“The Unevenness of Democracy at the Sub-National Level: Provincial Closed Games in Argentina”¹

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Abstract: Democratisation studies have tended to focus on processes at the national level, but have often neglected the spatially uneven nature of democracy at the sub-national level. This paper draws on examples from Argentina and develops an analytical framework of closed games to analyse the functioning of democracy at the sub-national level. It argues that the less democratic provinces or states of a nationally democratic country are not necessarily authoritarian and that the concept of sub-national authoritarianism prevents us from seeing political dynamics that may arise in the context of a reasonably well-functioning electoral democracy and that may result in closed games at the sub-national level. By focusing on two provincial case studies, the paper develops a framework to analyse the persistence of relatively closed sub-national regimes that takes into account the role of political families, media ownership, control of access to business opportunities and control of the provincial state.

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**Introduction**

In 1983, Argentina held elections that heralded the end of seven years of military dictatorship. Democracy was re-established and a president, 23 governors, national and provincial legislators, mayors and councillors were elected across all provinces. Yet the way politics was organised and practiced across the country varied greatly and in many provinces, continuity was more frequent than change. Members of the families that had controlled provincial politics for much of the 20th century, and had at times also collaborated with successive military regimes, were returned to the governorship in many provinces.

Democratisation studies initially focused on processes at the national level, but except for passing references (O’Donnell 1993), largely neglected the remarkable variation that may exist at the regional or sub-national level. The whole-nation bias of the democratisation literature left aside the fact that democracy may unfold in a spatially uneven manner. In recent years, the importance of “scaling down” (Snyder 2001) has become more evident and a number of scholarly works have turned their attention to the persistence of less democratic, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian sub-national units in nationally democratic countries. Yet, with few exceptions, most scholarly works have analysed problems of sub-national democratisation through the lens of sub-national authoritarianism (Gibson 2005, 2009). This paper argues that the less democratic provinces or states of a nationally democratic country are not necessarily authoritarian and that the concept of sub-national authoritarianism prevents us from seeing political dynamics that may arise in the context of a reasonably well-functioning electoral democracy. This paper builds on a growing literature on sub-national politics by developing the concept of closed game and building an analytical framework that explains the persistence of relatively closed and less democratic sub-national regimes in nationally democratic countries. The framework takes into account the role of political families, media ownership, control of access to business opportunities and control of the provincial state. In closed games, the elite has more subtle – non-authoritarian – forms of control grounded in socio-economic practices that enable it to reproduce itself over time.

Studies of sub-national politics have tended to explain the persistence of less democratic or hybrid sub-national regimes as a result of federal dynamics (Gibson 2005; Giraudy 2009) or local electoral rules (Calvo and Micozzi 2005; Calvo and Escolar 2005), but have largely ignored the endogenous dynamics that give rise to closed games and enable their reproduction. The analytical framework of the closed game focuses on the logic of continuity of less competitive sub-national regimes and their articulation with the national polity. Closed games do not necessarily function in opposition to the national political regime, but may be functional to it by providing support for national governments. This paper focuses specifically on case studies of two Argentine provinces – Corrientes and San Luis – where a reduced group of families has remained in power over several decades through free elections, controlling access to the state, the media, business opportunities, etc., in a context of national democracy.

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2 See (Hagopian 1996); (Cornelius et al 1999); (Gibson 2005 and 2009); (Montero 2007); (Benton forthcoming); (Durazo Herrmann 2009); (Giraudy 2009). In Argentina, research on federalism and the role of provinces in national policy-making also led to a growing interest in sub-national political regimes (Gibson and Calvo 2000; Calvo and Abal Medina 2001; Gibson 2004; Faletti 2004; Calvo and Escolar 2005).

3 E.g. (Gervasoni 2008).
The paper is organised as follows. In the first section, I review the literature on hybrid regimes and the usefulness of the concept to contextualise closed games as a type of hybrid regime. I then present the framework of the closed game in the second section and explain the variation that may arise within this framework. In the third section, I use original empirical research to apply the framework to two Argentine provincial case studies: Corrientes and San Luis. In the fourth section, I look at national-provincial relations. Finally, I conclude by analysing possible paths for sub-national democratisation.

Hybrid Regimes and the Unevenness of Democratisation

Democratic regimes may develop in different and varied ways. Yet the different ways in which democracy unfolds at the sub-national level do not necessarily mean that the least democratic provinces in a country are authoritarian. The category of “sub-national authoritarianism” has been used to describe provinces or states where governors exert a tight control over the state legislature, the law enforcement system and the media, usually through coercive means (Cornelius 1999, 7; Gibson 2005). This literature stresses the ways in which sub-national democratisation or lack thereof may effectively constrain national democratisation processes. However, national politics also functions as a constraint on sub-national politics. The sub-national regimes this paper deals with are embedded in nationally democratic regimes and this limits what sub-national rulers can and cannot do. It means that local rulers cannot govern in isolation from the national democratic polity and that they cannot sustain conventionally authoritarian regimes.

