

RODRIGO ZARAZAGA

# POVERTY SHAPING POLITICS

Machine Parties and their  
Unexpected Challengers



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Drawing on substantial original interviews and fieldwork data from Argentina's marginalized urban areas, *Poverty Shaping Politics* reveals how the spatial segregation of slums and vulnerable neighborhoods compels the poor to seek out local political brokers to access resources, while politicians depend on these brokers to navigate poor areas and garner political support. Rodrigo Zarazaga uniquely demonstrates that the establishment of broker networks is driven more by the conditions of segregated poverty and vulnerability than by the inherent capabilities of "machine-like" parties. Using the case of Cambiemos challenging Peronism in poor districts, Zarazaga provides the first account of a party building broker networks to contest a dominant machine party. While existing literature suggests that sustained economic development can weaken machine parties, this book shows that entrenched and widespread poverty can also threaten their hegemony.

Rodrigo Zarazaga is a full-time professor and senior researcher at the Instituto Universitario CIAS and at the National Council for Science and Technology from Argentina (CONICET). He is a Jesuit priest, and his research has been published in journals such as *Latin American Politics and Society*, *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *World Development*, *Journal of Democracy*, and *Governance*.



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*In memory of my parents,  
“El Lolo” and “La Agüeia.”*



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## PART I

### DISCUSSING MACHINE PARTIES' POWER





# I

## Introduction

### I.1 THE LOYAL PARROT AND THE SWING BROKER

I was sitting on a cramped home patio in one of the countless slums that ring Buenos Aires. I was waiting for the resident with whom I had arranged an interview that afternoon when I heard a strange and somewhat unnerving sound coming from the interior of the house. Though throaty and rasping, the tune was unmistakable: It was the anthem of the Peronist Party (or Partido Justicialista, PJ).<sup>1</sup> Curious as to the source of the melody, I peered over my shoulder into the home and, to my surprise, discovered that the anthem was being sung by the homeowner's caged pet parrot. A few minutes later, as I was regaled by several more renditions of the Peronist anthem, the *puntero* – a long-tenured neighborhood political broker – made his appearance.<sup>2</sup> He only half-jokingly explained to me, as he pointed to the winged crooner with his arms colorfully tattooed with Peronist symbols, “my parrot is as Peronist as I am!” Like many *punteros*, or *referentes*, he is absorbed in the local politics

<sup>1</sup> The PJ, founded by President Juan Domingo Perón in 1946, is considered to be both a labor and a machine party, given its populist origins and consistent support from organized labor and popular sectors. Being created and led by a personalistic leader, it has never institutionalized a clear internal organization. In every free election since its foundation, the PJ has enjoyed a clear hegemony among the poor.

<sup>2</sup> The literature on clientelism generally uses the word *broker* to refer to intermediaries that mediate between political bosses and the poor. However, in Argentina these mediators refer to themselves as *referentes* and usually use the word *puntero* to refer to their brokerage competitors in a pejorative manner, as this term is associated to clientelism. Very few introduced themselves as *punteros*. I use all terms – *broker*, *puntero*, and *referente* – interchangeably. In quotations I respect the term used by the interviewee.

of the slum where he lives in the Conurbano Bonaerense (or simply the Conurbano), an urban area which comprises the thirty-three mainly poor municipalities surrounding the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>3</sup>

After a few hours of talking about the dire social and economic situation facing the neighborhood and boasting how he navigates services on behalf of his poor neighbors, the *puntero* offered to walk me out of the slum as it was getting dark. As we approached the bus stop, to my great surprise, this long-standing Peronist broker turned toward me and whispered, almost with a tone of confession, that he would be working for the center-right coalition Cambiemos, the opposition of the Peronists, in the upcoming elections.

As I began the long bus ride back to my residence, my mind was racing. How could this be? What forces could be at work that were powerful enough to cause this famed Peronist broker to switch sides? It was amazing that his parrot kept loyally singing the Peronist anthem while his owner had actually changed his tune. It did not make sense.

On the one hand, the “supply side,” my surprise stemmed from the fact that this broker had lived and worked his political magic in the same neighborhood slum for over forty years, successfully procuring trades between his neighbors’ needs and local political bosses. The politicians for whom he had worked over the years came and went, but one thing never changed: All of them were Peronists. I considered him to be the quintessential *puntero*, and whenever I thought of a Peronist broker, his image was the first to come to mind. His Peronist identity and party loyalty were never in question. His wife was a loyal Peronist; his children were Peronists; even his parrot was a Peronist! So, it was unimaginable for me that he would be willing to work for a center-right coalition such as Cambiemos.

On the other hand, the “demand side,” scholars have studied clientelism extensively in Argentina and their many studies have long established the Peronist machine’s dominance over the networks of political brokers (Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003; Calvo and Murillo 2004; Stokes 2005; Zarazaga 2014). This is particularly evident in urban municipalities such as the one I had just visited, which have consistently been governed by Peronist mayors. Consequently, it was highly unexpected that a non-Peronist mayoral candidate, particularly one from the anti-populist

<sup>3</sup> UN-Habitat (2016, 57) defines a slum as “a contiguous settlement that lacks one or more of the following five conditions: access to clean water, access to improved sanitation, sufficient living area that is not overcrowded, durable housing, and secure tenure.”

coalition Cambiemos, would attempt to build a network of brokers to challenge the hegemonic Peronist machine in a poor municipality. Furthermore, the Cambiemos leader and at the time presidential candidate, Mauricio Macri, had vowed to combat clientelism and announced a reform to end discretionary social welfare payments in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Macri stated in his party program that there can be “no equality of opportunity, liberty, or dignity if individuals must exchange their vote for a food parcel, a workfare program or zinc slabs to cover their roofs.”<sup>5</sup> He argued vehemently for “institutional mechanisms to avoid the discretionary use of programs.”<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of Cambiemos and its recruitment of Peronist brokers in poor municipalities came as a surprise, as these areas were considered off-limits for non-Peronist networks. In developing countries, politicians build territorial networks to deploy all sorts of political strategies or policy proposals to attract support among voters living in vulnerable segregated neighborhoods. These citizens often cannot gain access to state services or enjoy the protection of their rights. At the same time, for their part, government agencies and bureaucracy often struggle to reach the citizens living in these areas and to respond effectively to their needs. As a result, politicians turn to brokers to gain access to these populations, both to provide needed services and to win their political support. Mayoral candidates, regardless of their political affiliation, strive to build networks of brokers for both campaign purposes and governance.

This book aims to explore why and how parties establish networks of brokers in vulnerable segregated areas and how they are able to recruit previously unavailable brokers to compete with a hegemonic machine party.<sup>7</sup> By doing so, the book aims to fill a void in the scholarly literature by deepening our understanding of how parties can build networks of brokers from scratch in poverty-stricken areas and of the conditions that make brokers available to be hired by different parties.

It has been previously argued that the development of networks of brokers was an exclusive characteristic of machine parties such as the PJ or Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Auyero 2000; Levitsky

<sup>4</sup> Mauricio Macri was president of Propuesta Republicana (PRO), a party that formed the center-right coalition Cambiemos in 2015 together with the Radical Party (or Unión Cívica Radical, UCR) and the Coalición Cívica (CC).

<sup>5</sup> The PRO electoral platform for the 2011 city of Buenos Aires elections.

<sup>6</sup> Cambiemos’ electoral platform for the 2015 national elections.

<sup>7</sup> Machine party is a type of party characterized by a centralized, hierarchical structure and the ability to maintain substantial control over political processes, often through networks of brokers and clientelism (Key 1984, 389).

2003; Greene 2007). It was considered that a party's "genetic traits" shape this linkage with the poor (Shefter 1977; Palmer-Rubin 2022). However, upon closer examination it appears that the set of political demands emanating from urban neighborhoods with significant pockets of poverty possess a greater power to influence party strategies – whether traditionally considered machine parties or not – than previously appreciated. If a party aspires to govern in these areas, it has strong incentives to develop such networks – especially because, as shown in this book, brokers, rather than the parties themselves, personally possess the assets and skills necessary to establish relationships with the poor. This book shows that a challenger to a hegemonic machine party can build its own network from scratch by switching to its side brokers previously working for the machine party. They can also complement this network by politically activating community leaders without previous partisan commitment. Two important goals of this book are to examine how political parties competing for power in vulnerable neighborhoods recruit brokers to develop winning *territorial network strategies* and under which conditions brokers switch sides. In other words, the book explores why our broker's parrot now sings the Peronist anthem alone.

