

Buying stones: Welfare spending and protests in Argentina, 2008–2019

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Abstract

Why do some governments manage to curb protest while others cannot and turmoil escalates to a social outbreak? This study proposes a theoretical argument that specifies how discretionary spending reduces conflict, highlighting the role of social movements in managing protests. It examines this and alternative arguments in Argentina, a country with strong social movements and historically large mobilizations, using statistical analysis with an original database on protests and a population of 364 national government programs between 2008 and 2019. The article makes a contribution by finding a differential effect between specific types of social spending, programmatic and discretionary, and protests. It also specifies the linkage between the main variables using qualitative evidence during two presidencies. The goal of discretionary distribution is not to win an election but to ensure governance. The article finally raises some comparative implications on the role of social movements and welfare spending in Latin America.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Why do some governments manage to curb protest while others cannot and turmoil escalates to a social outbreak? Many political analysts considered inevitable that President Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) and his Cambiemos coalition would face protests considering the large social mobilizations, and even looting, that non-Peronist governments had faced in Argentina since the return to democracy in 1983. This is a country with strong social movements, linked to the Partido Justicialista (PJ), the main opposition force to the Macri government. In addition, Macri's

Center-Right coalition carried out adjustment policies in various sectors and faced a major economic crisis. As expected, social movements took to the streets to rally against adjustment, and protests escalated during Macri's first year in office. However, his government managed to curb demonstrations, faced relatively few massive or violent protests compared to previous non-Peronist presidencies, finished his term in office, and handed over the government to another party. Although these events would seem normal in most democratic countries, they are completely extraordinary in Argentina: they have not happened since the presidency of Alvear in 1928. All the other non-Peronists governments post-1983 finished before their mandates amid social outbreaks. How did a Center-Right coalition managed to contain protests in a context of a large economic crisis and adjustment policies?

On the contrary, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's (CFK) (2007–2015) Center-Left faction of the PJ had strong links with social movements but faced increasing demonstrations from them during her terms in office, reaching a peak in 2014. Why did a PJ government face more protests than a Center-Right coalition, when most social movements are ideologically closer to the former?

In the end, both governments avoided major social outbreaks and contained turmoil on the streets. Most arguments linked to economic crises (both governments faced them), institutionalization of the party system, availability of social networks, and organizational capacity of groups (basically constant during the period) have troubles explaining these outcomes.

The main hypothesis of this study is that parties in government distribute funds to contain protests and social unrest. When vulnerable sectors of society face urgent needs, they are more likely to mobilize, protest, and eventually revolt. Social movements channel those demands and organize these sectors. When social movements get the funds they need, they are more likely to demobilize protests and contain social outbursts. Parties in government and social movements exchange funds for social peace and governability.

Although this article initially agrees with the argument connecting government welfare spending and protests (e.g., Calvo & Moscovich, 2017; Giraudy, 2007; Lodola, 2005; Weitz-Shapiro, 2006), it claims that previous works on this relationship have two main shortcomings. First, they rely on partial empirical evidence, by focusing only on some specific programs, disregarding all the rest. Second, several of these studies group different funds into a common pool of resources, failing to differentiate which one of them has the demobilizing effect on protests and how this effect works (Bonvecchi & Lodola, 2011, pp. 182–183).

The study includes a total population of 364 national government programs between 2008 and 2019, of which 27 social programs are identified as direct and urgent social aid. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time that the entire set of social welfare payments has been studied to compare government social policy in Argentina. Contrary to the expectations of the literature, we found a differential effect between specific types of spending, programmatic and discretionary, and protests. We propose a theoretical argument that specifies how discretionary spending reduces conflict, highlighting the role of social movements in managing demonstrations. This hypothesis explains why the PJ faced increasing protests when it reduced discretionary social welfare payments and decreased them when the opposite was true. It also accounts for why the Cambiemos government managed to contain social conflict increasing discretionary spending distributed through social movements.

The next section discusses the contributions and limitations of the existing literature for understanding how governments contain social turmoil. It then presents the main argument before introducing the methodology and data used. The study explores the political determinants of protests and demobilization during two governments in Argentina. We use qualitative

evidence based on secondary sources and interviews to identify the causal sequence that led to the observed results. We conducted interviews with the main leaders of social movements, government officials with power to make decisions and implement social policies, and mayors of municipalities in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. We also support some of the main claims of the previous sections using descriptive statistics as well as correlation and regression analyses. The final section presents the conclusions of the study and addresses its comparative implications.

2 | THE POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF PROTESTS AND DEMOBILIZATION

An extensive literature studies the conditions under which protests occur. According to some studies, these forms of contentious politics are more likely, particularly although not exclusively, in contexts of poor national economic performance (e.g., Kriesi, 2016; Roberts, 2006; Walton & Ragin, 1990). Although we find a negative correlation between economic growth and protests and we also underline the importance of macro-level factors in explaining their occurrence, these arguments fail to uncover the main mechanisms leading to mobilizations in democratic regimes (Su, 2015, p. 149). During the period we analyze, both presidents faced major economic crises, but they managed to contain social turmoil, while other governments in Argentina (and other countries in the region) were ousted during economic downfalls.

Another set of explanations highlight the role of political factors. For some of these works, protests are more likely to occur in party system with low levels of institutionalization and high fragmentation (Arce, 2010; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995), or during crises of representation and legitimacy (e.g., Luna, 2019; Mainwaring et al., 2006). Other studies highlight the role of political windows of opportunity, in addition to the availability of social networks and the organizational capacity of groups (e.g., della Porta & Diani, 1999; McAdam et al., 2003; Tilly, 2004; Tarrow, 2011). Despite the contributions of these studies, especially for comparing protests across cases, these variables tend to be relatively constant over time, and we find large short-term variations in protests.

Further research emphasizes the relevance of learning processes and the diffusion of ideas, ideologies, and cultural frameworks (Tilly, 2004; Tarrow, 2011, *inter alia*). Without ignoring the role of these (and many other) factors, in this paper we pay special attention to which government policies influence short-term variations in social protests.