Governors may well seek to maintain their regional bastions relatively closed or isolated from national politics, but this is not always possible or desirable. It is not possible because national and sub-national politics interact continuously in Congress, in the implementation of federal policy, through elections and through national political parties with local branches, and also because sub-national politics is constrained by the rules that govern the nation as a whole. Even if the press is controlled at the local level, there is national media. Moreover, there are geographical constraints: people can move from one province to another and are therefore in contact with other provincial regimes and with the national political regime, and they are not forced to remain in their provinces. All of this puts a limit to local elites’ attempts to maintain politics in their provinces insulated from the national polity. It may also not be desirable for sub-national leaders to maintain their regional bastions isolated, because they may have political ambitions at the national level. In a context of national democracy, it is therefore unlikely that sub-national units will be authoritarian in a conventional way. The emergence of “hybrid” sub-national regimes is a more likely possibility.

The category of hybrid regimes has been used to describe regimes that are “mixed” and contain both democratic and authoritarian elements (Diamond 2002; Collier and Levitsky 1997, 441). They inhabit the middle ground between authoritarianism and full democracy, but although they may not be fully democratic, they cannot be considered conventionally authoritarian. The notion of hybridity illustrates the fact that democratisation is not “a cut-and-dried one step shift to a new equilibrium” (Whitehead 2002, 246). It is unlikely that democracy will permeate all aspects of a polity from one day to the next and even if democracy becomes “the only

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4 Gervasoni (2008) makes a similar argument.
game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 5), this game can have enormous regional variation.

Even if there are occasional episodes of repression or outbreaks of violence, it is fair to say that all Argentine provinces have reasonably democratic regimes: they hold regular and clean elections, there is universal adult suffrage, freedom of speech and freedom to organise public protests, there are opposition parties that win legislative seats or municipalities, no political parties are banned and the media is not subject to censorship or totalitarian control. Winning elections, and winning them fairly, is important in these regimes and the local elite’s legitimacy at the provincial level and its leverage at the national level hinges on this. That is, elections are far from being a farce. These regimes are therefore not cases of electoral authoritarianism. They are also not cases of competitive authoritarianism, where formal democratic institutions are the principal means of obtaining political authority, but incumbents violate those rules to such an extent that the regime fails to meet the minimum standards for democracy (Levitsky and Way 2002, 52). In competitive authoritarian regimes, electoral results may be manipulated, the opposition harassed, threatened, arrested or even assaulted, which, aside from extreme and exceptional cases, is not common practice in most Argentine provinces.

The ‘Closed Game’ of Provincial Politics: A Framework for Analysis

The sub-national regimes this paper deals with are regimes where political families are important. Family is understood here in broad terms, as a political and not a legal construct. Therefore, although kinship relations tend to predominate, there may be members of a ‘political family’ who are not blood related, but enjoy the full trust of the predominant family and function as members of the extended family. Friends are thus incorporated along with family. Like Balmori et al (1984, 2) and Vilas (1992, 310), when speaking of families, I refer above all to notable families with social prestige, political authority and economic power, although their economic resources may be quite heterogeneous.

Closed games are sub-national political regimes where a family, or a reduced group of families, dominates politics in a province, controlling access to top government positions, the state apparatus, the media and business opportunities; through their control of the provincial state, they also develop a political clientele. This occurs in a context of national democracy.

Closed games are a type of hybrid regime and they are a diminished form of democracy. In closed games, the problem is not that elections are subject to manipulation, but that the elite has other ways of eliciting support that are grounded in cultural practices and economic processes. Elections are not a farce, but an instance that reflects the support elicited by the elite through other forms of control. The elite has often sponsored the reform of electoral legislation or provincial constitutions to make it easier to remain in power (Calvo and Escolar 2005), but generally through legal means. Fundamentally, it has remained in power with the consent of the population and not through electoral manipulation.

The main players in closed games are members of families that belong to the provincial political elite. These are families that have been involved in politics for at least a few decades and, in many cases, for most of the 20th century. Members of these families may belong to different political parties and may be in the ruling group or in the opposition. The families tend to inter-marry and therefore have relatives in different
political parties and factions. The main players can aspire to any kind of elected or un-elective office. Being governor of the province is the main prize, but being governor may enable a member of these families to aspire to the largest prize of all: running for president. There are also secondary players in closed games. These are players who belong to the ‘extended family’ or ‘inner circle’. They often belong to families that are newer in politics or in the province and reach office as part of an opening or broadening of the coalition made by the main players, particularly after 1983. They enter the game through the trust conferred by the main players and the condition of their permanence in the game is loyalty to the governor.

