration ought to align itself with democratic ideals.

1.1 Bureaucratic Authoritarianism and the Argentine State

In his acclaimed analysis of Latin American political regimes, Argentine political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell (1978, 1988) proposed an analytical framework that he called "bureaucratic authoritarianism." O'Donnell sought to describe the type of authoritarianism common in Latin America states, one reliant on the political and economic exclusion of the popular groups of society. Directed by a country's oligarchic sector, BA serves an exclusionary project that seeks to exert control and predictability over the socio-political and economic conditions of a country, with a focus on conditioning the masses' (the *pueblo*) political involvement in public life (O'Donnell, 1978, 1988).

BA places a premium on the liberalization of domestic economic production and increased capital accumulation—mainly to land in the hands of the economic and financial elite of the nation—as well as the neutralization of large popular sectors (O'Donnell, 1978, 1988). The defining characteristics of the bureaucratic-authoritarian state are:

1. Higher governmental positions in the hands of individuals with prior successful careers in "complex and *highly bureaucratized organizations* [such as] the armed forces, the public bureaucracy, and large private firms";
2. *Political exclusion* and deactivation of the popular sector, "not only by means of repression but also through the imposition of vertical (corporatist) controls";
3. *Economic exclusion* of the popular sector, in that the state "reduces or postpones indefinitely [their] aspiration to economic participation";

4. “*Depoliticization*” of social and political issues by reducing them to “technical problems [and hence] to be resolved by ... the higher echelons of government organizations”; and
5. The deepening of a peripheral and dependent capitalist process “characterized by *extensive industrialization*” (O’Donnell, 1978, p. 6; Pión-Berlin, 1984, italics in original).

O’Donnell’s bureaucratic-authoritarianism framework is valuable for assessing the role of Argentina’s public administration in perpetuating or undermining the political power that subverts democratic values. This is especially important when looking at three crucial aspects of BA:

1. Higher governmental positions in the hands of those with prior careers in complex and highly bureaucratized organizations. The BA state involves “the intervention of highly skilled officials” in order to deepen the process of economic modernization, as well as to impose the consolidation of the new order (Schamis, 1991, p. 203),
2. Political exclusion of the popular sector (previously included and activated), and
3. “*Depoliticization*” of social and economic issues by means of reducing them to technical or traditionally conceived “bureaucratic” problems. As Schamis (1991) argues, “In a nondemocratic regime, technocratic elites play an important role in demobilizing popular groups. ... [T]hey turn previously political issues into technical matters” (p. 204).

These characteristics relate to the political and socioeconomic relations that the political regime presses forward and legitimizes through bureaucracy.

The deep bureaucratization of political power coupled with both the political exclusion of the popular sector and depoliticization of social and economic issues create a most propitious ground for diminished inter- and intra-institutional checks and balances, that is, accountability, as well as promoting clientelism in public service delivery. In Argentina, such fertile ground for unchecked power has thrived during both military and democratically elected populist governments. While the regimes are diametrically opposed in terms of how government officials achieve power, they seem to share the aspirations of perpetuating themselves in power by means of concentrating power, spreading clientelism—through public agency work—and diminishing accountability—by appointing political cronies to key institutional positions.

Prompted by O’Donnell’s framework of analysis, the following discussion explores whether bureaucratic authoritarianism carried over from dictatorial rule to a democratic (yet deeply populist) government. Based on O’Donnell’s characterization, this discussion questions the role of the state in promoting unequal relations of power within society

under different regimes (military dictatorial versus democratic). What is the role of bureaucracy in materializing those differential relations of power? How does clientelism and a weak or inexistent accountability play into it?

2. Clientelism and Accountability

Clientelism and accountability are important concepts in light of the patterns of socio-political relations mentioned above, namely the concentration of the means of power and economic resources in the hands of one group—the elite—to the detriment of political involvement of the popular sector and to the bureaucratization of political problems. A political system based on the depoliticization and disempowerment of the popular classes must be questioned in light of the institutional apparatus and the rule of law of the nation.