## 1.2 THE ARGUMENT

How do challenger parties emerge that can credibly compete with, and beat, hegemonic parties in poor districts? This book seeks to explain how a party can develop its own networks of brokers at the local level to successfully out-compete a machine party which dominates poor areas. Parties as diverse as the PJ in Argentina, the PRI in Mexico, the Kuomintang in Taiwan, or Daley's Democratic Party in Chicago became hegemonic machine parties by establishing a quasi-monopoly over networks of brokers pervasive in vulnerable areas. Scholars have argued that these networks provided machine parties with overwhelming electoral advantages: capillarity on the ground (Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003), near perfect information about voters' political preferences or electoral choices (Stokes 2005; Zarazaga 2016), mobilization power (Nichter 2008; Szwarcberg 2015), and/or the reputation for delivering resources (Zarazaga 2015b; Oliveros 2021). Given these circumstances, challenger parties would be condemned to being a niche party with a (potentially) strong following but not enough to win elections (Greene 2007, 37).

Scholars have argued that if any challenger were to emerge against machine parties, it would likely come from the path of economic

development, which, over time, would reduce the percentage of the poor supporting these parties (Weitz-Shapiro 2012, 2014; Stokes et al. 2013). According to this literature, machine parties have historically lost competitiveness only when “the poor and vulnerable among the electorate shrank and the middle class grew” (Stokes et al. 2013, 242). This shift occurs because fewer votes can be influenced by cash or minor consumption goods; in an electorate with a strong middle class, programmatic appeals attract more votes than clientelism, leading politicians to change strategies (Stokes et al. 2013, 242). Furthermore, in societies with a sizable middle class, the electoral cost of clientelism can be substantial, as voters from this class may even choose to penalize parties that engage in such practices (Weitz-Shapiro 2012, 2014). However, I argue that even if poverty persists, a challenger party without a previous territorial base may have the opportunity to form its own territorial networks and challenge a dominant machine party.

Most populous democracies in the Global South see a significant portion of their populations living in zones I refer to throughout this book as “areas of segregated vulnerability.” These are slums, settlements, or precarious neighborhoods, commonly referred to as “the territory” by scholars and politicians, which are segregated by poor public transportation, lack of land tenure and infrastructure, and security issues. The dwellers of these segregated areas are the most vulnerable urban poor as they are the most exposed to hazardous conditions challenging their daily life (Murillo et al. 2021, 346). They have multiple pressing demands that the state does not satisfy through its bureaucratic channels. They are, to different degrees, severed from the state protection system and the formal market.

Confined to their homes out of which they frequently work, these vulnerable poor are left with only one avenue through which they can seek social integration and political representation: their neighborhoods, the *territory*. The neighborhood is what the vulnerable poor, who engage in diverse ways of making a living, have in common and geographically within reach, and as a result, they organize themselves within it to attempt to fulfill their many needs. Merklen (2010, 108) refers to this process as “territorial enrollment”; I use the term “territorialization of politics” to highlight the political dimension.

The material deprivation experienced by the segregated and vulnerable poor drives them to engage with the political system in search of solutions to their basic needs. This engagement is shaped by the geographical space in which they live and work, as the very fact of their

segregation makes them seek intermediaries who can connect them to state resources. Murillo et al. (2021, 344) show that slum inhabitants are even more exposed to clientelism than other similarly poor urban dwellers. In democracies with a large percentage of the population living under these vulnerable conditions, politicians, in turn, also need these intermediaries to reach and secure the political support of these pockets of urban poverty. I highlight that candidates for local positions, such as mayoral candidates, who are directly responsible for gaining support in these areas, have the most immediate incentives to adopt strategies that involve territorial networks. The book's unique contribution is to demonstrate that the construction of these networks is not a strategy available only to machine parties, but that it actually results from the objective conditions that characterize segregated urban territories blighted by poverty.

In democracies of the Global South, with large percentages of poor population, the conditions of segregated vulnerability generate the incentives for political parties to develop a territorial presence. Segregated vulnerability pushes candidates, whether from hegemonic machine parties or their challengers, to develop what I call "territorial network strategies." These strategies involve recruiting brokers who reside and operate in marginalized areas to obtain political support from the local population. While the literature often simplifies brokers' activities by referring to them as "clientelism," they play a central role in the territorial network strategic activities employed by politicians that extend well beyond clientelist practices. These practices include the provision of public goods and immediate poverty relief, the participation in election campaigns, and engagement in election monitoring. It is important to note that brokers can also play a crucial role in implementing programmatic policies in impoverished areas, such as urbanization plans or vaccination programs. Unlike clientelism, these programmatic policies do not rely on individual or selective discretion in determining the eligibility of policy beneficiaries (Stokes et al. 2013, 6).

Given segregation and the multiple pressing demands from the vulnerable poor, not only machine parties but also their challengers have an incentive to pursue territorial network strategies in these areas. To compete successfully with a hegemonic machine party, a challenger needs to develop its own competitive network. The obstacles to doing so might appear daunting given the machine party's monopoly over networks in the territory. However, under certain conditions it may be possible for the challenger party to build its own network, win elections, and govern

in a poor district. I analyze two social and political phenomena that may create an opportunity for a challenger party to build its own competitive network: (1) The machine party relies on brokers who personally possess the skills and links to mobilize the poor and (2) the machine party faces factionalism.

Scholars tend to view hegemonic machine parties as more invincible than they may actually be. Their historic electoral success may, in fact, obscure the reality that many of the party assets are, to a large extent, in the hands of brokers rather than the party leadership. Brokers are the ones who are in direct contact with their neighbors and, therefore, responsive to them. It is, in fact, the brokers who create and maintain the reputation for delivering resources to voters. They also live and work in the territories, providing capillarity to candidates and commanding information about the political preferences of the poor. What have been typically thought of as machine parties' assets may well be more like brokers' assets. Following Hicken et al. (2022), I do not assume that parties resorting to brokers are strong, meaningful organizations that can assure their loyalty. While I do not claim that machine parties are necessarily weak parties, I affirm that they rely on brokers who are more empowered than commonly thought. In the political dynamics described in this book, brokers are the cornerstones.

The brokers' main concern is to access the resources to respond to their material needs and those of their neighbors. If the hegemonic machine party were the sole provider of resources to them, brokers would not have an exit option and would remain loyal to that party. However, if there is competition for brokers and the machine party cannot guarantee a steady flow of resources or offers too little according to brokers' expectations, brokers may switch to work for a competitor that can provide (Camp 2017, 536; Novaes 2018, 85). Party identity or ideological commitment alone may not be sufficient to retain the loyalty and services of brokers. Brokers seek to maximize access to state resources. They can become detached from a given party's ideology or program and become willing to switch parties if they consider that another party could secure them more resources. As a result of this dynamic, brokers are available to the "highest bidder"; they become "commodified."

Brokers constantly assess the probabilities of candidates winning as they require assurance of the flow of resources to their constituents. This same dynamic also applies to brokers who have previously worked for unsuccessful candidates. There are strong incentives for them to switch loyalties and offer their political services to a new incumbent in order to

maintain their access to resources. In this scenario, the costs of switching parties and developing a reputation as a disloyal broker are outweighed by the benefits of guaranteeing resources. Since brokers' assets are largely personal, new incumbents may be willing to hire them to expand their own networks in the territory.

Furthermore, I contend that brokers' relationships with their bosses are not of the same nature as brokers' relationships with their neighbors. Brokers dedicate their efforts to cater resources to their neighbors and secure their support. Brokers rely on their connections with neighbors as their principal assets, and they leverage these assets to negotiate resources with their bosses. While their neighbors largely remain the same, those in control of resources may change under political competition. As a broker in a slum once told me: "The politician may lose or win and forget about us, but I will continue living and working here regardless. People will realize that the politician is no longer here, but I am, and I will continue to help them." In the context of electoral competition, brokers tend to have longer-lasting relationships with their neighbors than with their political bosses.

A second crucial factor for a party without preexisting territorial bases to recruit its own networks is the extent of factionalism within the hegemonic party. The long-term electoral success of a machine party can result in increasing competition among its own internal candidates. As the machine party becomes the dominant force in politics, intraparty candidates may be motivated to split the party in order to capture a portion of the electorate. Hence, factionalism weakens the electoral prospects of a party (Key 1984).