The framework of the closed game is composed of the following dimensions:

1. Free, fair and regular elections
2. Family politics: control of access to top government positions
3. Control of the media
4. Control of the provincial state, distribution of public resources and clientelism
5. Control of business opportunities
6. Control of the judiciary

Institutional rules are obeyed in closed games. In provinces with a small economic structure and limited business opportunities, the political elite uses the state to promote its economic interests and control access to business opportunities (companies owned by the political elite benefit from state contracts, the elite’s newspapers receive state advertisement, members of the economic elite hold government positions, and the elite controls which industries receive tax benefits or subsidies, industrial promotion schemes or favourable loans from the provincial bank). This discrentional use of the state and public resources, in addition to nepotism, contributes to making the distinction between private and public blurred.

In this context, citizens tend to be disaffected from politics and do not participate outside election time. The gulf between elites and citizens is often rooted in structural conditions that elections themselves do not overcome (Carothers 2002, 15). However, this does not mean that elections are not important. Even if closed games are not entirely democratic, they are strongly based on popular electoral preferences. Voters vote for the families because it makes sense to do so: provinces with closed games tend not to have a strong economic structure and voters know through experience that the ruling elite delivers – even if what it delivers is not all that much – and they cannot be certain that the opposition will do the same.

Although participation outside elections is low, there are occasional outbursts of social protest. These protests may become relevant at times, as the case studies will show. Political crises may ensue in closed games and even if in the end the elite succeeds in recomposing the game, the outbreak of social protest shows that control of the closed game is never absolute and maintaining the game requires a great deal of political insight and anticipation.

Control of the media tends not to be coercive. The political families own the most important provincial media and control the public television channel. But state advertising tends to be discrentional. Control of the judiciary is related to the fact that provincial judges are family members or belong to the elite. In more extreme cases, the political elite may harass judges until they resign and then fill the vacancies with family members or friends.

Not all closed games are the same and the differences lie in how the elite controls each of these dimensions. A province’s structural conditions (socio-economic
structure, poverty levels), solvency of the provincial state (more or less dependent on federal funding) and its political history also explain variation. Table 1 illustrates the different mechanisms provincial elites use to control each of the dimensions that are part of closed games, and the different possible outcomes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSIONS</th>
<th>MECHANISMS</th>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free, fair and regular elections</td>
<td>No direct interference in the electoral process.</td>
<td>Not contested: the opposition sees no point in participating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low contestation: there is more than one candidate, but only one has real chances of winning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Highly contested: more than one candidate has chances of winning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family politics: control of access to top government positions</td>
<td>Only members of the families are nominated for top government positions.</td>
<td>Governor always belongs to the same family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Governor belongs to a group of notable families.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alternation between parties, which are dominated by few families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Predominant party with alternation between families belonging to the same party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-family members are nominated or designated on condition of loyalty to the political families, but they cannot realistically aspire to becoming governor.</td>
<td>Non-family members become Cabinet members, mayors, legislators, but are not allowed to escalate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-family members develop political ambitions and a political crisis ensues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of the media</td>
<td>Newspaper ownership.</td>
<td>There is only one newspaper and it is owned by the elite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is more than one newspaper, but they are all owned by the political families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ownership/control of television channels.</td>
<td>Elite controls the public television channel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elite owns cable television channel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withholding state advertisement.</td>
<td>Small independent newspapers exist, but receive no state advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There is at least one independent cable television channel, but it receives no state advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Small independent radio stations exist, but receive no state advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journalists are harassed.</td>
<td>Independent journalists are afraid to publish/air critical news items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of the provincial state, distribution of public resources and clientelism</td>
<td>Distribution of public sector jobs.</td>
<td>Clientelist networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution of subsidised housing plans.</td>
<td>Politics is personalised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution of unemployment plans.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution of social assistance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discretionary application of social policy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discretionary allocation of public pensions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Handouts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control of business opportunities</th>
<th>Allocation of state contracts.</th>
<th>Elite’s companies benefit from state contracts (e.g. construction, printing, services, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allocation of tax benefits or industrial promotion programmes.</td>
<td>Elite has discretion to decide which companies receive benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Businessmen/business elite hold government positions.</td>
<td>Subsidies awarded to industries linked to the elite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corruption, bribes, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control of the judiciary</th>
<th>Judges are members of the family network.</th>
<th>Friendly courts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Designation of judges.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judges/prosecutors are harassed.</td>
<td>Resignation of independent judges, leaving vacancies for new designations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The closure of the game operates on two levels. The first and most important is that the game is closed with regard to who can realistically aspire to participating in politics in a province (both elective and non-elective office holding). It refers to the concentration of political, economic, media and symbolic power in the hands of a few families. The second type of closure, which also constitutes a limit to the closed game, lies in national politics. Governors seek to maintain the political game in their provinces closed and insulated from national politics in order to strengthen control of their geographical domain. This is possible because governors have a great deal of political and, to a lesser extent, financial autonomy. They are usually the head of the provincial branch of their political party if it is a national party and control the design of electoral lists; this awards them influence in national parties. And they usually have loyal voters.