Clientelism alludes to “relationships of political subordination in exchange for material rewards” (Fox, 2000, p. 7). This concept is enhanced by the broader term *particularism* to include other types of relationships in addition to clientelism, ranging from “hierarchical particularistic exchanges, patronage, nepotism, and favors [to] actions that ... would be considered corrupt” (O’Donnell, 1999, p. 181). As O’Donnell (1999) suggests, clientelism/particularism in any form blurs one’s ability (behaviourally, legally, and normatively) to make a distinction between the public and the private spheres. In turn, it undermines public service values, normatively oriented toward the public good.

Horizontal accountability refers to the institutional oversight and checks and balances within a state. More specifically, it is the capacity and willingness of relatively autonomous state institutions to call into question the discharge of public duties by government officials and public agencies (O’Donnell, 1998, 2004). These institutions range from the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government to the various oversight agencies, ombudsmen, and accounting offices. However, horizontal accountability relies on agencies’ legal power to take actions that control state power and, more importantly, on these agencies’ officials’ ability and willingness to pursue the necessary means “from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to possibly unlawful actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the state” (O’Donnell, 1998, p. 117). The rule of law matters greatly for the quality of democracy, especially in newer democracies. O’Donnell (2004) reminds us that “a truly *democratic* rule of law ensures political rights, civil liberties and mechanisms of accountability which in turn affirm the political equality of all citizens and constrain potential abuses of state power” (p. 32, emphasis in original). To that end, checks, balances, and horizontal accountability are vital. The case of Argentina at the outset appears to fail this prerogative inasmuch as its bureaucracy has historically played a neatly political role, unwilling or

unable to hold public officials accountable (Ferraro, 2006; Minsky, 2001; Oszlak, 1999; Spiller & Tommasi, 2007; Scherlis, 2013).

Vertical accountability points to the capacity and means of citizens, mass media, and organizations of civil society to hold public officials accountable in terms of the discharge of their duties and performance. In representative governments, free and fair elections constitute one means of vertical accountability. Along with freedoms of speech, the press, and association, citizens can voice social demands to public officials (elected and unelected) as well as to “denounce these same officials for wrongful acts that they may commit” (O’Donnell, 1999, p. 112). However, more-or-less open and free elections alone are insufficient to hold public officials accountable.

Fox (2000) reflects on how deeply connected clientelism and the lack of accountability are: “[A]uthoritarian clientelism enforces such imbalanced bargains with threats of coercion [or] withdrawal of critical services.” More specifically, authoritarian clientelism subverts the principle of accountability and “violates fundamental democratic principles” (p. 7). It does so in two ways:

First, authoritarian vote-buying renders electoral competition less than democratic, undermining the regime’s potential vertical accountability. Second, authoritarian clientelism obliges citizens to abstain from participating in organizations that will be accountable to them, weakening civil society. Furthermore, regimes that use the allocation of public resources systematically to reward and punish citizens create a form of “reverse vertical accountability,” requiring clients dependent on such resources for their survival to be accountable to state patrons (Ibid.).

Clientelism and accountability are relevant criteria to test whether a political regime based on divided powers and checks and balances (as well as other constitutional provisions) is able to exert such constitutional powers and guarantee basic freedoms across society. Is bureaucracy able and willing to internalize democratic governance values or does it preserve the state’s bureaucratic authoritarian tradition, the latter characterized by exclusion of the public and by “reverse vertical accountability” (Fox, 2000, p. 7)? If bureaucracy were complicit with special interests, such as populist or technocratic governing elite, what are the conditions necessary for the bureaucracy to embody and facilitate democratic ideals?