Some studies also underscore the mobilizing effects of some policies, particularly economic liberalization (Kurtz, 2004; Wolff, 2007) or some consequences associated to them, such as poverty, inequality, and higher levels of unemployment (Bellinger & Arce, 2010, p. 690). We address the connection between a particular policy, the distribution of social welfare payments, and protests.

The literature on the politics of distribution takes protests as an independent variable. This body of studies argues that presidents distribute welfare payments as a mean to *attract* voters (Stokes & Miller, 1962), rewarding loyalists (Cox & McCubbins, 1986) or mobilizing pivotal voters (Dixit & Londregan, 1996). Presidents also allocate these funds to *punish* political challengers (Fenwick & González, 2021), or, in the context of high levels of protest and economic constraint, to *appease voters*, through clientelism and political patronage (Calvo & Murillo, 2013; Fenwick & González, 2021, p. 288). For this latter group, an increase in the distribution of social programs is the result of intensified protests (Auyero, 2002; Calvo & Moscovich, 2017;

Giraudy, 2007; Lodola, 2005; Weitz-Shapiro, 2006), stronger social organizations (Anria & Niedzwiecki, 2016; Franceschelli & Ronconi, 2009; Garay, 2007), and stronger partisan links with them, even during Center-Right governments (Niedzwiecki & Pribble, 2017). This literature makes valuable contributions, but we claim that it has two main shortcomings: first, it does not provide convincing accounts as to why protests influence the nature of the policy response—whether that demand will be fulfilled via programmatic (e.g., increasing the minimum wage) or discretionary spending (e.g., social subsidies) (Fenwick & González, 2021, p. 288). And second, although the main empirical evidence of these works is that protests correlate with a larger disbursement of payments, few works empirically demonstrate that protest effectively recede after the distribution of funds.

Another part of this research agenda claims that the number of protests is the main outcome: governments use social spending to demobilize social outbursts (Cloward & Piven, 1977; Garay, 2016; Schipani, 2019). The distribution of social welfare payments implies a negotiation with social movements and the use of their capacity to demobilize protest and avoid social outbursts.

We present a theoretical claim that contributes to this latter group and empirically test it in the analysis section. We contend that a large group of this literature suffers from what Bonvecchi and Lodola (2011, pp. 182–183) call the “incompleteness deficit”, or focusing on some specific types of transfers (in this case, social programs) and disregarding others. The main empirical evidence of several studies are specific social programs, usually the largest or those related to emergency social assistance (e.g., Calvo & Moscovich, 2017; Giraudy, 2007; Lodola, 2005; Weitz-Shapiro, 2006). This is equivalent to relying on partial empirical evidence and, even possibly, selection bias. A second limitation is the “clustering deficit,” or grouping essentially different funds into a common, undistinguishable pool of resources. As a result, some studies claim social programs demobilize protests but the discretion the party in government has over their allocation varies widely, as well as, we argue, the effects of those funds. We demonstrate that governments allocate discretionary spending when they fear social turmoil and that, in turn, reduces protests. We empirically contribute to this literature including all social welfare programs in our database and showing that there is a differential effect between them and protests: only discretionary spending is negatively correlated with them. We also theoretically collaborate with this discussion presenting the expectations connecting these two variables.

The main hypothesis of this study is that parties in government distribute discretionary funds to contain social unrest. When governments increase this type of spending protests will be more likely to recede. On the contrary, when governments reduce discretionary welfare payments, protests will be more likely to escalate.

When vulnerable sectors of society face urgent needs, they are more likely to mobilize, protest, and eventually revolt. Social movements channel those demands and organize these sectors. They control the access of poor people to discretionary social aid, especially workfare programs for unemployed and informal workers. They do not handle any of the programmatic social payments that reach the targeted population through the bureaucratic channels of the state, without their intermediation. The administration of discretionary programs is crucial for social movements to satisfy the demands of the most vulnerable and organize and represent them. If they do not get access to such programs, they use their organizational capacity to mobilize the sectors they represent against the government. Social movements have not only used this power to register people to receive workfare payments, but also to remove beneficiaries from these programs. They can appoint new beneficiaries, dismiss those who do not fulfill the programs' requirements, and, more importantly, select new ones to replace those dismissed. Politicians regularly refer

to this gatekeeper power as “*dar altas por bajas*” (i.e., enroll new beneficiaries after dismissing others). Social movements are also usually in charge of organizing the cooperatives and the jobs required by this type of programs. The state delegates on them the power to call the roll and verify if beneficiaries fulfilled their jobs or not. This gives social movements a considerable power over beneficiaries. For this reason, they have been frequently accused by part of the press and the non-Peronist political arch of using this power to force beneficiaries to participate in their protests. They have also been accused of using this power to blackmailing governments: if they do not receive the funds they request, they revolt ([Interview 1](#)). However, the other side of the coin is that social movements get funds for those in need and reach vulnerable sectors with social help. They distribute social welfare payments to quickly reach those in need according to the necessities different households have (being, for instance, food, shelter, or clothing). Social leaders help organize people and this is fundamental for channeling monetary aid from the state and managing community centers, basic health care units, and soup kitchens. They have more proximity and outreach to the most vulnerable sectors than national and subnational welfare states and more ability to channel social help quickly when economic conditions are dire.

Governments negotiate with social movements. They channel discretionary funds through them because they provide the necessary mediation to reach vulnerable sectors and prevent mass protests and social outbursts. Social movements can also negotiate with parties in government to prevent unrest by providing politicians with up-to-the-minute information on the social situation. They can address grievances, demobilize protests, and prevent possible social outbursts. Their members come from and live in the neighborhoods where they are politically active. They are in permanent contact with their neighbors and have precise knowledge of their needs and possible solutions. Personal and direct ties with local populations allow social movements to distribute specific benefits quickly.