Yet, it is not always possible for the provincial elite to maintain the province closed from national politics. National and provincial politics interact and influence each other continuously and closed games have an impact on national politics and national democracy. As Gibson and Suárez Cao (forthcoming) argue, in federal countries, party systems are composed of a national party system and sub-national party systems, and the structure and dynamics of party competition at the federal level cannot be understood without taking into account the relation between these different sub-systems. Governors’ support is needed to approve legislation, implement policy and ensure votes in presidential elections. Smaller provinces, which are over-represented in

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5 This is what Gibson (2005) calls “boundary control”.
Congress, are often part of government coalitions. Moreover, many presidents are former provincial governors and governors often have presidential ambitions. The institutional characteristics of Argentine federalism mean that a governor of a province with a small population and scarce participation in national GDP can project himself to the presidency.

Closed games are also not merely examples of patrimonialism or nepotism. They are sustained by well-organised political systems with stable institutions, highly structured political practices, newspapers, families, clienteles and a judicial system. The closed game includes an institutional account of a well-organised political system.

In closed games, the focus is on families and not on parties or party systems. Closed games may develop in provinces with a predominant party, as the case of San Luis in Argentina illustrates, or in provinces where, at a first glance, there is limited pluralism (Sartori 1976), as the case of Corrientes in Argentina illustrates. This occurs because political families may be concentrated in one predominant political party or family members may be present in several political parties. In many cases, each of the political parties active in a province reproduces the family dynamics of the closed game when it reaches power. In this case, there may be alternation between parties, but the structure of the closed game is reproduced by each party that reaches office.

The following sections apply the framework of the closed game to two Argentine provinces: Corrientes and San Luis.

Two provincial closed games: Corrientes and San Luis

In 1983, José Antonio “Pocho” Romero Feris was elected governor of the North-Eastern province of Corrientes. Ten years later, his younger brother, Raúl “Tato” Romero Feris, was elected governor. He had been mayor of the provincial capital from 1987 to 1991, and was once again elected mayor after his term as governor ended. The Romero Feris brothers, who belonged to the provincial Partido Autonomista, came from a family that had been active in politics in Corrientes since the mid-20th century.

In San Luis, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá, a young Peronist politician, was elected governor in 1983. His family had been involved in provincial politics since the 19th century. Rodríguez Saá was uninterruptedly governor of San Luis for a record nineteen years until he resigned in 2001 to become president of Argentina for seven days. His brother Alberto was elected governor in 2003 and re-elected in 2007, while Adolfo was elected to the Lower House.

The Romero Feris and the Rodríguez Saá are examples of provincial political families that developed closed games in their provinces. They are exemplary, but they are not unique in Argentine politics. Several other provinces, including Santiago del Estero, Catamarca, Salta and Neuquén, evidence closed games where a single family or

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6 Gibson and Calvo (2000), and Jones and Hwang (2005) show that President Carlos Menem’s success in implementing many of his most controversial economic reforms during the 1990s was due to the coalitions he built with the peripheral (less populous and over-represented) provinces and the support of provincial governors. In exchange, Menem spared them the cost of these reforms in the initial stage and maintained a flow of federal resources to their provinces.

7 Once a governor’s term ends or they have been re-elected as many times as the constitution allows, they can either retire from politics, run for a lower position (such as senator) or run for president.

8 Rodríguez Saá was designated president in December 2001 by a Legislative Assembly in heat of the political crisis that broke out after the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa and the outbreak of massive protests against him.
a reduced group of families succeeded in remaining in power for a remarkable number of years.

The selection of these two cases is based on criteria of similarities and differences. Both provinces were governed by families that achieved remarkable control over politics in their provinces. However, the degree of control achieved varied. The main differences lie in the provincial party system, economic and structural characteristics, and the level of fiscal solvency and autonomy of the provincial state. I selected one province, Corrientes, that was traditionally governed by provincial parties, is heavily dependent on federal transfers and has a limited economic structure. The second province, San Luis, is governed by a national party, the PJ, has fiscal autonomy and underwent an important process of state-led industrialisation.