2.1 The Political Tradition of Argentina’s Public Administration

Argentina is a federal republic that has in place a similar governmental structure to that of the United States. It is founded on a *Carta Magna* or Constitution that clearly stipulates the division of government powers in three branches, as well as the principle of checks

and balances. However, a different set of values prevails in practice. Old-fashioned party politics, including patronage and vote buying (Brusco, Nazareno, & Stokes, 2004; Levitsky & Murillo, 2008), are common in Argentina and go mostly unchallenged by opposition groups. While frowned upon by many citizens and critics, such methods remain the motor of Argentine politics, characteristically short term in vision. Differing dramatically from its northern hemisphere's counterparts, the peculiar type of Argentina's political regime explains this tradition. The type of democracy is "delegative" (O'Donnell, 1994).

"Delegative" democracy (O'Donnell, 1994) describes Latin American government regimes more accurately than it does the type found in northwestern nations, such as the United States, Canada and the developed European countries. As opposed to representative and formally institutionalized democracies, in delegative democracies high-level representatives, especially those in the executive branch, believe that, once elected to office, they ought to avoid institutional checks and balances and other means of horizontal accountability and representative controls to remain in power for as long as possible (O'Donnell, 1994). Faithful to their delegative and protective aspirations, "these presidents devote great efforts to co-opting, marginalizing, or even eliminating the state institutions formally in charge of exercising those controls" (O'Donnell, 1994, p. xi. Also, see Roberts, 2007; and Rose-Ackerman, Desierto, & Volosin, 2011).

In terms of public administration, Argentina relies on a civil service system—the National Civil Service System,⁵ modelled after the Weberian bureaucratic type—to handle the hiring, promoting, and retaining of state employees on the basis of qualification (i.e., merit). Nonetheless, it remains deficient in many important fronts. While there is, in fact, a well-formed cadre of highly qualified public administration careerists, most public servants do not fall under that category, but rather an informal parallel system or "parallel bureaucracy" (Oszlak, 1999). The careerists' vulnerability in the face of continuous political and policy changes translates into a highly unstable, even volatile public service (Minsky, 2001). That is, what prevails *in the exercise* of public administration is the non-civil service appointments or parallel bureaucracy, conformed by temporary workers, many of whom are political brokers. Parallel bureaucracy persists over time and government administrations due to a long tradition marked by distrust and skepticism of politicians towards civil service careerists, who are deemed potentially disloyal to the ruling party or groups in power or even possible traitors (Ferraro, 2006; Minsky, 2001; Spiller & Tomassi, 2007).

⁵ The *Sistema Nacional de la Profesión Administrativa* (or SINAPA) was introduced in 1991 and has since been modified several times (Rinne, 2003; Oszlak, 1999).

Politicized bureaucrats, thus placed in high-level positions, have full discretion and few checks and balances over allocation of public resources and services, which remain largely at their disposal. Devoid of transparency, party patronage appointments proliferate in public agencies. Political brokers are the ideal nexus between careerists and political party bosses for the sake of securing and applying public resources toward reelection of the ruling groups (Scherlis, 2013). Meanwhile, the well-trained cadre of civil service professionals is relegated in their functions to a minimal degree or done away with altogether, typically through massive reduction in personnel via retirements or salary decreases (Rinne, 2003). Other times, professional public servants are demoted or displaced from office (Capiello, 2015). Most commonly, the process happens by ignoring the professionals and strictly assigning programs and resources to a party-supporting and largely untrained group of administrators (Spiller & Tomassi, 2007).

Finally, Argentina endures a long tradition of “hyperpresidentialism” (Rose-Ackerman et al., 2011), or concentration of powers to the executive branch of government. Over the twelve years of the Kirchner’s administrations, this tendency exacerbated into what some scholars call “plebiscitarian superpresidentialism” (Mazzuca, 2013; Schamis, 2008). The concentration of presidential powers, according to Mazzuca (2013), has happened “at the expense of the national legislature [while the president] receives nothing more than nominal scrutiny from other branches of government or nonpartisan oversight agencies” (p. 109). In light of this politicized context, neither the conceptualization of “the public” nor the work of public administrators to legitimize it can be underestimated.