When social movements get the funds they need, they are more likely to demobilize protests and contain social outbursts. There is a relationship of mutual dependence between social movements and governments that goes beyond clientelism and similar contentious issues (Rossi, 2017). This relationship was built not as a clientelistic exchange for votes but as a negotiation for social peace. The ultimate goal of discretionary distribution for the government is not to win an election but to ensure governance. Hence, we argue, the probability of preventing protests and social turmoil is larger when governments channel more discretionary social spending through organized social movements.

We need to underscore the importance of two contextual factors that are critical for our argument. The first one is that Argentina’s welfare state does not reach all its territories equally. O’Donnell (1997) called “brown areas” those regions with low state penetration in which a substantial part (about a third) of the population lives in conditions of socioeconomic vulnerability and depends on informal wages. The second important fact is that these vulnerable sectors living in those areas have been partially assisted by social organizations. Social movements became important actors and gained more organizational density and a larger territorial base, especially after the 2001 economic collapse and social turmoil in Argentina. Their strength consolidated during both CFK’s and Macri’s administrations, especially in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, where major social outbursts had led to the resignations of two previous presidents and social movements now had the power to uphold or destabilize the social order.¹

3 | DATA AND METHOD

The dependent variable is the number of protests each year. We follow a standard definition of protests in studies on the topic as any total or partial interruption of a public road (including highways and other public roads) during a demonstration, regardless of its duration and relevance (Giraudy, 2007; Giusto, 2020; Lodola, 2005; Weitz-Shapiro, 2006). Original data on protests are compiled from a daily survey of more than 200 national, provincial, and municipal media outlets in Argentina, printed and digital. The data are provided by Diagnóstico Político (Giusto, 2020), from January 2009 to December 2019.

The main independent variable is the share of discretionary (and programmatic) social welfare spending for the period 2008–2019, provided by the National Ministry of Economy Open Budget website.² We classified a total population of 364 national government programs and selected 27 direct and urgent social aid programs (see Table 3, Appendix). These were then classified as discretionary or programmatic.

At a theoretical level, there is an agreement that social programs are, for the most part, non-contributory income transfers to the most vulnerable social groups. However, at the empirical level there is no clear agreement among analysts and academics or unequivocal criteria in the public sector on what to include when referring to social programs.

This paper defines social programs as direct and urgent social aid.

1. They are social *aid* because they do not depend on prior contributions (as in retirement pensions and unemployment insurance) or subsequent ones (as in pension credits or moratoria).³
2. They are *direct* because they are directed at an individual recipient (even if they are transferred through a social institution or cooperative).
3. They are *urgent* because they are destined to people in socially vulnerable situations (those who receive this aid have informal salaries or do not earn the minimum wage).

The 27 direct and urgent social aid programs are divided into programmatic and discretionary, according to three criteria of discretionality: scope, distribution, and the obligations they impose (Zarazaga, 2014).⁴

Social programs are “programmatic” when their benefits are made available to the entire target population (their scope is general), there are no intermediaries in their distribution and, in addition, eligibility requirements are checked automatically by professional bureaucrats (usually education and health workers). With these programs there is little room for political manipulation. On the contrary, social programs are “discretionary” when only part of the target population has access to them (their scope is restrictive), when there are intermediaries (who may be individuals or groups), or when eligibility requirements are not checked automatically and are at the discretion of some agent (e.g., a so-called “*jefa o jefe de cuadrilla*” or “squad leader”) (See Table 1).

Based on the above criteria, the Universal Child Allowance (Asignación Universal por Hijo, AUH), for example, is programmatic and the Working Social Income Program (the PRIST, generally known as Argentina Trabaja) is discretionary⁵ (see Table 3, Appendix).

We classified social programs as programmatic and discretionary, and analyzed changes in the amounts and percentages of each type over time. The first group includes 11 social programs, such as non-contributory pensions, family allowances, and supplements to social security benefits. The second group comprises 16 social programs, including employment and social economy programs and community projects.

TABLE 1 Criteria for classifying programs

	Programmatic	Discretionary
Scope	General (accessible to the entire target population)	Restrictive (accessible to only part of the target population)
Distribution	No intermediaries	Through intermediaries
Obligations	Checked by professional bureaucrats	Checked by external agents

Source: Based on Zarazaga (2014).

4 | THE POLITICAL DETERMINANTS OF PROTESTS AND DEMOBILIZATION DURING TWO GOVERNMENTS IN ARGENTINA

This section explores some of the reasons why protests varied depending on the spending decisions of two different governments. We use qualitative evidence based on secondary sources and interviews to show that protests declined when governments, out of fear of a social turmoil, increased the allocation of discretionary spending through social movements. On the contrary, protests increased when governments reduced it.

Previous research claims that CFK's government used discretionary social spending as rewards and punishments depending on whether the movements were inside or outside the government coalition (Zarazaga, 2015). However, the political use of these programs is also, arguably, linked to the need to reach the most vulnerable sectors and contain social conflict.

After electoral defeat in the 2009 legislative elections and in the context of a deteriorating economy (GDP fell almost six percent this year), the government implemented important changes in social policies and in its relations with social movements. But these changes were not only a response to the elections but also a reaction to over a year of political instability and fear of a possible social outbreak.

Despite the economic recovery from 2003 to 2007, social indicators deteriorated sharply. Official data from the National Institute for Statistics and Census (INDEC) differed substantially from the one from private sources, such as the Social Debt Observatory (UCA), but both showed that unemployment began to increase between 2008 and the first quarter of 2009. Due to this situation, "the debate on poverty, unemployment, and informality reached the public and state agenda with almost the same intensity than in the years after the 2001 crisis" (Arcidiácono et al., 2014, p. 344).

The social situation also worsened because the most important conditional cash transfers at that time (*Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* and *Familias por la Inclusión Social* programs) showed a decreasing number of beneficiaries during the period. Registration was closed and the amount of transfers was not updated over the years, which progressively decreased the purchasing power of its beneficiaries due to inflation (Arcidiácono et al., 2014).