Controlled Alternation: The Closed Game in Corrientes

Throughout most of the 20th century, Corrientes was ruled by the Autonomista Party and the Liberal Party, which alternated in power, and after 1961 by the Autonomista-Liberal Pact (hereafter, PAL or Pact), an alliance whereby the two parties shared power. These parties, which are heirs of the two national conservative parties created in the 19th century (the Partido Autonomista Nacional and the Partido Liberal), subsisted as provincial parties in Corrientes despite their disappearance in the rest of the country. Corrientes was one of the few Argentine provinces where the provincial political system continued to be dominated by provincial instead of national parties after 1983. The province therefore remained relatively insulated from national politics during most of the 20th century.

Seen from the outside, Corrientes appeared to have a party system where there was alternation. Yet power alternated among two parties that were part of an alliance and were dominated by a reduced group of political families, with the predominance of the Romero Feris family.

In 1992, after a stalemate in the electoral college over the election of governor and an ensuing political crisis, the federal government intervened the province. However, the closed game proved resilient.

Table 2: Corrientes: Socio-economic Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (2001)</td>
<td>930,991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population below the poverty line (2001)</td>
<td>57.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (2001)</td>
<td>16.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed population in the public sector (2001)</td>
<td>26.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in national GDP (1998)</td>
<td>1.2 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Free, Fair and Regular Elections

Politics in Corrientes functioned smoothly during the first decade after national democratisation in 1983. The political elite in Corrientes succeeded in creating a stable

9 However, since 2001, Corrientes is governed by a coalition of parties headed by the UCR.
10 Other cases are the provinces of Neuquén and San Juan.
political regime in which members of certain families and, particularly, of the two parties that formed the Pact, peacefully alternated in power until the mid-1990s. The Autonomista-Liberal Pact won every election without facing major electoral challenges. In 1995, Governor Raúl Romero Feris created a new political party, the PaNu (Partido Nuevo), which was an offspring of the Pact, and the result of a factional struggle with his brother and his alliance with President Menem. Hereafter, the PaNu began to win elections in the province. As Table 2 shows, the Pact was the strongest electoral force after 1983 until the appearance of the PaNu in 1995.

Table 3: Corrientes: electoral results for governor and provincial deputies, 1983-1999 (% of votes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1989</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gov.</td>
<td>46.61</td>
<td>*45.56</td>
<td>49.81</td>
<td>44.35</td>
<td>44.21</td>
<td>40.49</td>
<td>43.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td>43.44</td>
<td>54.44</td>
<td>50.19</td>
<td>55.71</td>
<td>55.79</td>
<td>59.51</td>
<td>56.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>22.94</td>
<td>23.10</td>
<td>18.87</td>
<td>18.44</td>
<td>18.60</td>
<td>32.75</td>
<td>33.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>20.70</td>
<td>21.01</td>
<td>24.04</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td>24.83</td>
<td>23.32</td>
<td>17.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>12.36</td>
<td>10.85</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gov.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PANU</td>
<td>48.49</td>
<td>70.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>18.23</td>
<td>18.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>13.27</td>
<td>14.18 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interior Ministry
* The Liberal and Autonomista parties went on separate tickets in these elections, although they joined forces in the PAL. The Autonomistas obtained 28.59 % of the vote and the Liberals 16.97 %.
** UCR in alliance with Frepaso

Family Politics: Control of Access to Top Government Positions

The Romero Feris family was the dominant political family within the provincial family network from the early 1970s until the turn of the 21st century, and three of the governors and one deputy governor elected since 1973 (there was no re-election in Corrientes until 2007) belonged to the family. Even when it was not at the helm of the province, the family continued to hold executive or legislative positions. Not all members of the Romero Feris family were in the same political party. The Romero side is Peronist. The Feris and the Romero Feris are Autonomistas. And the PaNu was created and dominated by Raúl Romero Feris. The family also had kinship ties with members of the Liberal Party through marriage. Thus, the kinship relations of this family covered most of the political spectrum in the province.

After 2001, a new family that belonged to the opposition Radical Party reached the governorship: the Colombi family.

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11 There were no elections during the military dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983. The other governors elected after 1983, Ricardo Leconte and Pedro Braillard Poccard, also belonged to the provincial network of notable families, as did most of the cabinet ministers during this period (Jaime 2002).
12 With the exception of the Radical Party, although this does not mean that kinship relations are not important in the provincial Radical Party.
Control of the Media

Corrientes has three provincial newspapers: *El Litoral*, which has the largest circulation, *Época* and *El Libertador*. All three are owned by political families. *El Litoral* belongs to the Romero Feris family and is run by a brother of the two former governors. *Época* belongs to their Peronist cousins, the Romeros. *El Libertador* is owned by another Peronist strongman and former national deputy, Rodolfo Martínez Llano. Although all three newspapers belong to political families, they are aligned in two different political parties. The structure of print media ownership is therefore part of the closed game, but it also reflects the factionalism within the elite and of provincial politics. This means that, to a certain extent, competing views of events are reported, even if they only reflect the political elite’s factionalism. These families own local radio stations and the provincial government controls the local public television channel.