The next section explore clientelism and accountability during two selected government regime periods in Argentina to better assess the potential of the bureaucracy to serve as instrument for democratic change.

3. Argentina’s Process of National Reorganization: The Pinnacle of the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State

The most notable accomplishment of the junta that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 was to tear nearly completely asunder the fragile democratic institutions of the Argentine republic. The military regime conflated the political and economic interests of the elites with the national interest and declared any interest contrary to those elites a *de facto* threat to the nation. The yoke of authoritarianism descended upon the Argentinean people harder than ever before in a dual form of oppression--political and economic--the extent of which was only possible by the establishment of a well-functioning bureaucratic apparatus, one that operated with ruthless efficiency. This is what O’Donnell (1978, 1988), in his much-debated work, refers to as the rise of a “bureaucratic authoritarianism.”

A system of political and economic exclusion, the bureaucratic-authoritarian state sought to close democratic channels of access to government, suppress citizenship and political democracy, and depoliticize social issues by rendering them mere technical problems to be solved through neutral and objective tools (O'Donnell, 1978, 1988). The dictatorship was determined to eradicate three “threats” haunting Argentine society:

(1) all forms of subversion—including guerrilla activity, popular agitation, challenging behavior in schools, factories, and within the family, artistic and cultural non-conformism, and questioning of authority in general; (2) populist political society—Peronism, the unions, the “obliging” opposition composed of radicals and the parliamentary Left, and the tutelary state; and (3) the ‘inefficient’ industrial sector, which formed the base of the urban economy, together with its “undisciplined” working class (Cavarozzi, 1986, p. 44).

That is, the economic liberalization project of BA sought to dismantle the previous “developmental” economy and subvert all popular expressions of political, class, or socially (internally) defined group ideals, including the *pueblo* claims (O'Donnell, 1988). The central concerns of the bureaucratic-authoritarian state during this phase encompassed guaranteeing a solid capital and cash inflow as well as keeping mass revolts subdued. Regulation ensured predictability, which, in turn, gave way to the economic and social normalization that solidified and granted protracted power to the dictatorship and the machinery necessary to sustain it (Cavarozzi, 1986; O'Donnell, 1988).

3.1 Horizontal Accountability

Horizontal accountability refers to the inter- and intra-governmental controls or checks and balances among the different branches of government. However, the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 suspended the Constitution, and with it its checks and balances and due process. The branches of the constitutional government (executive, legislative, and judiciary) collapsed into a singular head—the military junta. Its power supplanted the old power of law insofar as it suspended the Congress and staffed the judiciary with trusted appointees. Handpicked via clientelism and placed at the pinnacle of public agencies, the most entrusted associates brought to practice the regime’s motto of economic and social control (Cavarozzi, 1986; O'Donnell, 1988). The three armed services (army, navy, and air force) that comprised the governing junta divided the country into five zones, with a different army, naval, and air force corps responsible for each one. These forged a network of military intelligence services that “carried out the monitoring, detailing and classifying of potential victims, as well as the process of archiving the information obtained from those abducted and the writing of reports for the military leadership” (Catoggio, 2010, p. 6). Along with this jurisdictional division, the network included “340 clandestine detention centers (CDCs) in 11 of the 23 provinces of Argentina” (Catoggio, 2010, p. 6; also see CONADEP, 1984). Horizontal

accountability was present only as far as to prevent abuses of power of one branch of the military over the others, but not in terms of abuses committed against the citizenry, organizations of civil society, and outspoken bureaucrats. Neither was accountability exercised against cases of embezzlement of public and private goods, including stealing from arrested citizens. Least of all were military officers accountable for the most horrifying and deplorable crimes against humanity during the dictatorial government, such as the civilian kidnappings, “disappearances,” torture, and killings (Catoggio, 2010; CONADEP, 1984).⁶