Aspinall and Hicken (2020, 141–143) and Hicken et al. (2022, 80) demonstrate, intraparty competition heightens the significance of personal broker networks, as candidates rely more on their own networks than on party structure. Thus, factionalism not only weakens the electoral performance of the machine party but also renders brokers available to new challengers, both within and outside the party. Brokers aligned with factions or candidates lacking access to power make themselves open to opportunities with more promising candidates, even if those candidates are running independently of the machine party. A challenger to a machine party may find a considerable number of brokers within losing factions who can be recruited, enabling them to gain electoral viability in impoverished districts. The greater the internal competition among contending candidates within the hegemonic machine party, the easier it becomes for a challenger to attract brokers away from a losing faction and into its own camp.



That said, it becomes challenging for an opponent party to attract brokers from the machine party on an individual basis. If brokers do not witness a growing network in the territory, they may perceive the challenger party as nonviable, especially in their impoverished districts (Hicken et al. 2022, 86). To recruit brokers, a challenger party needs to demonstrate its ability to establish a competitive network. Intense factionalism within the machine party presents an opportunity to hire a substantial number of brokers and display such potential. Section 1.3 explains why Argentina is a suitable case to study this phenomenon.

### 1.3 WHY ARGENTINA?

The paradox of an avowed Peronist broker switching sides to work for an anti-Peronist political coalition raises intriguing questions about how a party can build its own network to defy a machine party with pervasive networks in poor districts. While the theory in this book applies to many countries and districts where hegemonic machine parties are surprisingly and effectively contested by other parties, Argentina offers a unique context for studying the evolution of party competition for brokers in impoverished segregated areas.

In an unexpected turn of events, 2015 became a championship year for PRO as part of the Cambiemos coalition; for the first time in Argentine history, a center-right party won a presidential election in free and open elections.<sup>8</sup> Mauricio Macri, the businessman leader of PRO and Cambiemos' presidential candidate, defeated the Peronist candidate, Daniel Scioli, by little more than two points in the runoff. More surprisingly, Cambiemos also gained access to the governorship of the province of Buenos Aires and a third of the mayoral positions in the Conurbano, an area of mainly poor municipalities within this province. The story of Cambiemos defeating Peronism in poor municipalities provides insight into how parties can unexpectedly challenge hegemonic machine parties in democracies in the Global South, as well as the conditions under which brokers switch parties.

The PJ and its networks have received more scholarly attention than any other machine party in the world, with several seminal works serving as cornerstones for studying the evolution of brokers' networks and their strategies on the ground (Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003; Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Szwarcberg 2015; Calvo and Murillo 2019; Oliveros 2021). Since its foundation in the 1940s, the PJ established a hegemony in poor

<sup>8</sup> For further analysis of 2015 election in Argentina, see Lupu et al. (2019).

districts that seemed undefeatable. After the 2001 socioeconomic crisis, Peronism adapted to the territorialization of poor people's lives, with their governors and mayors deploying brokers to every area of segregated vulnerability (Levitsky 2003; Calvo and Escobar 2005). This hegemony made it hard to predict that a challenger could emerge. However, Cambiemos capitalized on an opportunity, providing a case of the emergence of a challenger to a hegemonic machine party that deserves to be studied.

The unexpected electoral success of Cambiemos mayoral candidates in the impoverished districts of the Conurbano gives rise to significant questions regarding the strategies employed by these candidates and the opportunities they identified to secure power. If additional brokers, akin to the one mentioned in this introduction, were enlisted by Cambiemos mayoral candidates, it would mark a substantial shift in Argentine political dynamics. The dominant machine party may have relinquished its exclusive control over broker networks, and the case of Cambiemos provides a particularly relevant instance to examine the establishment of a competitive political machine in vulnerable areas from the very beginning.

The challenge posed by Cambiemos to the PJ in the poor districts of Argentina presents a hard case for my theory. Historically, the Peronists have had the poor as their core constituency, while Cambiemos, as a center-right coalition co-founded by a businessman, have had its stronghold in the middle and upper classes of the affluent districts. Cambiemos represents a "least likely" case to account for how a party without a preexisting territorial base can construct its own network in vulnerable segregated areas to confront a hegemonic machine party. This book seeks to build theory from a deep study of this crucial case.<sup>9</sup>

#### 1.4 THE CONURBANO BONAERENSE: THE MOTHER OF ALL ELECTORAL BATTLES

This book examines political parties' strategies in Argentina over the last two decades, with a particular focus on the Conurbano, which comprises the thirty-three mainly poor municipalities surrounding the capital city of Buenos Aires. The Conurbano has a uniquely high concentration of population and poverty compared to most other urban areas in the world. Other megacities in the continent, such as Mexico City or Sao Paulo, may be larger in absolute numbers, but they do not have the same level of population concentration and poverty accumulation as Buenos Aires

<sup>9</sup> For the use of crucial and least likely cases in political science, see Eckstein (1975).

and its metropolitan area. As noted by Malamud (2017), the Conurbano exhibits the federal hypertrophy of few other sites in the world. It represents a third of the national population and half of the country's urban poor. With such a concentration of population and poverty in less than 1 percent of the national territory, it is no surprise that the Conurbano municipalities have been the focus of most studies on Argentine clientelism. As pointed out by Oliveros (2021, 64), "because it comprises such a large part of the Argentinean electorate, understanding how political competition works in this area is central to Argentinean politics."

The Conurbano is a contiguous urban agglomeration to the wealthy capital city of Buenos Aires but offers much worse living conditions. It is poorer on average than the rest of the country and has some of the starkest social inequalities. While 20 percent of Conurbano youngsters live in upper-middle socioeconomic-level neighborhoods, 40 percent of them live in slums and vulnerable areas. More than half of the Conurbano workforce has precarious and unstable employment, and 60 percent of heads of household did not finish high school (Bonfiglio et al. 2016, 35). Furthermore, one-third of the almost 5,000 slums and informal settlements in the country are located in Conurbano municipalities. Due to its large and mainly poor urban population, political control of the Conurbano has been decisive for any national political project seeking to win elections and maintain governability. Both Raúl Alfonsín (1983–1989) and Fernando de la Rúa (1999–2001), the two UCR presidents who governed the country since redemocratization in 1983, were forced to resign amid social outbursts and lootings in the Conurbano.<sup>10</sup>

The PJ has enjoyed a clear electoral hegemony in the Conurbano, thanks to its historical concentration of industrial workers and, especially since the 1990s, unemployed and informal workers. From the return of democracy in 1983 to 2011, Peronist candidates won 80 percent of the mayoral elections in the Conurbano (196 out of 246). The PJ machine historically had its stronghold in the Conurbano municipalities, where its mayors commanded large networks of *punteros* embedded in poor neighborhoods (Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003). However, the seeming Peronist hegemony veiled the fact that Cambiemos mayoral candidates, eager to grab power from the Peronists, started building a territorial presence in poor areas, initiating unexpected party competition in the Conurbano.

<sup>10</sup> The UCR is a centrist party that is ideologically heterogeneous. It was founded at the end of the nineteenth century and is the oldest of the main Argentine parties. Its main constituency is the middle class, and it has generally opposed Peronism.

Thus, these municipalities provide an excellent setting to explore questions such as: What do brokers do for politicians and residents? Why are they resilient in the territory? How do politicians recruit them? Why would they switch to work for a nonmachine party? Why does the command of broker networks increase a candidate's chance of winning elections and achieving governability?

The Conurbano municipalities provide crucial settings for studying the evolution of parties' connections to the poor and, in particular, the emergence of a coalition without a territorial base aiming to recruit brokers to develop its territorial network strategies and challenge a dominant machine party. They also offer an exceptional context to study the conditions under which brokers are willing to switch from working for one party to another. Variation across municipalities has allowed an examination of the relationship between structural conditions, networks of *punteros*, and parties' competition in different settings without sacrificing the advantages of conducting in-depth research in a single region.

This study focuses mainly on brokers and mayoral candidates acting at the municipal level in the Conurbano. Brokers are crucial for mayors to win elections and govern, and Conurbano mayors are powerful political actors in Argentina. The latter command the municipalities of the most populous region of the country, municipalities which comprise around a quarter of the national electorate. For example, Quilmes, Lanús, Tres de Febrero, and Pilar – all municipalities included in this study – are each more populous than a number of Argentine provinces. Despite having relatively meager budgets, they possess ample executive power to allocate municipal resources and finance territorial networks, and their decisions can significantly impact people's lives in their districts (Ollier 2010; Zarazaga 2017). As Ollier noted, “the concentration of decision-making power in the mayors turns them into a sort of monarch who can exclusively control the network of power within their municipalities” (2010, 141). Given these assets, mayors are crucial not only for their municipalities but also for providing governability and votes to provincial and national candidates. As politicians know and the press consistently repeat, the electoral battle in the Conurbano is the mother of all electoral battles.