The Colombi family does not own any print media, but Arturo Colombi’s inner circle created an internet news agency that, apart from transmitting the governor’s viewpoint, controlled the distribution of state advertising.

Control of the Provincial State, Distribution of Public Resources and Clientelism

In Corrientes, 26.8 per cent of the economically active population was employed in the public sector, according to data from 2001 (UNDP 2005). The political elite derived its legitimacy from delivering public works, jobs and goods to voters. Public works were the sign of a good government for the elite and in a province with few industries and job opportunities, the state was an important source of employment. Between 1987 and 1999, the number of state employees increased from 35,843 to 41,401 (Economy Ministry n.d.).

Although clientelism is difficult to quantify, public sector jobs and the distribution of food or housing material prior to elections was a common practice in Corrientes in the times of the Pact, according to politicians from the Pact. Unemployment plans became an important source of income for many households in the 1990s. Most of these plans were federally-funded but administrated provincially and were perceived to be a benefit awarded by the provincial government. The number of beneficiaries of federally-funded unemployment plans increased from 2,750 in 1994 to 58,731 in 1998 in a province with a population of 930,991 (UNNE 2000: 280).

Corrientes also benefited from funding from the FONAVI federal housing programme, which enabled provincial governments to construct cheap subsidised homes. Former governor J.A. Romero Feris said his government (1983-1987) built around 24,000 housing units with FONAVI funds. Between 1992 and 1998, 34,889 housing units were built. (Ministerio de Economía 2000).

Control of Business Opportunities

Control of access to business opportunities played a central role in Corrientes, which has very little industry. In 2001 there were only four large firms in the province and 43 small and medium-sized businesses (UNDP 2005, 142). Most of the provincial political families belong to a landed oligarchy and own agro-businesses in the province. But the

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13 This figure only includes the provincial administration and does not include other public sector employees such as teachers and doctors.

14 Author’s interviews with J.A. Romero Feris and J.C. Raffò.

15 Author’s interview with J.A. Romero Feris.
Romero Feris family set up companies and began to do business with the provincial state.

The construction company, EACSA, owned by the Romero Feris family, undertook several state contracts. In 1993, the federal intervention sent by the national government initiated lawsuits against EACSA for fraud against the provincial housing institute, in charge of constructing the housing units built with funds from the FONAVI, and for fraud against the provincial water company for other construction works undertaken by the company. Former directors of the provincial bank were also accused of fraudulent management by the intervention for allegedly giving easy loans to companies owned by members of the political elite. Lawsuits were filed against the provincial energy body and the provincial road-building institution, all of which involved members of the Romero Feris family (El Litoral 25/10/1992).

In addition, the newspaper owned by the Romero Feris family received state advertising. Indeed, most of its large-scale advertising appeared to be from the provincial state.16

Control of the Judiciary

During the federal intervention sent by the national government in 1992, the federal interventor accused the provincial Supreme Court of “responding to the political interests of the ruling ‘families’” (El Litoral 25/10/1992).

There was no evidence of direct attempts by the elite to control the courts or force the resignation of judges through intimidation or other manoeuvres in Corrientes. However, this was probably due to the fact that, because of the province’s social structure, many judges were members of the provincial political families and were inclined to sympathise with their relatives.

Crisis, Protest, Intervention and a New Family Politics

In 1999, mobilisations began to be held in the provincial capital. The provincial state was in paralysis and unable to fulfil its basic functions or pay its employees, and there was an intra-elite crisis. The protest, which lasted nine months, and the political crisis that ensued had little national media coverage until December 1999, when, less than a week after taking office, President Fernando de la Rúa ordered its brutal repression.17 In the context of the protest, the governor of Corrientes and the mayor of the provincial capital were impeached. The federal intervention lasted two years and a governor from another party – the president’s party – and another family was elected. The dynamics of family politics, elite agreements and factionalism, however, continued after the election of Governor Ricardo Colombi. His cousin, Arturo Colombi, succeeded him as governor in 2005. In 2009, the two cousins competed for the governorship and Ricardo won the elections. Each Colombi was backed by a different Romero Feris brother.18 The political party in power had changed, but yet another family had reached power and was once again renewing the provincial tradition of family politics, elite settlements and factional disputes.