In a context of a deteriorating economy and social indicators, protests began to climb. In fact, 2008 was a very conflictive year for CFK. After the international economic crisis of 2008, which had an impact on investment in the region, the government needed fresh funds and proposed to increase taxes to the agricultural sector. This led to a severe conflict with farm producers. Several social sectors joined them and started 4 months of strikes, roadblocks, and mobilizations in cities across the country. The government coalition broke down when the vice-president, Julio Cobos, voted in the Senate against the president's bill to increase taxes for farmers. Later, he justified distancing himself with the president by saying that "social peace was being altered" (Clarín, 2018).

Fearing a social outburst similar to the one in 2001, the government launched the PRIST and the AUH in August and October 2009, respectively. These two major programs would be central to the government strategy to regain electoral support and to control social conflict. The AUH, as a programmatic policy, helped the former, while the PRIST, as a discretionary and targeted program, helped the latter.

The government conceived AUH as an extension of the programmatic social policy and not as a discretionary social program. It made access available to the entire target population and entrusted implementation to the National Social Security Administration (ANSES). In this way, it ensured that AUH would adopt implementation systems closer to those of family allowances for formal wage earners than to those of conditional transfer programs made on a discretionary basis. In this regard, a broker (*puntero*) from the Buenos Aires metropolitan area said: “The allowance is a different program; it does not give us any room for pork barrel Peronism even if we want to. There is universality about it... people accept that they are entitled to it.” Another said: “I get nothing out of the allowance. I go with a person to do the paperwork and they know they don't need me. If they're told when they go there that it's a right, what do I get out of it? Nothing at all. It's a waste of time” (Interviews quoted in Zarazaga, 2015).

The creation of AUH in 2009 was the most important increase in urgent social aid during this government, causing Family Allowances to increase from 985 million in 2008 to 10.3 billion in 2015, an increase of more than 1000%. As a result, CFK's government increased the real value of programmatic transfers from 8 billion in 2008 to 31.9 billion in 2015 (See Figure 1). The increase in real terms was almost 400%. As a percentage of total social aid, the CFK government increased programmatic transfers from 64 to 89% of total social spending (an increase of 25 percentage points) (See Figure 2).

One year after its implementation, the AUH already had more than 3,500,000 children and adolescent beneficiaries. Undoubtedly, it meant an improvement in income and a reduction in poverty (González & Santos, 2020).

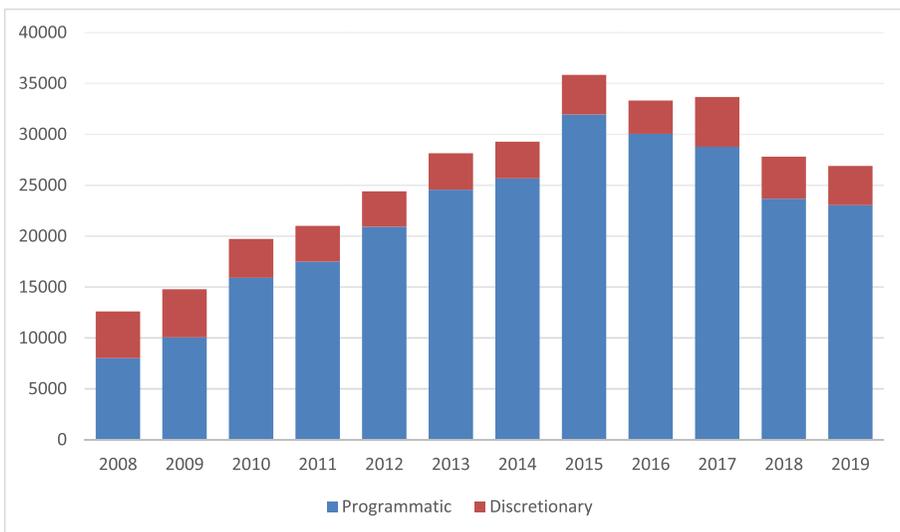


FIGURE 1 Programmatic and discretionary spending (real values, in millions of 2008 pesos). Source: Own elaboration based on data from the National Ministry of Economy

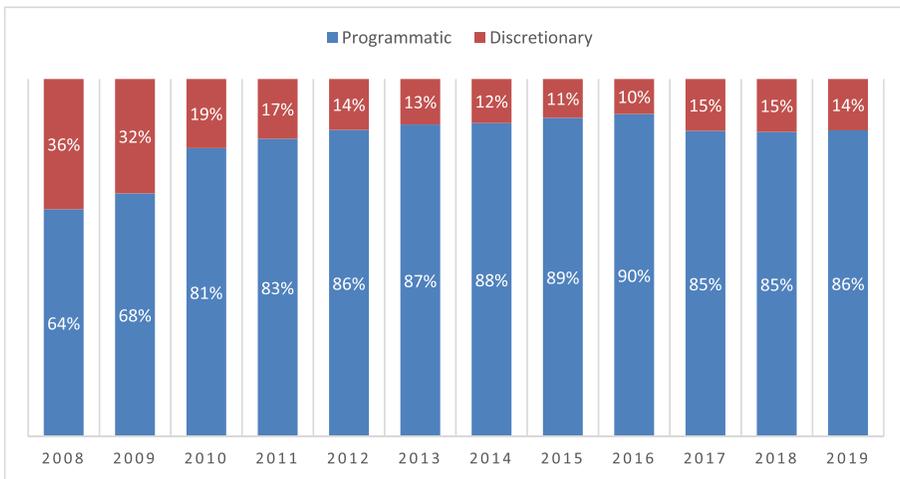


FIGURE 2 Programmatic and discretionary spending (% of total, 2008–2019). *Source:* Own elaboration based on data from the National Ministry of Economy

Unlike the AUH, the PRIST was designed to reach the most vulnerable sectors in the context of the economic deterioration produced by the international financial crisis of 2008 and to contain social conflicts (Zarazaga, 2015). Concerned about the economic slowdown, some social movements began to exert pressure through institutional channels and from within the government coalition. They demanded social measures to protect workers from layoffs, and family allowances for unemployed and informal workers (Garay, 2020, p. 78).