## 1.5 ARGENTINE POLITICAL PARTIES' TRANSFORMATION

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, many countries in Latin America experienced a crisis of party representation and a process of territorialization of politics. As the programmatic agendas of postwar

development models lost their preponderance, traditional parties struggled to maintain their historical constituencies. In response, new parties emerged in the region to appeal to disenchanted voters and new constituencies (Jones and Mainwaring 2003; Levitsky 2003; Calvo and Escolar 2005; Luna 2014). This book draws on the last two decades of party competition in Argentina to study how structural changes affect parties' strategies and competition.

During the 1990s, with Carlos Menem's presidency (1989–1999), the PJ transformed itself from a party organized through unions to a party that was territorially organized. The networks of *punteros* displaced unions and local party organizations as PJ's primary link to the lower classes (Levitsky 2003, 107). However, Menem never personally took charge of controlling the Conurbano territory; devoted to carrying on his neoliberal reforms, he left this task in the hands of his vice-president and then the governor of the province of Buenos Aires, Eduardo Duhalde (Pagni 2023, 502). As a result, Duhalde developed the most powerful machine in the Conurbano. As a former mayor of Lomas de Zamora (1983–1987), a Conurbano municipality, Duhalde knew well how the territory conditioned politics and, as governor of Buenos Aires (1991–1999), he enjoyed access to ample state resources to develop strong on-the-ground networks.

In 2001, the economic and social crisis in Argentina marked the end of neoliberal reform, leading to a crisis of representation. The failure of President Fernando de la Rúa to handle the crisis caused disarray in the UCR, leaving non-Peronist and anti-Peronist voters without party representation (Torre 2003). Peronism emerged as the only political pole that adapted to the territorialization of politics, becoming a machine party in which governors and mayors commanded dense networks of *referentes* in their districts (Levitsky 2003; Calvo and Escolar 2005). After the resignation of President de la Rúa (2001), Congress appointed Eduardo Duhalde as president (2002–2003). He was the only person who could control the networks of *punteros* and pacify the riots and lootings that were particularly severe in the Conurbano by the end of 2001.

After testing several unsuccessful candidates, Duhalde supported Néstor Kirchner as his successor.<sup>11</sup> Despite only receiving 22 percent of

<sup>11</sup> Néstor Kirchner (1950–2010) was the Peronist Governor of Santa Cruz. Heading a Peronist coalition under the label of Frente para la Victoria (FPV) in 2003, he was elected as president in the first presidential election after the 2001 crisis. In 2007, he chose not to seek reelection and instead prompted his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, to run. She was elected that year and reelected in 2011 with 54 percent of the vote and a

the vote, Kirchner became president (2003–2007) when Carlos Menem withdrew from the runoff round. Upon taking office with limited electoral support, Kirchner's top priorities included maintaining governability, controlling the Conurbano (the Peronists' electoral stronghold and the site of social unrest in the 1989 and 2001 crises), and suppressing any internal competition that could threaten his leadership, particularly in the Conurbano.

Néstor Kirchner decided to step out from under Duhalde's shadow. In the 2005 midterm election, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK) faced and defeated Duhalde's list, which was headed by his wife, Hilda "Chiche" Duhalde. With CFK's victory, many anticipated the end of the *punteros*-based Peronist machine (Lenarduzzi 2009, 7). It was expected that Kirchner would cut state resources flowing to Duhalde's former territorial bosses and establish his power base in social movements and unions that had returned to the political arena with the improving economic outlook. However, Kirchner chose to take control of the machine rather than dismantle it – as one Peronist mayor put it, "to ride the beast instead of killing it."<sup>12</sup> The 2005 elections marked not the end of the machine but rather the transfer of its ownership. Territorial network strategies kept their central place in mayors' political portfolios.

The Peronist machine seemed undefeatable in the Conurbano for more than a decade. However, in 2015, this Peronist hegemony was shaken by the electoral triumph of the Cambiemos coalition, not only at the national level but also in the poor Conurbano, where it secured the mayoral position in one-third of the municipalities. Cambiemos was formed from the alliance of PRO, UCR, and CC.<sup>13</sup> PRO, the main partner of this coalition, emerged from the 2001 crisis, and in 2015, its candidates Mauricio Macri and María Eugenia Vidal were already elected as president and governor of the province of Buenos Aires, respectively. PRO was a product of the crisis of representation, capitalizing on a general dissatisfaction with traditional political leaders while simultaneously incorporating some of these leaders who had left their parties (Vommaro

clear lead over all other candidates. Together, the Kirchners governed for thirteen years, which is considered a successful political cycle. Their governments are usually labeled as center-left or progressive Peronism by scholars and the press.

<sup>12</sup> Personal interview, June 27, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> The CC is a political party that was founded after the 2001 crisis by Elisa Carrió, a former UCR politician. It is a center or center-right party that is focused on defending republican institutions. Until October 2009, the party was known as *Afirmación para una República Igualitaria*.

and Morresi 2016; Mauro 2020). The group that founded PRO gathered around the leadership of Mauricio Macri, a well-known businessman and chairman of the country's second-largest soccer club. In his political discourse, Macri emphasized his status as a political outsider and the need "to renew politics" by bringing it "closer to the people."

According to Vommaro and Morresi (2014), in addition to attracting business groups and nongovernmental organization (NGO) leaders who were new to party politics and defined themselves as nonpartisan, PRO was also successful in recruiting politicians who had split from the UCR, Peronism, or right-wing parties. Despite including candidates with a history in these traditional parties, the party leadership positions and decisions about the national strategy remained in the hands of Macri and his inner circle. By drawing in businesspeople, NGO leaders, and popular celebrities who were new to politics, PRO sought to present itself as the "new politics" detached from "old ideologies." Party ideology was considered a thing of the past, in contrast to PRO's approach of "management to serve the people." The party leaders proclaimed from the start that PRO was the party of "good management" detached from "the vices of politics" (Landau 2015).

PRO originated and grew successfully as a local party in the city of Buenos Aires, following Macri's election as head of government in 2007. For two consecutive elections after its creation, in 2007 and 2011, PRO did not field or support any presidential candidate. Given the Peronist national electoral dominance under the Kirchners, it chose to consolidate itself in the capital city, known for its more independent and anti-Peronist electorate. PRO's aspirations to govern the country may have encountered the limitations of being a local party that could appeal only to the urban middle class. Several authors argue that it is challenging for local parties to transform themselves into nationally competitive electoral alternatives (Calvo and Escolar 2005; Leiras 2007; Malamud and De Luca 2016).

Although PRO's cadres tried to avoid defining themselves as right or center-right, the general public and the press considered them as such due to Macri's programmatic positions on issues such as the role of the state and labor rights. Macri himself repeatedly declared that PRO was a "pro-market force." As a result, PRO was consistently labeled as a center-right party by public opinion experts and the general public (Mattina 2016, 88). After 2007, PRO and Macri stood in clear opposition to Kirchnerism, emphasizing anti-populist and liberal republican values in their speeches. While being a local party presented a challenge to becoming a viable

national party with a presence in the Conurbano, being a center-right party posed an even greater challenge in appealing to poor voters.

The city of Buenos Aires, with its large middle and upper classes, was a natural setting for the consolidation of a center-right party, while the Conurbano, as a Peronist stronghold with a predominantly poor constituency, seemed an unlikely place for the development of such a party. However, given the concentration of population and poverty in the Conurbano, it was key for Cambiemos to develop political organization there. In the city of Buenos Aires, PRO established its core constituency in the middle sectors while also appealing to poor voters who were segregated in the southern part of the city. To achieve this, the party developed a network of *referentes* in the slums of the capital city with the help of former leaders from the UCR and the PJ (Vommaro et al. 2015). Some viewed this as a precursor to the strategies adopted by PRO's mayoral candidates in the Conurbano. However, while PRO managed to recruit some leaders with networks in poor areas, its core voters were in other sectors (Vommaro and Armesto 2015, 129–130). Developing ties with a few leaders and slum *punteros* in the wealthiest district of the country is different from developing a strategy to reach poor voters in the region containing half of the country's poor population. Nevertheless, some of PRO's local candidates in the Conurbano were successful in recruiting brokers and adopting territorial network strategies. This allowed them to win elections and govern in poor districts. These strategies brought them so close to Peronism that they received criticism from their party's national authorities.