17 Two people were killed and 25 injured in the repression.
18 Arturo Colombi allied with Tato Romero Feris and Ricardo Colombi allied with J.A. Romero Feris.
The All-Powerful Family: The Closed Game in San Luis

The province of San Luis has been governed since 1983 by members of the Rodríguez Saá family enrolled in the Peronist Party. The Rodriguez Saá created one of the most closed provincial political regimes in Argentina, where in a period of 26 years, alternation only occurred between two brothers. Their use of an industrial promotion regime awarded to the province, and sound financial management of the province’s accounts enabled them to achieve economic independence from the federal government and have greater scope for political manoeuvre.

Table 4: San Luis: Socio-economic Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>367,933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population below the poverty line</td>
<td>40.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment (2003)</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed population in the public sector</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to national GDP</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Free, Fair and Regular Elections

When Adolfo Rodríguez Saá won the elections for governor in 1983, he did so with only a handful of votes more than his main contender from the Radical Party. But by the early 1990s, he was winning elections with an ever increasing majority of votes. Adolfo Rodríguez Saá – and after 2003 his brother Alberto – consistently won elections in the province and by 2003, they were winning elections with 90 per cent of votes (see Table 3). A 1987 constitutional reform enabled the indefinite re-election of the governor, allowing Adolfo to run for five consecutive terms in office.

Table 5: San Luis: Electoral results for governor and provincial deputies, 1983-2003 (% of votes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1989</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>40.48</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45.50</td>
<td>52.13</td>
<td>44.16</td>
<td>41.94</td>
<td>51.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>37.29</td>
<td>49.08</td>
<td>32.87</td>
<td>33.73</td>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>36.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22.25</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>22.10</td>
<td>20.80</td>
<td>11.27</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>44.24</td>
<td>54.32</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>63.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>32.49</td>
<td>44.99</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23.28</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>23.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19 Rodríguez Saá had only three percentage points more than his contender, which amounted to 3,873 votes (Interior Ministry).
Family Politics: Control of Access to Top Government Positions

The Rodríguez Saá family was not new on the political scene in San Luis and can be traced back to the independence wars of the 19th century. Members of the family figure prominently among the founders of the Unión Cívica Radical in the late 19th century and in the provincial Liberal Party. Indeed, there was a remarkable presence of members of the Rodríguez Saá family in high positions – including eight governors – after 1860 and until the election of President Juan Perón in the mid-1940s. From then on, the family only appeared sporadically in politics and returned with Adolfo and Alberto Rodríguez Saá’s conversion to Peronism in the early 1970s.

In his youth, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá had been a member of the Liberal Party and a virulent anti-Peronist. But when he and his brother returned to San Luis after earning law degrees in Buenos Aires in 1971, they became members of the provincial Peronist Party and quickly escalated within party ranks. Reform of the Constitution in 1987 ensured the family’s continuity in power. Adolfo sought to curb the political ambitions of many of his collaborators and was successful to a great extent, except in the capital city of San Luis, where Peronist mayors increasingly distanced themselves from the governor’s control towards the end of the 1990s.

Control of the Media

Control of provincial media was fundamental to sustain the closed game. In the beginning of the 1980s, San Luis had two newspapers: El Diario de San Luis, a morning daily with the greatest circulation, and La Opinión, an evening newspaper. In 1984, a corporation formed by close collaborators of the governor purchased El Diario de San Luis. A few years later, collaborators of Rodríguez Saá acquired La Opinión, which began to be managed by a relative. Allegations of fraudulent manoeuvres surrounded the purchase of the two newspapers. From 1984 onwards, the directors of El Diario de San Luis were people who had occupied or would later occupy key government

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ/FV</td>
<td>36.05</td>
<td>86.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leg.</td>
<td>**</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ/FV</td>
<td>16.48</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>14.22</td>
<td>11.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>24.81</td>
<td>13.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interior Ministry
* In alliance with Frepaso.
** Dissident Peronists allied with President Kirchner.
*** Partido Unión y Libertad, founded and controlled by Alberto Rodríguez Saá.

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20 I take into account direct members of the Rodríguez Saá family who bear the same surname and other close relatives on their maternal side who bear different surnames.
21 This was a period of mostly military rule, with only two interludes of elections between 1958-1962 and 1963-1966, during which Peronism was banned.
22 Many of the properties that allegedly belong to the Rodríguez Saá family are registered under the names of front men (Wiñazki 2002).
23 La Opinión was shut down in 2004.
24 In 1984 the newspaper’s owner was in financial difficulties. Before negotiations to purchase the newspaper began, the San Luis government withdrew official advertisement from the newspaper and forced it to near bankruptcy (Wiñazki 2002, 138)
positions and since 1996, the director of the newspaper has been the Rodríguez Saá brothers’ sister, Zulema Rodríguez Saá de Di vizia. The interests of the newspaper and the government have been very closely linked since 1984. Democratisation in San Luis, far from meaning pluralism and open debate in the media, involved the creation of a media conglomerate owned by the family that controlled politics.