3.2 Vertical Accountability

The military dictatorship dissolved all means of vertical accountability,⁷ as it interrupted popular elections. It also banned political parties, dissolved unions, and abolished the right of citizens and groups to mobilize and participate in politics. Therefore, not only were the basic means of vertical accountability blocked, such as freedoms of speech, press, and association, but also citizenship was also suppressed (Cavarozzi, 1986; O'Donnell, 1988). Through a narrow conception of specific state interests, the military subdued basic freedoms by imparting terror in public and private spaces that ranged from threats and personal attacks to systematic repression, kidnappings, and disappearances.⁸ Consequently, vertical accountability plummeted because people became extremely fearful to speak up and openly pronounce themselves in any way.

During this period, the military took hold of the bureaucracy to impart terror and pacify the populace. The military focused simultaneously on eliminating populism—which had dominated the Argentine public and political scene between 1946 and 1955, and again between 1973 and 1976—and developmentalism (“*desarrollismo*”), meaning the modernization of the national industrial sector along with its urban industrial worker base, which was undertaken between 1955 and 1973 (Cavarozzi, 1986). The goal was to introduce the deepest liberal economic reform ever known before in Argentina, which had to be conducted hand-in-hand with a deep social reformation. Under the motto “shrinking the State to aggrandize the Nation” and after seven years of terror, the cruelest military dictatorship in Argentina’s history had the exact opposite effect (Minsky, 2001).

⁶ However, many high-level officials from the military junta were prosecuted and charged criminally upon the return of the constitutional government in 1983.

⁷ Vertical accountability refers to the mechanisms in place in a democratic government that enables a citizenry to keep its representatives accountable.

⁸ There is no agreement as to the number of disappeared people in the hands of the military regime. The numbers run from the official CONADEP (1984) figure of 8,960 reported disappearance cases to the 30,000 broadly accepted by human rights groups and society. The state’s centralized database reports the number of cases in approximately 10,000.

It transformed social relations (worker-employer and citizen-government) and left a profound and long-lasting mark on the citizens and the public administration.

With its mission to deter subversion, the bureaucracy under the military rule—greatly aided by civilians sympathetic to the regime—played a crucial role in the territorial and institutional control. Jurisdictional divisions of the territory allowed the bureaucracy to spread units of specialization and control for the permanent surveillance of individual citizens and groups. Places of residence, study (high schools, universities), work (factories, unions, businesses), and other form of social organization were constantly surveilled, and their activities, highly scrutinized, while raids against and abductions of “unruly” citizens or groups muted any potential threat to the public order (Catoggio, 2010; Cavarozzi, 1986).

In summary, a lack of political accountability and the use of bureaucracy for compliance, scrutiny, and surveillance of the population (especially against those deemed dangerous or holding different and therefore threatening political ideals) characterized this period. The military government sought to depoliticize popular groups under the pretext of preventing social revolt by punishing civil disobedience that could potentially threaten the regime.

4. Politicized Bureaucracy Under Populist Democratic Rule: Argentina from 2003 to 2015

As advanced earlier, the tradition of Argentina’s public administration has resonated more with the political goals of the day than with the rule of law (Minsky, 2001; Oszlak, 1999). With the return to democracy in 1983, public administration continued to serve as the political regime’s operating arm. However, in marked contrast with the military government period, during democratic rule public administration has been put at the service of the governing political party. An iconic example of this dynamic is Nestor Kirchner’s and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s administrations.

Under this new political terrain, day-to-day government administration occurs in a type of public agency now intensively populated by the politically appointed and the most loyal party supporters of the ruling groups, thus creating parallel bureaucracies (Ferraro, 2006; López & Zeller, 2006; Scherlis, 2013; Spiller & Tomassi, 2007), or bureaucracies that act as *de facto* political entities, marginalizing professional administrators. This practice grants broad decision-making power on important administrative and policy issues to political appointees and supporters of the ruling party—who occupy the agency’s top positions—to the detriment of civil service careerists. The politically appointed officials may lack the expertise and qualifications of the careerists (Ferraro, 2006; López & Zeller,

2006; Spiller & Tomassi, 2007), or they may be as qualified as their professional counterparts, except that party patronage has placed them in influential agency positions (Scherlis, 2013) to make sure that political goals find a smooth administrative path.