PRO's success in building a political organization in the Conurbano that transcended the limitations of a local and center-right party is an interesting case study, one that sheds light on the structural conditions for the emergence of new parties that can appeal to poor voters and challenge dominant machine parties in democracies of the Global South. As political representation in poor areas was considered exclusive to Peronism, the development of networks of *punteros* by PRO mayoral candidates to compete electorally in the slums and vulnerable neighborhoods of the Conurbano constituted a radical and surprising transformation of Argentine politics.

## 1.6 METHODS

The primary goal of this book is to demonstrate how segregated vulnerability drives parties to develop territorial network strategies in poor districts, explain how a party builds its networks of brokers from scratch



to challenge a dominant machine party in these areas, and explore the conditions under which brokers switch parties. To achieve these goals, a multimethod strategy is required. Here I use ethnographic work to produce in-depth knowledge about mayoral candidates and brokers' strategies and quantitative analysis to support these arguments with aggregated data. The arguments are developed and tested mainly in the Peronist stronghold of the Conurbano in Argentina.

To capture the construction of networks and how they operate over time rather than simply presenting snapshots of the process, I draw on ethnographic work carried out in eight selected municipalities in the Conurbano: La Matanza, Merlo, Malvinas Argentinas, San Miguel, Lanús, Pilar, Tres de Febrero, and Quilmes. The book combines top-down and bottom-up approaches by considering the incentives and strategies of both mayoral candidates and brokers. I engaged in participant observation of brokers' political activities in these municipalities and conducted interviews with the two main actors: *referentes* and mayors, as well as their challengers. In local political structures, some politicians are referred to as *armadores* or brokers' coordinators, as they possess the skills and connections needed to gather and organize *referentes*. These *armadores* typically serve as intermediaries between mayors or candidates and brokers, coordinating strategies and negotiating resources with a group of *punteros* that can range from a few to several dozen. Often, these *armadores* were *punteros* themselves who were able to increase their power and recruit other *punteros* to work for them. I also conducted interviews with *armadores* to gain insights into the dynamics within a network.

The arguments presented in this book are derived mainly from active participation in brokers' everyday activities and from over 250 interviews with *referentes*, *armadores*, mayors and their challengers, local political figures, and key informants, over the course of ten years. The book is based on two periods of intensive fieldwork, which are respectively referred to as the "first wave" and "second wave" throughout the book.

The basis of the considerations about who the brokers are and what they do for their parties and neighbors comes from the first wave; that is, from fieldwork carried out in the Conurbano between June 2009 and December 2010. I personally conducted in-depth interviews with 120 brokers, 112 of whom were Peronists. I also interviewed party leaders and executive officials, including three former governors of the province of Buenos Aires, five Conurbano mayors, twenty-two council city members, and twelve municipal directors and secretaries. This wave serves as a benchmark for studying the evolution of political links to the poor.

To refine this book's theories about a party building its own network to defy a machine party and the conditions under which brokers switch parties, and provide evidence for them, I conducted fieldwork from July 2017 to December 2019, during the second part of the *Cambios* government.<sup>14</sup> I refer throughout the book to this period of fieldwork in the Conurbano as the "second wave."

In the 2015 mayoral election, *Cambios* candidates won in eleven out of thirty-three Conurbano municipalities, with nine of the mayors winning their positions for the first time by defeating Peronist candidates. I personally conducted in-depth interviews with all these mayors, with each interview lasting an average of an hour and a half. Additionally, I interviewed twenty *Cambios* national authorities, including President Mauricio Macri (2015–2019), Governor of Buenos Aires María Eugenia Vidal (2015–2019), and other key figures in the party such as the National Chief of Cabinet Marcos Peña (2015–2019), the Buenos Aires Province Chief of Cabinet Federico Salvai (2015–2019), and the National Social Welfare Minister Carolina Stanley (2015–2019).

To study how *Cambios* mayoral candidates built their networks and won in the 2015 election, I selected four municipalities out of the nine won by *Cambios* in that election: Lanús, Pilar, Quilmes, and Tres de Febrero. These four municipalities are representative of the three geographical regions in the Conurbano named North, West, and South. The South is the most populous and poorest region, and two of the municipalities, Lanús and Quilmes, are located there. The Conurbano is also divided into three concentric belts surrounding the capital city, and the four municipalities are representative of these belts too. The four municipalities are medium to large in size compared to the rest of the Conurbano municipalities, and, in socioeconomic terms, they lie near the median of the Conurbano.

By including these four municipalities in the ethnographic work, I aim to capture the relationship between poverty and networks of brokers in the Conurbano across units. In these municipalities, I conducted interviews with not only the four *Cambios* mayors who won the 2015 election but also their main Peronist rivals. I interviewed each candidate one to four times, with interviews lasting an average of one and a half

<sup>14</sup> Besides the fieldwork specifically carried out for this book, I have been in constant contact with politicians and the local community over the last thirty years. Sometimes, I refer to conversations from this period that were not part of the original fieldwork but are relevant to the political dynamics discussed in this book, as they were always an integral part of our conversations.

hours. This allowed for a particularly rich view of the political processes at the local level.

To gain further insight into these processes, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eighty-six *punteros* in the four municipalities, with interviews lasting an average of two hours. Half of these *punteros* worked for Cambiemos candidates and the other half for Peronist candidates. The interviews were conducted by myself or research assistants with special training for this task. Additionally, I interviewed thirteen *armadores* and forty-seven key informants such as municipal directors, secretaries, city council members, and party and social activists.

While a random sample of brokers was logistically impossible, I was able to interview a large number of them (eighty-six) with a low rate of refusal (seven). The *punteros* were selected, as in the first wave, using a snowball technique. Given my thirty years of work in poor areas of Buenos Aires and my personal connections with a large group of local politicians, I was able to interview a first group of *referentes* in each municipality through personal contacts and then asked them if they knew other *referentes*. When *punteros* mentioned their rivals in interviews, I located them and started new seeds of snowballing. In addition, I asked people at different community centers, soup kitchens, or schools in each vulnerable neighborhood for the names of their *referentes*. In this way I was able to interview *punteros* from all major areas and localities. Locating *punteros* in this way rather than via their bosses helped to avoid bias, as party leaders may have introduced only compliant brokers. It also ensured that the sample of *punteros* interviewed was not biased toward those who were electoral candidates, who are typically more educated than the average *referente*. Interviews with *referentes* were mainly conducted in slums. These are the natural settings to examine *punteros*' roles and the impact of segregated vulnerability on parties' strategies (Auerbach and Thachil 2018, 2).

To trace brokers' roles during and between elections, I engaged in participant observation and follow-up interviews. *Punteros* enabled me to participate in observation by taking me in their buses to rallies, inviting me to political meetings or neighborhood parties, such as Children's Day, and allowing me to stay at their headquarters, even on election day. Prolonged firsthand observation in the field enabled me to capture a complete picture of the territorial machine at work, rather than just snapshots. The fundamental political dynamics described for these municipalities were confirmed for the rest of the Conurbano municipalities via interviews with mayors, candidates, and key informants.

Furthermore, I use quantitative data to substantiate different claims in the book. First, using an index of local poverty and brokers' locations, I show that brokers are bound by the structural limitations within their poor neighborhoods and struggle to make a living as much as their poor neighbors. Second, using the Argentine 2015 electoral results, I present statistical evidence to support the argument that competition within incumbent coalitions created an opportunity for the mayoral opposition candidates to access power in Conurbano municipalities for the first time in 2015. Finally, I use the Argentine 2019 electoral results to show that incumbent mayors in the Conurbano resort to their networks of brokers to incentivize ticket splitting and separate their electoral destiny from that of their fading presidential candidate.

### 1.7 MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

This book presents key contributions to the study of the impact of structural factors on party systems. It contributes to the literature on party adaptation (Gibson 1992; Kitschelt 2000; Luna 2014), showing that territorial network strategies emanate largely from the broader social conditions that characterize the territory, conditions which powerfully shape the strategies of all parties seeking to win elections and govern, rather than a distinct attribute of specific parties. I demonstrate that this demand is particularly pressing for local candidates seeking to displace a hegemonic machine party in districts with a large percentage of the population living in areas of segregated vulnerability. While parties who have the poor as their main constituency are often the first to develop networks of brokers, local candidates from other parties will also have strong incentives to establish these networks in segregated vulnerable areas. A novel contribution to the literature is to expose the process by which a challenger party develops its own networks from scratch and competes in segregated vulnerable contexts against a dominant machine party.