The PRIST was a discretionary program that by institutional design could be allocated to cooperatives run by either municipalities or social movements. It allowed resources to be redistributed to the organizations' cadres on the ground. According to Hudson (2018, 630), the government “believed that these types of programs to promote self-management and cooperativism were of vital political importance. They were considered strategic programs to avoid social protests and confrontations in a recessive scenario.” The data show that CFK’s strategy worked⁶: in 2010, after the creation of PRIST, social protest decreased by 30% compared to 2009 (Giusto, 2020, p. 2; See Figure 3). “Today the state, instead of the police, it sends us the Ministry of Labor or Social Development. We understood that this is a new scenario (...) (b)ecause the Argentine people built an encompassing program of resistance through the piqueteros movements, peasant women’s movements, recovered industries, barter clubs (...). They (the government) no longer penalize us, they did not prosecute us, they did not persecute us. This is what allowed us to move forward in another way” (Interview quoted in Hudson, 2018, p. 626).

In 2015, Macri got elected to office after defeating CFK’s presidential candidate, Daniel Scioli. In line with the campaign promises, the Macri government reduced discretionary spending in real values from 3.9 billion in 2015 (during the CFK government) to 3.3 billion in 2016, the first year in office (See Figure 1). This year had the lowest value of discretionary spending for all the period we analyze.

On top of reducing discretionary spending, Macri also changed conditionalities in the most important discretionary social program, the PRIST. The main goal was to take power away from social movements by reducing the discretion in the distribution of the programs, mainly the movements’ authority to register new beneficiaries in the PRIST. The reforms sought to change compliance with work obligations for compliance with training and education requirements. A

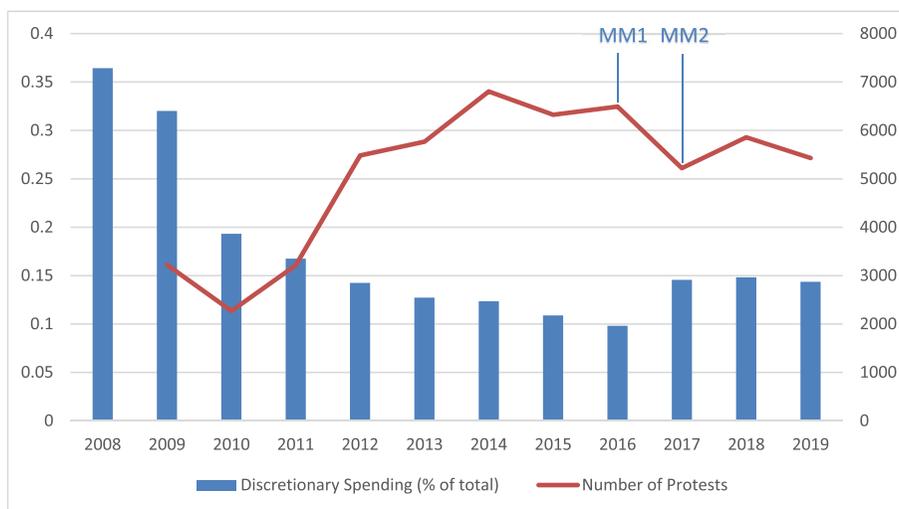


FIGURE 3 Discretionary spending (% of total) and number of protests. *Source:* Own elaboration based on data from the National Ministry of Economy and Giusto (2020)

high-ranking political appointee in the Ministry of Social Development said 2 days before taking office, “I want Argentina Trabaja to work differently. I don’t want to dismantle it, but I don’t want to see people forced to attend political rallies with the threat of being kicked off the program for not working if they don’t. If we ask for training, social movements cannot say that we are hurting the poor because we are giving them tools. We are making a leap forward” (Interview 2). According to the Minister of Social Development, Carolina Stanley, “it is important to separate social policies from party politics. Social policy cannot be used to put pressure on people” (Interview 3).

Some social movements’ leaders, such as Emilio Pérsico of Movimiento Evita and Juan Grabois of the Excluded Workers Movement (MTE) openly opposed these reforms and organized massive protests against them. Pérsico said, “they are not telling the truth. They know that our 70-year-old grandfather is not going to study. He can’t. They just want to weaken us” (Interview 4).

These reforms had been proposed since the beginning of Macri’s administration. However, before they could be achieved, the economy fell 2% in 2016 and the social conditions of vast sectors of the population deteriorated, without the state being capable of assisting them. In this context, the number of protests increased: from 6323 protests in 2015 to 6491 in 2016. Beyond the marginal increase in protests, one particular demonstration, the Federal March that took place between August 31 and September 2, 2016, was a turning point. This protest mobilized not only the most important social movements from across the country, but it was also supported by the largest national unions (even some of those who were keener to negotiate with the Macri government) and vast sectors of the population. About 200,000 demonstrators blocked the center of the city of Buenos Aires for three days (Rivas Molina, 2016).

The government feared an uncontrollable increase in protests and social unrest. The two radical governments of Raúl Alfonsín and Fernando de la Rúa had ended their terms in office ahead of time during social outbursts and in a recessive scenario accompanied by huge budget cuts, including in social aid (Cao & Vaca, 2018, p. 23). Given this experience, Macri’s government was marked by a strong concern for maintaining governability and social peace. There was agreement in the cabinet that social movements had considerable mobilization power on protests, acquired over more than 2 decades of struggle, and that they were a possible source of government

instability. One sector sought to repress protest and another to contain the social movements to guarantee law and order. This tension was expressed in two different ways of relating to social movements. One wing, represented by the Minister Stanley, recognized the territorial outreach and community role of the movements and, therefore, sought to negotiate and conciliate with them. The other, a hard-line wing, in the hands of Security Minister, Patricia Bullrich, stressed the importance of reestablishing order even at the cost of repression. In fact, she was accused of “judicializing” protest and using excessive force to suppress it on several occasions, especially at the beginning of the Cambiemos administration (Rosemberg, 2016).