The political dynamics commanding the public administration therefore create enormous imbalances and uncertainties during partisan political changes every few years. These swings decisively affect short- and mid-term objectives (e.g., public service provision, resource allocation, policy direction) and long-term goals (e.g., agency direction and institutional memory) (Ferraro, 2006; López & Zeller, 2006; Spiller & Tomassi, 2007).

4.1 Horizontal Accountability

As stated earlier, during military rule and more widely throughout most of Argentina's constitutional history, the absence of horizontal accountability was a defining feature of the Argentine government (O'Donnell, 1999). This deficiency is rather worrisome in a constitutional state that, in principle, upholds the rule of law as the regulatory principle to ensure the checks and balances proper of a democratic civil society. By controlling the use of state powers, the rule of law seeks to protect equality and society's freedoms. The constitutional prerogative of checks and balances and its practical application by state powers and public agencies has been largely dismissed in Argentina insofar as a culture of clientelism and particularisms has prevailed.

The return to a constitutional order in 1983 through democratic elections promised to reinstate the balance of powers and strengthen democratic institutions. However, this did not materialize in effective checks on the executive branch by the Congress and the judiciary.⁹ Instead, the concentration of presidential powers to govern at the pleasure of the executive has undermined the means and procedures for institutional accountability by the legislative and judiciary branches (Castañeda, 2006; Levitsky & Murillo, 2008; Mazzuca, 2013; Roberts, 2007; Rose-Ackerman et al., 2011).

The concentration of presidential powers and lack of an active system of checks and balances have deepened with the advent of populist leaders in Argentina and other Latin American countries. In fact, presidential powers increased markedly during Néstor Kirchner's presidency and even more so during the two consecutive mandates of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, especially compared with their predecessors since the return to

⁹ The Constitution of 1953 rests on the liberal tradition of a government based on the plurality of actors and power of law to prevent public officials' abuse of authority. However, it explicitly confers greater powers to the country's executive over the legislative and judicial branches. Under contemporary Latin American populist governments, the president's capacity to accumulate excessive powers makes democratic processes and the rule of law obsolete in practice.

democratic rule in 1983 (Castañeda, 2006; Levitsky & Murillo, 2008; Mazzuca, 2013). In fact, the Kirchners' combined tenures have "eroded the necessary functions of a democratic state, [and] have contributed to an institutional decay that served their goal of staying in power" (Schamis, 2008, p. 76).

As an example of such political decay, note that political parties were much weaker at the beginning of Fernández's term in 2007 than in 2003, when Néstor Kirchner was inaugurated into office. In fact, as the opposition was "co-opted and fragmented on the basis of electoral deals among individuals, not on the basis of ideas or programs ... Congress [became] a mere appendage of the executive" (Schamis, 2008, p. 76; also see Spiller & Tommasi, 2007). The breach of horizontal accountability appears in the regular bypassing of institutional checks and balances that implicates prior and current administrations in joint ventures with associates "to create windows of opportunity ... and engage in corrupt activities" (Manzetti, 2014, p. 185).

Many examples demonstrate the lack of accountability and checks and balances measures during the Kirchners' regime. The cases range from overpriced public works projects awarded by the country's president in 2005 to close associates and confidants (Manzetti, 2014), to a breach of authority case involving the General Attorney (GA) of the Judicial Cabinet. In the latter case, the GA single-handedly and in violation of judicial procedures, sought to remove twenty federal careerist prosecutors and judges of long trajectories and replace them with political appointees of the GA's political predilection (Capiello, 2015). This decision allegedly sought to halt ongoing corruption investigations involving the country's highest governmental officials (Denuncian, 2015). Once again, the bureaucracy intervened, subverted, or otherwise was used for political gain of the party in power.