The book also makes significant contributions to the extensive literature on clientelism, particularly with regard to studies focused on the Argentine case (Auyero 2000; Levitsky 2003; Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Weitz-Shapiro 2012, 2014; Calvo and Murillo 2013, 2019; Stokes et al. 2013; Szwarcberg 2015; Oliveros 2016, 2021). I add to this literature by outlining the complete range of tactics and strategies adopted by brokers, highlighting their crucial role in both winning elections and maintaining governance in areas of segregated vulnerability. I argue that territorial networks hold a political value beyond what is conventionally

understood as “clientelism,” demonstrating that the presence of *punteros* can be critical for maintaining stability in poor contexts by providing social support and public services in vulnerable communities. An important trait is that it is not the machines but the brokers themselves who possess relationships with the poor in vulnerable areas.

Furthermore, a fundamental contribution of this book is to specify the conditions under which brokers are willing to switch from working for a machine party to working for its challenger. The need to secure resources for themselves and their neighbors leads to the commodification of political brokers, making them accessible to anyone willing to pay. In addition, I contribute by showing that the electoral hegemony of machine parties can incentivize divisions, as candidates see opportunities to win over a significant portion of the electorate, and these divisions strengthen challengers’ electoral chances. Factionalism weakens the hegemonic machine party also as brokers working for defeated machine party’s candidates become available to be hired by challenger parties.

Finally, I aim to challenge prevailing negative attitudes toward democracy in poor contexts. The literature is rife with notions that brokers simply exploit the poor and rob them of agency – that brokers present obstacles to the provision of public goods and democracy. By contrast, I argue that they can often represent a necessary, indeed sometimes the only, source of political solutions to the problems faced by the poor. Poor voters support them not because they are misguided or uninformed but because brokers offer tangible benefits and avenues to improve the quality of life for their families and neighborhoods. The poor understand that brokers are self-interested, but what is more important to them is the fact that brokers can provide concrete goods and services. It is true that *punteros* can obstruct reliable and accountable state access to the poor and engage in potentially demeaning clientelist practices, but it is not clear that their absence would necessarily benefit the poor. This book supplies evidence drawn from years of extensive fieldwork which aims to emphasize the perspectives and agency of the poor and their local neighborhood leaders, and thereby redress a void in broader discussions of political competition in developing democracies.

## 1.8 SCOPE CONDITIONS

The arguments presented in this book have varying scopes of applicability. The theories concerning territorial network strategies are applicable to many democracies in the Global South, where parties have developed

such strategies to win elections and govern. The presence of networks of political brokers has been observed in many vulnerable neighborhoods across these democracies, including countries such as Argentina, Brazil, India, and Mexico. The provision of a minimalistic welfare state through the discretionary channels of territorial brokers is common in most democracies of the developing world. The role of brokers goes beyond vote buying; they also play a role in campaigning and providing public goods in many of these countries. Across many machine parties in the world, brokers possess the assets that enable them to reach the poor, making them capable of offering their services to the highest bidder.

The arguments in this book, about the conditions under which a party without a territorial base can develop networks of brokers to challenge a hegemonic machine party and the conditions that prompt brokers to switch parties, have a broad reach and were inductively derived from the Argentine case. However, most elements of them can be applied to other hegemonic machine parties that face competition for the poor's votes. In Chapter 9, I examine how this book's arguments translate to other hegemonic machine parties such as the PRI in Mexico and the Indian National Congress (INC) in India.

## 1.9 PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is organized into five parts. Part I focuses on establishing the theoretical framework and describing the data and the methods. After this introduction presenting the arguments, some basic definitions, and the case selection, Chapter 2 outlines the theory and the contributions of the book to the existing literature on brokers, machine parties, and party adaptation. This chapter closes with a discussion of the book's contributions to the literature on Argentine clientelism.

Part II provides qualitative evidence on the process of territorialization of politics in Argentina and explains why *punteros* are needed in areas characterized by segregated vulnerability. Chapter 3 focuses on the evolution of parties' and politicians' linkage to the poor in Argentina over time. It explains that, in response to the problems faced in areas of segregated vulnerability, citizens seek solutions within their own neighborhoods and communities. This process of territorialization of politics results in the increased importance of neighborhood political brokers, or *punteros*. The chapter also argues that local candidates, including mayors and council city members, regardless of their political affiliations, soon realize that their chances of winning elections are higher if they

have a network of *punteros* active in every poor neighborhood in their municipalities.

Chapter 4 focuses on the main actors of the political story, known as *punteros* or *referentes*. Here, I draw upon my own ethnographic research to describe these territorial political brokers, including the skills and assets that allow them to become central figures in their neighborhoods. The activities that *punteros* perform all year round, not just during elections, are also outlined. These activities include being the parties' foot soldiers that mayors recruit to campaign and govern. I highlight the important role *referentes* play in the provision of public goods and services and the implementation of state programs in poor neighborhoods. During campaigns and on election day, *punteros* are not only responsible for carrying out clientelistic strategies but also for traditional campaign activities such as canvassing and monitoring polling stations.

Part III examines the opportunities that a party challenging a hegemonic machine party has to create its own networks of brokers in poor districts. Chapter 5 explores the commodification process through which Peronist brokers started to demand payment for their political services, downplaying party loyalties and ideological preferences. Qualitative evidence and descriptive statistics are used to demonstrate how three factors influence this process in the municipalities of the Conurbano: Poverty makes brokers crucial channels for politicians to meet the demands of the territory; the brokers themselves are affected by poverty and informality; and party leaders begin to show a lack of commitment to their parties. The chapter argues that this process left the PJ vulnerable to competition from a party willing to recruit its *punteros*. Furthermore, it describes the average fee charged by *punteros* for each political service. Chapter 6 uses qualitative and quantitative evidence to analyze how the division of the PJ into different factions made local Peronist candidates less competitive, thereby allowing Cambiemos to recruit Peronist *punteros* and rise to power in 2015.

Part IV focuses on the building up of a political party's network of brokers over time. Chapter 7 uses ethnographic research to show the process of recruiting *referentes* by Cambiemos mayors. This research is based on in-depth interviews with mayors and *punteros* in four municipalities of the Conurbano, and it captures the growth of these new networks over time. It describes how mayors recruited militants from Cambiemos allies, Peronist *punteros* who disagreed with other Peronist mayoral candidates, and community leaders who had no previous political experience. Chapter 8 concludes this part by testing the relevance

of the network built by Cambiemos mayors in the 2019 election. In that election, Cambiemos mayors needed to resort to their recently built networks to decouple their chances of reelection from those of their presidential candidate, Mauricio Macri. The research uses in-depth interviews and intensive fieldwork to show how local Cambiemos candidates used territorial network strategies to survive the election. The chapter also tests the hypothesis that brokers are crucial for mayoral candidates' electoral survival when their presidential candidate is not performing well.<sup>15</sup>

The final part of the book, Part V, seeks to place the arguments developed from the Argentine case in a broader comparative context to consider deeper theoretical implications. Chapter 9 seeks to determine the generalizability of the book's claims about party competition in poor contexts to two of the biggest democracies in the Global South, Mexico and India. The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the book and discusses how the ideas set forth can contribute to our understanding of politics in developing democracies with high poverty and informality levels. The role of territorial brokers in promoting or hindering progress in these communities is also explored.

<sup>15</sup> In the Province of Buenos Aires, the presidential, gubernatorial, and municipal elections are held concurrently.



## Final Remarks

The more populous democracies of the Global South are characterized by large percentages of their populations living in areas of segregated vulnerability. These are slums, settlements, and precarious neighborhoods where the urban poor concentrate, suffering from isolation and a conspicuous lack of public goods and services. The landscape of these areas does not vary much across countries, and the failure of the state to provide basic infrastructure can be witnessed in almost every corner of these neighborhoods. Unfortunately, ramshackle homes made of zinc sheets, together with open sewers, meandering wastewater through unpaved streets, polluted streams, and exposed garbage dumps are recurrent features of these sceneries. The absence of meaningful connections or employment opportunities beyond these boundaries segregates their inhabitants, creating pockets of vulnerability. These populations are also often disconnected from vital urban utilities, such as sewage systems, potable water networks, or the internet. They are further segregated by weak security, roads, and public transit systems.