In the end, the government realized repression had high costs, as social movements mobilized large sectors of the population, and began to fear a social turmoil. As a result, Macri decided to sit the social movements at the table and negotiate with them (Gamallo, 2017, p. 33; Sued, 2016). Social movements could have insisted in a more radical stance and escalate conflict. In fact, some of them (on the more radical Left) followed that path. But the largest preferred to negotiate and access discretionary social funds to reach their supporters. The government agreed to extend the societal emergency for 3 years and increased resources transferred to social movements. Between 2016 and 2017, PRIST was augmented by 37.5% in real terms (it increased from 1.69 billion in 2015, the last year of CFK’s government, to 1.76 billion in 2016 and 2.42 billion in 2017) (see Table 3, Appendix).

On top of that, and in a dramatic U turn from its campaign promises, it also created the People’s Economic Council and Complementary Social Wage, made up of members of the national government and three representatives of the social movements. By creating this council, the government institutionalized a negotiation mechanism for distributing discretionary funds through social movements. In addition, it created the National Registry of the Popular Economy, through which social movements assembled lists of workers eligible for the Supplementary Social Wage (*Salario Social Complementario, SSC*) (Gamallo, 2017, p. 11).

The SSC was implemented in early 2017 before the government succeeded in transforming the PRIST into the *Hacemos Futuro* (“Making Our Future”) program in early 2018. Eventually, this change was not so radical: although compliance with training and education became mandatory, the government accepted that social movements were the ones responsible for certifying these requirements. A senior official of the Ministry of Social Development acknowledged in an interview near the end of Macri’s government, “for me it is frustrating because we changed the eligibility criteria for Argentina Trabaja to training to avoid discretion, but we gave them (the social movements) the Complementary Social Wage. We gave with one hand and took away with the other. A useless effort” (Interview 5).

With these changes, social movements gained access to fresh discretionary social funds. The SSC increased 258% in real terms between 2017 and 2019 (from 585 million to 1.5 billion). This program accounted for 12% of discretionary spending in 2017 and increased to 40% in 2019 (see Table 3, Appendix). The power to select the beneficiaries of this program remained in the hands of social movements. CFK denounced this in 2019: “It is important to have the correct information because, for example, I left the government with 207,000 social programs. Today, there are almost half a million. Many more than during my government of *choriplaneros*” (scroungers) (La Capital, 2019).

If we analyze all discretionary spending, Macri spent 3.3 billion pesos (in real terms) during his first year in office and finished his mandate with 3.9 billion in the last one; an 18% increase during the period. Between 2015 (CFK’s last year in office) and 2017, the year of the largest boost in discretionary spending, the increase was almost 26%. The increase in discretionary spending coincided with a decrease in programmatic transfers: they were cut from 30 billion in 2016 (the

drop during Macri's first year in office was almost 7%) to 23 billion in 2019; a 30% decrease for 4 years (see Figure 1). As a percentage of total social aid, Macri's government reduced programmatic transfers by 5-percentage points (from 90% of total social aid in 2016 to 85% in 2018) and increased discretionary ones by an equivalent percentage: from 10% of the total in 2016 to 15% in 2018 (see Figure 2).

Since the creation of the SSC, social movements, particularly those in favor of dialog, consolidated their position as the main negotiators and, therefore, the main recipients of these policies (López, 2019). In Stanley's words, "now the extremists tell us that we gave away too much but the objective of preserving social peace was not obvious and we achieved it because of the work we did. I fulfilled the mandate I received. We maintained social peace" (Interview 6).

The government recognized the community role of social movements even at the expense of its mayors in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.⁷ A pro-government mayor in one of these districts stated: "We, the mayors, were not given funds. Can you believe that I did not get a single Complementary Social Wage? Not even for a single neighbor of [his municipality]. [Opposition mayors] got more! People come to ask me for help, and I have nothing to give them, do you understand? It's crazy. What's more, they also gave [money] to [Movimiento] Evita... The municipality was responsible for cooperatives in the district and these guys took a cooperative from us and gave it to the Evita. The reality is that we didn't work well with the National Ministry of Social Development. Things were a bit better with the Provincial Government" (Interview 7).

The expansion of discretionary programs during the Macri administration can hardly be explained in terms of electoral objectives. In their vast majority, the social movements that received programs were Peronist or Kirchnerist, as were their beneficiaries (Zarazaga, 2019, p. 24).⁸ It does not seem logical, then, that the leaders of Cambiemos would have expected to obtain a significant number of votes from these sectors.

By pushing for the declaration of a food emergency, social movements also managed to reinforce the allocation of discretionary funds for soup kitchens (López, 2019). During Macri's government, the allocations of the National Food Security Program increased by 282% in real values, going from 180 million pesos in 2016 to 508 million in 2019. The province of Buenos Aires together with the Federal Capital absorbed 82% of spending in this area. However, the leader of Barrios de Pie, Daniel Menéndez pointed out: "of course, food assistance has increased, both from the Ministry of Social Development and from municipalities; but that is not enough because in soup kitchens where you used to have 30 people, you now have a hundred" (Rosso, 2018).

For Gildo Onorato, Movimiento Evita's Secretary of Social Policies, the government could not ignore social movements because "neighborhood organizations, clubs, churches (Catholic and other denominations), and social movements" formed a "community network of food policies, early childhood care, and other forms of assistance that are quite outside the state orbit" (Rosso, 2018). These networks meant that the most vulnerable social sectors were "more organized and contained than before the social crisis of 2001" (Rosso, 2018). Gamallo (2017, pp. 44–45) argues that, in addition to containing unrest, the creation of the People's Economic Council provided "better institutional links" between the government and social movements.⁹ Daniel Menéndez recognized that social movements were seen as "the dike restraining the very poor" (La Nación, 2016). Juan Grabois acknowledged that the only merchandize they had to sell was "social peace" (Natanson, 2018).