4.2 Vertical Accountability

The transition from military dictatorship¹⁰ to democratic government brought some changes to the relationship between government and the rule of law. Reinstating an open electoral process was no small feat after many years under a cruel military dictatorship that imparted terror, threatening the population with repression, torture and disappearances. However, electoral processes alone do not guarantee vertical government accountability. Except for isolated cases, political parties with parliamentary representation have had a dismal impact in denouncing blatant cases of corruption within the executive, Congress, and high-level cabinet positions (Manzetti, 2014). Even when members of opposing parties have denounced public officials for wrongdoing and

¹⁰ The most recent military regime in Argentina (1976–1983) was not an isolated case, but the most radical expression of a series of military disruptions throughout the twentieth century (1930–1932, 1943–1946, 1955–1958, 1962–1963, and 1966–1973).

illegal activities and have brought public attention to these cases, it has elicited no official acknowledgment or critical changes to the situation at hand, and even less to the system of checks and balances. In other words, opposition members act as isolated whistleblowers with no institutional protection or partisan support. The dismal role of opposition parties in the process of accountability and in the electoral realm reflects an “inchoate party system, high voter and party volatility, poorly defined issues and sudden policy reversals” (O’Donnell, 1999, p. 113; also see Spiller & Tommasi, 2007).

In light of these constraints, the independent media, civil associations, NGOs, and social movements cannot be underestimated. Societal controls of state powers have been extremely important in light of the weakness (and in some cases, sheer absence) of vertical and horizontal accountability. Social accountability—the controls that social and civil organizations exercise over political authorities—becomes paramount for calling into question the actions of state officials in cases ranging from social injustice to criminal cases involving elected officials and their closest circles (Smulovitz & Peruzzotti, 2000, 2003). Finally, the work of non-affiliated investigative journalists¹¹ is a reminder of the type of controls that ought to take place in a republic committed to the constitutional provisions for checks and balances. Not only have investigative journalists revealed corruption cases by denouncing public officials’ misdeeds, but they have also, in many instances, become the only credible counterbalance to political (in)action (Capiello, 2015; Denuncian, 2015; Jorge Lanata mostró, 2013; Pagni, 2015).

The deeply felt allegiance to then-President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and her call for “a new country”—spelled out by her party followers and mediated by political brokers through the initial motto “*vamos por todo*” (“we will conquer it all”) to her second mandate’s “*vamos por más*” (“we will get even more”)—brings to mind the Peronist party’s concentration and deliberate use of bureaucratic-authoritarian state power, surreptitiously proclaimed under the dictum “no one but us can and will govern” (O’Donnell, 1978).

5. Discussion

The politicized bureaucrats claim to bow to the public will while they often act in ways contrary to open deliberation and the right to dissent. When the figure of state authority

¹¹ For instance, in April 2013, investigative journalist Jorge Lanata and his team brought to light a corruption case, popularly known “The route of K-money” (“*La ruta del dinero K*”), involving the Kirchner family and a web of their close political and personal friends (Jorge Lanata mostró, 2013). The evidence presented showed proof of money laundering and public embezzlement in the hands of high-level public officials. Far from being just an exposé, and in light of official dismissal and inaction, a journalist team initiated proceedings in oversight and judicial agencies.

mediates the relationships between public administration (through all its public services) and citizenry in politicized ways, a new dynamic emerges whereby citizens perceive the bureaucracy as a political medium with propagandist aims (Pagni, 2015). In that sense, Argentina's bureaucracy is much more vulnerable to party politics than to the inherent dangers of the Weberian bureaucratic structure (i.e., an abiding allegiance to control and order, rules, and expected objectivity and neutrality in the discharge of official duties, among other aspects), which tends to dehumanize both citizen and bureaucrat (Hummel, 2008).