The vast extent of these vulnerable segregated areas is a recipe for social fragmentation. Life within these communities is characterized by multiple forms of overlapping informalities. Informal neighborhoods suffer from socio-spatial exclusion and disconnection from formal infrastructure and public services. However, slum dwellers not only live in socio-spatial marginalization but also have limited access to formal employment and education, further fragmenting society along multiple cleavage lines, especially within the working class. The gap between formal and informal spheres creates two dramatically different worlds. This fragmentation is

a challenge for political parties, which must endeavor to represent an increasingly broad and diverse spectrum of interests.

Lacking extensive external affiliations outside their communities, the poor and vulnerable forge their existence within the boundaries of their localities, commonly referred to by scholars and politicians as “the territory.” In a process that Merklen (2010, 108) has termed “territorial enrollment,” the poor seek social integration and political representation in their neighborhoods, the only spaces they share and that are within reach geographically. Throughout this book I have used the phrase “territorialization of politics” to denote the political dimensions of this process.

The relationship between the vulnerable poor and the political system is shaped by the geographical space in which they live and work. Their spatial segregation compels them to seek out intermediaries who can facilitate their access to state resources. They turn to their community leaders, referred to as “brokers” in the literature, in search of solutions to their diverse and pressing needs. I have witnessed neighbors engaging with their brokers to obtain resources as critical as asthma medication for their children, coffins to bury deceased parents, or appointments for surgical procedures. These brokers, known as *punteros* or *referentes* in Argentina, in turn, engage with politicians to obtain the resources needed to respond to their neighbors’ petitions. Politicians, then, allocate resources to these brokers because they cannot reach vulnerable areas themselves to secure the political support of the residents, and brokers can. The evidence presented in this book shows that any serious contender for executive office in a poor district, in order to build connections to voters in areas of segregated vulnerability, relies upon brokers.

Local politicians and aspiring candidates, namely mayors and mayoral candidates, are directly responsible for gaining support in these areas and therefore have the most immediate incentives to adapt to the territories. They need to garner support and then govern effectively in these areas of segregated vulnerability, so they build networks of brokers and implement what I term “territorial network strategies.” These strategies require brokers that are deeply immersed and well-connected in the segregated vulnerable areas.

This book shows that brokers are of paramount importance for local candidates not only to win elections but also to govern effectively. While scholars often simplify the role of brokers to mere clientelism, this study describes a more complete set of strategies and activities undertaken by these intermediaries in vulnerable areas. In other words, *punteros* assume

a central role in territorial network strategies that extends well beyond conventional clientelistic practices. These include the provision of public goods and immediate alleviation of poverty, active participation in election campaigns, and engagement in election monitoring. In the field, I have witnessed firsthand the pivotal role *punteros* play for governments when they need to implement important measures, such as a vaccination program, an urban intervention, or a housing plan. This book shows that both machine parties and their challengers employ territorial network strategies in countries as diverse as Argentina, India, and Mexico.

Machine parties are distinctive in their ability to connect with voters living in pockets of poverty and to mobilize these voters at the grassroots level (Rakove 1975; Key 1984). The PJ in Argentina, the PRI in Mexico, and the INC in India, for example, have all traditionally been considered machine parties. However, in this book, I partially counter the common perception of such parties by showing that segregated vulnerability imposes conditions on any party seeking to be electorally competitive in these areas. It is not that parties select a type of linkage in a vacuum and then land in the territory, but rather the territory itself shapes the types of linkages that parties can establish.

Specifically, this book demonstrates how parties lacking previous territorial bases can challenge hegemonic machine parties in vulnerable areas by constructing their own territorial networks of brokers. In particular, I illustrate how challengers to the PJ, the PRI, and the INC built their own networks and ultimately ended the long-lasting dominance of these parties, thereby challenging the notion that certain parties are more inherently machine-based than others. A party facing a hegemonic machine party in a poverty-stricken district may opt to establish networks of brokers similar to those of the machine party to secure the votes of the poor. Attempting to challenge the machine party otherwise would be like landing a plane without landing gear. Parties wishing to avoid relegation to niche status in impoverished districts must adapt to the demands arising from these areas. Interestingly, these observations suggest it is not only economic progress, as many scholars have predicted, that can erode the dominance of a machine party. While economic progress can weaken its clientelistic ties to the poor, persistent poverty can give rise to challengers using similar strategies.

The PJ, which spearheaded the FPV coalition in 2003, is considered both a labor-based and machine-based party due to its populist origins and consistent support from organized labor and popular sectors in Argentina. Its electoral supremacy and monopoly over networks of

brokers in impoverished areas, particularly in its Conurbano stronghold, have been well established. It therefore came as a shock when, in the 2015 election, Cambiemos candidates not only won the presidency, defeating Peronism, but also secured victory in the province of Buenos Aires governorship and eleven mayoral positions in the Conurbano. However, even more surprising is that in these municipalities, which were previously thought to be impenetrable for non-Peronist candidates, Cambiemos mayoral candidates recruited brokers who had formerly campaigned for Peronists. Thus, they adapted to areas with pronounced vulnerability by emulating the territorial network strategies employed by their rivals.

The victory of the center-right Cambiemos in impoverished municipalities signaled a profound change in Argentina's political landscape. Few urban areas in the world account for such a high percentage of a country's population and poverty as the Conurbano Bonaerense, which comprises the mainly poor municipalities surrounding the capital city of Buenos Aires. This historical Peronist bastion houses around one-third of the nation's slums and approximately half of the country's poor. A particularly revealing example of this political transformation occurred in a district studied extensively in this book. The municipality of Lanús earned the title of "capital city of Peronism" in 1946 because it was the Conurbano Bonaerense district where Juan D. Perón won by the largest percentage. In 2015, for the first time in Peronism's history, a non-Peronist candidate, Néstor Grindetti (2015–2023), triumphed in the mayoral election there and took the reins of power. A Cambiemos mayoral candidate was finally able to develop his own territorial networks and wrest power from Peronism. A strong and enduring hegemony had met its end, much to the surprise of most.

The unexpected electoral success of Cambiemos mayoral candidates in the impoverished districts of the Conurbano Bonaerense has provided this book with an excellent case study of how parties can challenge hegemonic machine parties in democracies of the Global South, as well as the conditions under which brokers change their affiliations. The book has demonstrated how the arguments developed from the competition between Cambiemos and Peronism in areas of segregated vulnerability can be applied to the INC in India, the PRI in Mexico, and their respective challengers.

An important lesson derived from this research is that relying on a system of hired *punteros* as the primary link to the vulnerable poor can severely weaken a party whose base consists mainly of the most deprived. In his seminal analysis of Peronism in the 1990s,

Levitsky (2003, 248) speculated about the possibility that the PJ's transformation from a union-based to a territorially organized party could erode its links to the popular sectors in the future. Almost two decades later, this conjecture proved prescient. A party capable of establishing a similar grassroots organization emerged and outperformed the PJ in some of its strongholds. A strategy that consists of distributing resources through territorial networks is, evidently, one that can be emulated by other parties.

The idea that some parties are invincible machines is therefore too static an interpretation of how parties compete for the vote of the poor. In impoverished districts, parties could face serious problems if they cannot offer the poor anything other than the discretionary and minimalistic welfare state channeled through brokers. Without a programmatic agenda for socioeconomic inclusion, these parties can lose their vitality and competitive edge. The minimalistic welfare state provided through networks of brokers in Argentina, in Auyero's words, has become "the remnants of the populist heresy ... the leftovers of a golden time" (2000, 204). Though it may take a long time for a machine party's hegemony to wane, those that rely primarily on brokers' discretionary allocation of resources are ultimately replaceable.

What distinguishes this book from existing literature is its portrayal of the entire process by which challengers to hegemonic machine parties built their own networks from scratch by enlisting brokers who had previously worked for those machine parties, as well as new brokers who had not previously engaged. Extensive ethnographic research and firsthand observation of mayors and *punteros*' deals provided a unique opportunity to capture the whole picture of the machine-building process, rather than mere snapshots. The evidence indicates that at the beginning of the 2015 campaign, Cambiemos mayoral candidates did *not* command large networks of *referentes* in the poor Conurbano. However, driven by a strong desire to seize power from Peronism, they committed extensive resources to the arduous task of network-building. Few, especially in their own party, considered it possible to break the Peronist stranglehold on territorial networks in vulnerable areas. However, the commodification of *punteros* and high levels of Peronist infighting gave Cambiemos candidates the opportunity to forge their own networks to compete with the Peronist ones.