In line with our theoretical expectations, a five-percentage point increase in discretionary spending during the Macri administration (after the creation of the SSC and the virtual abandoning of the new eligibility criteria for the Argentina Trabaja program) led to a 16% drop in protests (see Figure 3). On the contrary, during CFK's government, discretionary spending

dropped 25-percentage points between 2010 and 2015 (after the creation of AUH). Her government decreased discretionary social spending from 36% of the total spending in 2008 to 11% in 2015 (See Figure 2). CFK began her government with a total discretionary spending of 4.6 billion real pesos (base year 2008) and finished it with 3.9 billion, a 15% drop during the period (See Figure 1). This decrease in discretionary spending led to a 300% increase in the number of protests during this period. The correlation between discretionary social spending (as a percentage of total spending) and the number of protests is -0.73 ($p = 0.01$), indicating that conflict increases as this type of spending decreases. On the other hand, this dramatic increase in protests correlates positively with programmatic spending (which rose 25% during the period).

This negative correlation between discretionary spending and protests supports our theoretical expectation that increasing this type of spending leads to fewer social mobilizations. At the same time, it is contrary to the other argument in which protests are a cause of larger spending. This latter claim requires a positive correlation between the variables. Decreasing discretionary spending can explain (partially, together with other factors) an escalation in protests, as we showed during the CFK government. We also showed that conflict decreased after the creation of discretionary programs and an increase in this type of spending, such as during the Macri government when it started distributing the SSC.

The literature that argues that protests increase social spending analyzes specific social programs (usually the largest or those related to emergency social assistance, e.g., Lodola, 2005; Giraudy, 2007; Weitz-Shapiro, 2006; Calvo & Moscovich, 2017), without separating discretionary from programmatic. As expected in this literature, we found that there is a positive correlation between total social spending and protests (0.82). Also, there is a positive correlation between programmatic social spending (as a percentage of total spending) and protests (0.73) (or total programmatic spending and protests: 0.83). However, we not only separate discretionary from programmatic spending, but we also include all social programs in our classification and analysis. As we indicated, and contrary to the expectations of the abovementioned literature, the correlation between discretionary spending and protests is negative. The CFK government decreased discretionary spending (and expanded programmatic spending) and protest rose. Macri, first reduced discretionary spending and protests rose (See MM1 in Figure 3). Then, fearing a social outburst, he increased it and protest dropped (See MM2 in Figure 3). And finally, he stabilized this type of spending and protests remained relatively constant.

We run a simple OLS regression model to check these results. The dependent variable is the number of protests each year (we use the natural logarithm to normalize the data). The main independent variable is the share of discretionary spending. We use share of total spending because this variable includes how much money is allocated to discretionary and programmatic social aid. Following the literature on the topic, we included into the model some structural control variables, such as economic growth, inequality, population, and urban share of the population,¹⁰ as well as some political control variables, such as presidential popularity,¹¹ partisan fragmentation,¹² and ideology of the party in government (see Table 4, Appendix, for a description of the variables, their sources, and years covered). The number of cases is very low, so conclusions should be taken with caution. Despite this, results are robust: on average, and controlling for third variables, when discretionary spending increases by one percent, protests decrease by more than four percent ($p = 0.017$) (See Table 2 and Figure 4). If we use programmatic spending as the main independent variable, protest increase instead of diminishing, in an equivalent amount.

Among political control variables, results indicate that Leftist governments (CFK) have faced more protests than Center-Right ones (Macri). Presidential popularity and partisan fragmentation appear to be unrelated to the outcome. In relation to structural variables, protests decrease

TABLE 2 OLS regression results

Variables/model	Model 1
Discretionary spending (%)	-4.398149** (0.5742813)
Leftist government	0.2317611** (0.0574917)
Presidential popularity	0.0764236 (0.0410224)
Partisan fragmentation	0.0628594 (0.0390978)
Economic growth	-0.0324295** (0.0039319)
Inequality	-0.1139433** (0.0127107)
Population	-5.24e-07** (8.88e-08)
Urban population	1.982532** (0.2663034)
Constant	-142.76** (20.01114)
R-squared	0.9966
Number of cases	11

Note: The dependent variable is number of protests (LN). Standard Errors in parenthesis.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, (two tail test).

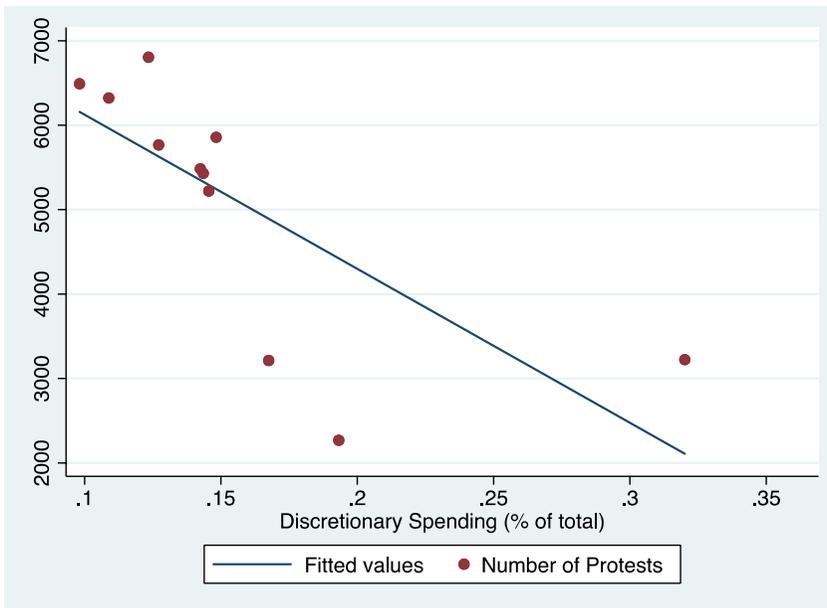


FIGURE 4 Scatterplot between discretionary spending (% of total) and number of protests

when there is more economic growth and larger inequality, while urban population is positively related to the outcome.