Far from a contrasting bureaucratic character under dictatorial and democratic regimes, this research has found more continuity than change. The bureaucracy under military rule and under democratic government in Argentina share similar levels of clientelism—the internalization of particularism dominating the larger political realm—as well as nepotism and undue influence, all of which are manifested through bureaucratic action (O'Donnell, 1988). Moreover, political accountability is deeply threatened under the periods analyzed here. This involves public administration with specific political and policy agendas of the governing regime at any cost, including subverting accountability through clientelism.

This is problematic for the profession of public administration—still in its infancy in many Latin American countries—especially when compared with more stable political and institutional arrangements. Despite efforts to reinstate the professional administrator's role of infusing government with professional standards, as well as moderate the use of official power (after a military rule deeply implicated with human rights violations), successive public administration reforms in Argentina's recent history have proven both deficient and politically inconvenient (Oszlak, 1999).

Careerist administrators suffered equally under the dictatorial military regime (1976–1983) and the most recent populist governments (2003–2015). A change in the role of public administrators *vis à vis* the political regime seems to fall under either the technical imperative (during the military government) or the politicized norm (in democratic-populist regimes). Prior to and between the two periods analyzed here, the contempt of politically elected officials toward career administrators appeared as a response to politicians' suspicion that careerists might not aid in achieving the incumbents' political goals (Oszlak, 1999)—hence the key political role of parallel bureaucracy. The displacement and virtual demise of the career administrator in lieu of the political bureaucrat, so commonplace during the most recent populist regimes in Argentina and other Latin American countries, like Venezuela, surely destabilizes public administration's commitment not only to technical expertise, but also and most importantly to democratic governance values.

Conclusion

The discussion presented here reflects on Argentina's partisan politics as deeply engrained in the day-to-day operations, lexicon, and narrative of public administration, in stark opposition to the legal, professional, and "neutral" premises of Weber's (1978) bureaucratic ideal. In Argentina, the public administration's alleged function—to administer and manage what is public—seems to boil down in practice to attaining the aims of the political party or president of the time as mediated by political brokers (Oliveros, 2016).

Both dictatorial and democratic governments depend on a well-oiled and efficient bureaucracy that tends to concentrate on the regime's political agenda. However, in Argentina the lack of continuity in upholding the rule of law has created policy that perishes at the end of every political mandate (Spiller & Tommasi, 2007). This tradition has led to a severe impediment to a continuous and reliable public bureaucracy (O'Donnell, 2007).

The military governments sought to reduce social and political issues to technical problems by depoliticizing the public and subverting dissent through bureaucratic means. The ideal or desired state of a political democracy calls for a repoliticization of the most pressing social and political issues from the bottom-up, especially after a long tradition of dictatorial regimes that tasked the machinery of the state to exclude the citizenry at large and the popular sector in particular (O'Donnell, 1978). While the most recent populist governments of Argentina have claimed to take the lead in prioritizing social and economic issues as part of a "social revolution," the socio-political reality unveils a different picture. What predominates is an orientation that depoliticizes the citizenry in a different way than during the dictatorial regime, but is equally detrimental. That is, bureaucracy becomes subservient to the ruling group while citizens stand as passive receptors of nominal social benefits, denied a real and meaningful participation in the governance process.

Marginalizing and subduing citizens through their depoliticization and deactivation during military rule, and reducing them to mere voters per clientelism during democratic-populist rule, illustrates the dark side of a politicized bureaucracy insofar as public administration remains frail and implicated in unfairness and authoritarianism.

The long clientelist tradition, coupled with weak accountability of public and political processes, have defined the character of public administration in Argentina under both dictatorial and democratic governments. The challenge ahead for the public

administration profession in Argentina and other Latin American nations resides in finding and meeting the balance between serving citizens while upholding the rule of law without falling prey to either technocracy or clientelism.

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