

A different view on the Argentine electoral reform

The recent electoral reform introduced by the government will bring about important changes to the political universe of political parties. With more than 700 organizations, the new rule makes it harder for parties to register and keep their status as such. Despite the first and evident reactions by many political groups, in particular the relatively small ones, the changes might bring about some positive aspects in the heavily fragmented political scenario. *By Hugo Passarello Luna, Director Argentina Elections*
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On December 3rd, 2009 the Senate gave the final approval to the [electoral reform](#) which adjusts several aspects of the system in Argentina but it does not dramatically alter the process. For example there is no discussion of electronic voting, or the single paper-ballot, electoral observations, the redefinition of functions of electoral bodies or the creation of a unique and autonomous, such as in México.

The law, presented only a few weeks before by President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, was first passed by the Deputies chamber after modifying 50 items, due to heavy negotiations with the opposition parties. The incredible speed, at which the bill was endorsed, was because in December 10th the newly elected representatives were taking office, after the defeat suffered by the government in the legislative elections of June 28th loosing the majority in Congress.

In this article we will briefly go through the key changes introduced by the reform, focusing in the political parties' organization, and how it might positively affect the current scenario, despite strong criticism coming from small political groups.

Political parties' organization

By far this was the matter that obliged the government's policy makers to negotiate with its colleagues in the opposition. The reform envisages critical transformations in the political parties' landscape, with its main objective being the reduction of the fragmentation of political groups: Argentina has 713 political parties, of which 34 operate at the national level. The new dispositions, a priori, negatively affect the existence of small parties, most of them lying at the left of the political spectrum, while strengthening the position of consolidated and traditional parties, like the Union Cívica Radical (UCR, centre) and the Partido Justicialista (also known as Peronist party, centre-left or centre-right, depending of the succeeding internal movement).

One of the main controversial articles, number 16, preserves and reinforces a condition from the previous law: a party must attain at least two per cent of the valid votes in two consecutive national elections to remain recognized as a political organization. Given the results of the 2007 and 2009 elections, around 89 parties would be subject to loose its status.

If applied, the party (or parties) will have to register again, going through the process of forming a political group, process which was altered with the reform, making it less viable for citizens to create their political channel. At first glance, this raises lots of criticisms, especially regarding how democratic it is to set a threshold for parties reducing the spectrum of choices for the elector.

However, a requirement of this sort might force the reordering of the political universe, reducing fragmentation. For example, the left parties could achieve more if they were to unite their efforts, overcoming their differences, most of the times minimal. If we take the 2009 elections for the Deputies Chamber, in the city of Buenos Aires, these parties obtained 6.12 per cent of the valid votes together (see Table 1 below). That would have effectively translated into a seat at the Lower Chamber. Instead, as most presented individual candidates, none obtained a seat. The Partido Autodeterminación y Libertad, who accumulated the most votes in the district, obtained two per cent, below the three per cent threshold required to enter the D'Hondt system calculations, according to present rules.

In the previous example I have not included three parties that could also be place (with reservations) in the center left side of the spectrum: Proyecto Sur, who collected an impressive 24 per cent, Diálogo por la Ciudad, with three per cent, and Iniciativa Verde por Buenos Aires, with a slim 0.45 per cent. If taken into account in the hypothetical left alliance the results would have dramatically, and evidently, changed.

Of course, their differences have made their union very difficult if not impossible. In the last election only one left front was formed, the Frente de Izquierda y los Trabajadores Anticapitalista (formed by the Movimiento al Socialismo, el Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas, y la Izquierda Socialista). Other groups did not participate even though their electoral platforms were very similar, such as the case of the MST. The difference was that the MST had supported the claim of the agricultural producers against the national government (in Argentina, some left wing parties consider large agricultural producers as the voice for conservative views).

Moreover, a wide reaching alliance has never been achieved, because of the relative laid back and lack of enforcement of the requirements to form and maintain a political party, which permits Argentina to count more than 700 parties. The new rules, approved by Congress could have a positive impact in making more evident and necessary for smaller and like minded factions to unite their efforts and set aside their differences.

A second and contentious issue brought about by the law is the obligation for all parties to demonstrate a minimum number of members, of four per thousand in each district of action. Though the threshold is modest the initial agreement in Congress was to postpone the new registering process until the end of the presidential and legislative elections of 2011, so to give enough time for this massive reordering of the political choices. The move by President Fernández de Kirchner to veto the articles, thus rendering the debate

useless, and bring forward the registering process will make it unfair for a number of new but quickly growing parties to keep up with the new system, not to mention it undermines the role of the Congress, as it is regular in Argentine history. The present time frame to complete the entire process and ensure participation in the future elections is negligible. Those reforms should have been implemented after 2011 as previously agreed. But as the executive has shown, early in 2009, by advancing the legislative elections four months for pure political convenience, there is little interest in fairly applying the rules. A basic suggestion for the well functioning of democratic processes: the electoral clock should always run independently from that of politics.

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Bio: Hugo Passarello Luna, Argentine, is a journalist specialized in politics and economics. Since 2006 he directs Argentina Elections (www.argentinaelections.com) the leading site in Argentine electoral debate. Previously he worked as a columnist in *Peru Elections* and *Left Turns?*. In 2001 he was awarded the Global Citizen Award by the University of British Columbia.

Table 1

Political Party	% of votes
Partido Obrero	0.69
Partido Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores	0.72
Partido Socialista	0.24
Jubilados en Acción	1.62
Autodeterminación y Libertad	2.04
Convergencia Socialista	0.24
Asambleas del Pueblo por el Socialismo y la Libertad	0.11
Frente de Izquierda y los Trabajadores Anticapitalista	0.31
Partido Alternativa Social	0.15
Total	6.12

Divisor D'Hondt:	110609.09
Seats	13
Threshold (%)	3
Electors	2,525,550

<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Total votes</i>	<i>% of electors</i>	<i>% of votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>
Pro	561,901	22.2%	31.7%	5
Proyecto Sur	437,557	17.3%	24.7%	3
Acuerdo Civico y Social	344,298	13.6%	19.4%	3
Frente para la Victoria	210,193	8.3%	11.9%	1
HIPOTETICA ALIANZA DE IZQUIERDA	110,609	4.4%	6.2%	1
Dialogo por la ciudad	59,281	2.3%	3.3%	0
Partido iniciativa verde	8,133	0.3%	0.5%	0
Partido Democrata Cristiano	9,760	0.4%	0.6%	0
Movimiento por la dignidad y la independencia	3,615	0.1%	0.2%	0
De la ciudad	3,253	0.1%	0.2%	0
Consenso porteno	2,711	0.1%	0.2%	0
Comunal	1,265	0.1%	0.1%	0
Coalicion independiente federal	3,615	0.1%	0.2%	0
Popular de la restauracion	2,892	0.1%	0.2%	0
Idear	1,084	0.0%	0.1%	0
Del campo popular	5,603	0.2%	0.3%	0
Encuentro federal por la unidad	1,446	0.1%	0.1%	0
Frente es posible	5,783	0.2%	0.3%	0
		0.0%	0.0%	0
		0.0%	0.0%	0
Total Votes	1,772,999	70.2%	100.0%	13