The R-squared is very high. If we run the model with the main independent variable only, its value is 0.43, indicating that this variable has a quite important explanatory power. We also run some post-estimation tests. The Breusch-Pagan/Cook-Weisberg test confirms that we cannot reject the null hypothesis indicating that there is constant variance in the error term. We also run a Prais-Winsten AR(1) regression to control for autocorrelation. The key independent variable is even more robust than in the main model and remains correctly signed and statistically

significant (although some control variables lost statistical significance). As indicated before, the low number of cases can also contribute to these values and future studies may double-check these results using longer time series and, if possible, more cases.

5 | COMPARATIVE IMPLICATIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

Why do social conflict escalate during some periods and decrease in others? Although several factors account for variations in protests (such as periods of economic crisis and adjustment policies), this paper shows that government spending decisions also affect them. Previous studies use partial evidence to show that social spending reduce protests. We collected data on all social programs in Argentina and show that only discretionary social aid, and not programmatic spending, is negatively correlated with protests.

We argue that governments channel discretionary funds through social movements because they provide the necessary mediation to reach vulnerable sectors. Social movements distribute aid to quickly reach those sectors in need, according to the necessities households have. They cannot distribute programmatic funds because this type of social aid reaches every person in a target population automatically, without intermediaries.

If governments do not allocate social aid through social movements, the latter could use their organizational capacity to mobilize the sectors they represent and protest. When governments distribute the funds social movements demand, they are more likely to target the specific needs of vulnerable sectors. These citizens may also feel the government listens to their demands. As a result, social movements can demobilize protests and contain social outbursts. Parties in government and social movements exchange discretionary funds for social peace and governability.

In sum, governments may contain social outbursts when they can rely on social movements capable of reaching the most vulnerable sectors of society and when they recognize the community role of these organizations and channel discretionary funds through them. The generalizability of this argument is conditional on the strength of social movements and the (legal) capacity of governments to actually deliver discretionary social aid.

Many researchers and analysts are concerned about both the increase of social outbursts in Latin America (and beyond) and the surge in discretionary spending in some countries, such as Argentina. Is the effect of discretionary spending in Argentina similar in other countries or across subnational units? Can this classification between programmatic and discretionary programs be used to explore other socioeconomic or political effects? Others worry about the pressures social movements can inflict on formal institutions and how they can undermine governability. Under what conditions do social movements facilitate or are an obstacle to governance? Which social organizations are more willing to negotiate with the federal government and which ones are more prone to conflict with it? Which level of government (federal, provincial, or local) is more or less likely to engage in negotiations? When are these actors more inclined to clash with each other? When do conflicts escalate and lead to a social upheaval?

This paper presents a discussion on the role discretionary funds have both in reaching vulnerable sectors and to curb social unrest. This has notable implications for countries where economic crises, popular discontent, and violent protests are on the rise, and the welfare state is unable to assist the most vulnerable sectors of society.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to report with regard to this research.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Researchgate at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Lucas-Gonzalez-4>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: - Presupuesto Abierto, Ministerio de Economía, Argentina. <https://www.presupuestoabierto.gob.ar/sici/>.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Buenos Aires metropolitan area concentrates most of the population and the largest share of protests of the country, but this is also a phenomenon present in many other regions of the country (Auyero, 2002, Lodola, 2005, inter alia).

² <https://www.presupuestoabierto.gob.ar/sici/>

³ The focus is on current transfers to the private sector (accrued). We excluded transfers to other national public sector agencies and institutions.

⁴ These criteria are straightforward to identify using official information (e.g., laws or decrees) making our coding transparent and replicable.

⁵ AUH is a monthly non-remunerative monetary benefit for children under 18 years of age whose parents are unemployed or work in the informal economy for a salary lower than the minimum wage (Decree 1602/2009). PRIST is aimed at creating jobs, training, and promoting cooperative organization through the implementation of local infrastructure works (Zarazaga, 2015).

⁶ The economy also improved and the conflict with farmers receded in 2010.

⁷ Governors and mayors had a key role in the politics of discretionary distribution, as previous research shows (Benton, 2008; Bonvecchi & Lodola, 2011; Fenwick & González, 2021). CFK tried to politically control governor Scioli by building up political alliances with mayors. Macri cut-out the discretion of mayors and return it to the social movements because this was less politically risky for a non-PJ president. We thank an anonymous Governance reviewer for this comment.

⁸ According to Zarazaga (2019: 24), in 2017, “67.8% of those who receive social programs vote for the FPV [Mrs. Kirchner’s Victory Front]/PJ, as compared to 45.4% of those who receive no social program.”

⁹ Perelmiter (2016) called this the emergence of a “plebeian bureaucracy,” a buffer and bargaining agent when it comes to mass rallying.

¹⁰ We also included other socioeconomic variables, such as unemployment and inflation. Economic growth, unemployment, and inflation are highly correlated, so we could not include them in a single model. We run separate models with each of the variables and the rest of the controls, and results remain very similar: the coefficient of the main independent variable is robust, correctly signed, and statistically significant in all models.

Economic growth is the only socioeconomic variable clearly associated to (fewer) protests, so we kept this variable for the main model. Socioeconomic data was retrieved from INDEC. <https://www.indec.gob.ar>

¹¹ Data from the Confidence in Government Index. <https://www.utdt.edu/icg>

¹² Measured using the effective number of parties, provided by Carlos Varetto. Data from DINE: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/interior/dine>

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