In their effort to adapt to the poor districts they sought to govern, Cambiemos mayoral candidates discovered that *punteros*' main concern was to access resources to address the material needs of themselves

and their neighbors. Consequently, Cambiemos candidates willing to pay found *punteros* ready to switch allegiances and work for them. The Peronist *puntero* described in Chapter 1, who had a parrot that could sing the anthem of the PJ even after he had switched to campaign for Cambiemos, is just one illustration of this process. Since brokers prioritize access to resources, many of them were willing not only to switch bosses but to work for a different party entirely. In essence, ideological commitment alone does not suffice to retain the loyalty of machine party brokers. Brokers are rational actors whose primary asset is their influence in and responsiveness to their communities. To serve their constituents, they need access to resources. As *punteros* often assert, “a *referente* without resources is not a *referente*.” This book even presents the fees *punteros* typically charge politicians for the different services they provide.

An important finding of this study is that the perceived advantage of machine parties is, in fact, rooted in the personal attributes of its *referentes*. Machine parties are usually renowned for their capillarity and delivery of benefits. However, it is not local party organizations that maintain this crucial connection with the poor; rather, it is *punteros* living and working in these vulnerable areas who are the capillaries. They also personally enjoy the reputation for delivering essential resources to voters. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that brokers are the ones in touch with and responsive to their neighbors, and that the formal party organization often remains conspicuously absent from brokers’ daily operations in their territories. The UBs, the local organization cells of the PJ that were so common in the past, have mostly disappeared from the neighborhoods.

During the fieldwork, the personal style of relationship that *punteros* have with their neighbors became apparent. I saw *referentes* hosting dinner for dozens of children in their own homes and addressing each child by name. I witnessed a *referente* cooking the favorite dish of an elderly neighbor to celebrate his birthday with fifty other seniors. I met a *referente* in a hospital as he was obtaining all the necessary paperwork for one of his followers about to undergo surgery. Brokers are the ones directly offering such services, supplanting the roles traditionally associated with party organizations. This autonomy enables them to work for any candidate willing to provide them with resources. They leverage personal connections with their neighbors to negotiate resources with their bosses. While their loyalty to their neighbors is mostly consistent, their fidelity to their bosses hinges on them remaining in power and providing resources.

The broker who said he needed a boss that gave him the resources to take care of “his flock” effectively characterizes the contrasting dynamics of brokers’ relationships with bosses and clients.

The book also shows that factionalism within machine parties strengthens their challengers’ opportunities. As a machine party achieves dominance as an electoral force, its candidates may be motivated to splinter the party in order to capture a portion of the electorate and gain office. Intense intraparty competition and divisions weaken machine parties. While further research is needed, the evidence amassed in this study shows that social fragmentation, especially in the labor realm, has also exacerbated factionalism and the splintering of the once-dominant machine party. Division within the Peronist ranks played a crucial role in Cambiemos’ ascension to various municipal executive positions in 2015, not only by weakening machine parties’ electoral chances but also by making brokers available to their challengers. The new electoral system introduced in Argentina in 2009, with open and compulsory primaries (PASO), turned Peronist intraparty competition into fierce public battles by 2015. After that year’s PASO, Cambiemos mayoral candidates managed to recruit a substantial portion of the *punteros* who had worked for defeated Peronist candidates. Cambiemos mayors who won for the first time in 2015, along with their *punteros*, admitted in interviews that they took advantage of Peronist infighting to build their networks and win over their constituencies. The Peronist candidates who triumphed in the primaries but lost in the GE all complained that their primary contenders had betrayed them and even supported Cambiemos candidates in the GE. A quantitative analysis of the 2015 electoral results corroborated that Peronist internal competition in primaries facilitated the opposition’s victory in Conurbano municipalities.

An important and interesting fact highlighted in this book is that once in office, Cambiemos mayors used their incumbent powers to enlarge and solidify their own networks of *punteros*, enough so that six of these mayors were reelected in 2019 despite the unpopularity of their presidential candidate. That year, mayors resorted to their *punteros* to disconnect their local campaigns from their party’s national campaign. Ballot clipping (or ticket splitting), a primary strategy by which candidates can distance themselves from their parties, provided an excellent quantitative proxy for analyzing Cambiemos mayors’ territorial network strategies. To extricate themselves from the fate of their national party, Cambiemos mayors sent their *punteros* to distribute clipped ballots in their favor, which was reflected in the difference between Cambiemos successes at

the presidential and mayoral levels. In this way, *punteros* were crucial for local candidates' electoral survival once the national candidate had lost competitiveness.

In addition to the quantitative evidence, my fieldwork revealed political machines working tirelessly to clip ballots, surprisingly not for Peronist candidates but rather for Cambiemos. Etched in my memory is the image of a large shed, with pallets full of different parties' freshly printed ballots and with two *punteros*' followers diligently clipping and packaging their desired combination – the Cambiemos mayor and the Peronist presidential candidate. It was a powerful scene that confirmed that in some districts of the Conurbano Bonaerense, the Peronist machine had lost its hegemony, transforming the political arena.

Moreover, the book shows that the fundamental political dynamics described in this case can also be found in Mexico and India. In Mexico, the phenomenon of segregated vulnerability has also transformed brokers into central links between the poor and the state, and prospective challengers of the PRI's hegemony in poor districts have sought to establish their own networks. Local candidates from the PAN and the PRD recruited brokers to assemble their personal networks and penetrate areas of segregated vulnerability. As observed in the Peronist context, intraparty divisions weakened the PRI, allowing its challengers to enlist brokers to their cause. In India, as in Mexico and Argentina, brokers serve as the linchpins connecting candidates to areas of segregated vulnerability. The BJP, a right-wing religious party, realized, like Cambiemos and the PAN, that to challenge the INC's electoral dominance in poor districts, they needed to develop their own networks of brokers capable of reaching the poor. Factionalism also weakened the INC, providing a window of opportunity for its challengers. The BJP has succeeded in recruiting brokers at such a rapid pace that it is now considered the new dominant machine in the largest democracy in the world. In such diverse countries as Argentina, Mexico, and India, scholars have identified brokers willing to work for whichever candidate or party offers the most promising solutions for their neighborhoods, and in these three countries, machine parties that once seemed unbeatable have lost their hegemonic positions.

Finally, worthy of emphasis is the importance of a more balanced view of brokers. The media, and often scholars as well, portray *punteros* as exploiters of the poor and as obstacles to their free exercise of democratic rights. However, the vulnerable poor follow their brokers' leadership not because they are powerless but because brokers assist them with their many needs. The poor are certainly aware that brokers pursue their own private



interests, but for them, it is more important that brokers can provide them with relief. The fieldwork shows that when poor neighbors need an ambulance in the dead of night, an urgent medical appointment, or even a boat during a flood, brokers are their closest and most immediate providers.

It is not easy to judge brokers' roles without oversimplifying. In the field, I found that brokers are complex political agents driven by a variety of motivations and strategies, including altruism, ideology, and financial incentives. While typologies can be useful to advance the theory and knowledge of politics, scholars studying clientelism should be careful not to force the dynamic realities of the territory into static ideal types. One lesson from this study is that brokers' strategies and territorial politics are far more fluid than previously believed.

Following those authors who foreground the agency of the poor and their brokers (Nichter 2018; Oliveros 2021; Auerbach and Thachil 2023), this book shows, through extensive fieldwork in impoverished areas, that brokers exist because there are pockets of poverty – not the other way around. To understand why neighbors seek their assistance, this book clarifies who *referentes* are and what they do. In slums with weak or nonexistent public services or social benefits, and with no formal property and labor rights, residents embrace the few available channels they find to access state resources. Clientelism does not appear to be the most significant hazard to which the poor are exposed. This book found evidence of neighbors switching brokers and brokers switching parties, but never of communities disposing of all their brokers. In an environment of increasing party competition, this suggests that the poor seek out brokers who can provide solutions, rather than being subjected to an exploitative and oppressive system imposed upon them. The uncomfortable truth is that brokers' exchanges are how democracy delivers in poverty-stricken areas with limited or no access to state services. Politics in the territory shapes politics generally, especially in the Global South, as it influences the relationship between the state and the poor.

Ignoring the conditions from which community leadership and political brokerage emerge leads to a sterile, if not unjust, condemnation of brokers. Focusing on brokers as the cause of clientelism and other exploitations of the poor means failing to see the root of the problem, which lies in the segregated vulnerability experienced by millions in the Global South. Condemning the poor to a lack of public services and goods, as well as depriving them of opportunities for socio-urban integration, while attempting to dismantle any intermediation method they build, is irresponsible at best.

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