Apart from the structure of media ownership, what made the boundaries between the state and private business interests even more unclear was the use made of the newspaper by the political elite. El Diario de la República, as it came to be called, achieved a monopoly of state advertising, a source of income that should not be underestimated for any media, particularly in a province where there are few large-scale advertisers. Similarly, the ownership of television channels also shows a remarkable degree of concentration in the hands of Rodríguez Saá’s trusted collaborators and family. Channel 13, the only provincial open air channel, is managed by the San Luis government. The provincial cable television channel was independent until 1991, when the owner decided to sell it, allegedly due to government pressure. It was bought by a close collaborator of Rodríguez Saá.25 Alberto Rodríguez Saá’s former wife is the director of a radio station.

Control of the provincial state, distribution of public resources and clientelism

As governor, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá developed the image of someone who “delivered”: a governor who industrialised the province, provided employment opportunities linked to industrialisation, undertook public works and built cheap housing with FONAVI federal funds.

The regime developed a clientele that was strengthened even more after 2003 with the creation of the Social Inclusion Plan, which initially benefited around 48,000 unemployed adults over the age of 18 (roughly 31 per cent of the Economically Active Population).26 Twenty-five per cent of the government budget was assigned to this programme.27

Control of Business Opportunities

As of 1983, San Luis underwent a process of rapid industrialisation with the aid of an Industrial Promotion Law, which awarded tax cuts to industries that settled in the province.28 The tax the exemptions and deferrals were for federal taxes, so the province had everything to gain from the scheme and nothing to lose. Adolfo Rodríguez Saá created a populist, yet modernising, regime. He used provincial revenue astutely and built infrastructure to promote the settlement of industries in San Luis. At the same time, the two brothers began to do business with the provincial state. Construction and printing contracts were awarded to companies owned by the family or front men. Because the application of the industrial promotion scheme was in the hands of provincial and not national authorities, Rodríguez Saá was able to effectively control

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25 Author’s interview with a San Luis journalist.

26 Official statistics about the plan’s beneficiaries are not publicly available and different government officials gave numbers that ranged from 40,000 to 48,000 beneficiaries; however, authorities claimed that many of these people had left the plan and found jobs in the labour market and that between 30,000 and 35,000 remained in the plan in 2005.

27 Author’s interview with Deputy Minister for Work Culture Vilma Carossia, 14/7/2005.

28 Eager to have good relations with Peronist governors and prevent the factionalism that had led to political instability in the 1970s, Radical President Raúl Alfonsin favoured four provinces with industrial promotion regimes.
access to business opportunities in the province by deciding which companies would be awarded tax benefits. Many companies denounced that they had been asked for bribes in exchange for tax benefits.

Industrial promotion dramatically changed the province of San Luis in more than one respect. In first place, it changed its economic and social structure: in 1980, the industrial sector accounted for 21.8 per cent of provincial GRP; by 1997, it accounted for 57.76 per cent of GRP. In second place, industrial promotion gave Adolfo Rodriguez Saá control over material and symbolic resources that enabled him to expand his power base, be re-elected for five consecutive terms in office, project himself at the national level and become hegemonic in his province. He came to be seen as the man who had industrialised San Luis.

Control of the Judiciary

In San Luis, the Rodriguez Saá family began to exert greater control over the courts and to interfere with the judiciary’s independence from 1995 onwards, when a series of laws that aimed at controlling the judiciary were enacted (Cieza et al 2005). These laws sought to undermine judicial independence, limit the judiciary’s control over other state powers, impose obedience to the executive, expel those who were reluctant to comply with the executive and incorporate docile judges (CELS 2002). The approval of this legislation was accompanied by a fierce slander campaign against judges in El Diario de la República, which ended with the resignation en masse of all provincial Supreme Court justices except one in December 1996. This enabled the provincial government to designate new judges with close links to the government, many of whom had held key positions in the executive or legislative branch (CELS 2002).

Crisis, Protest and Recomposition

In 2004, a series of protests broke out in the provincial capital after the government intervened Church-run institutes for minors and state schools. Weekly multitudinous marches began to be held. Opposition also arose within the local Peronist Party: the elite was divided and two different persons claimed to be the legitimate mayor of the capital. A few months after the protests began, two prosecutors and judges from San Luis denounced that they had been forced to sign resignation letters before accepting their positions.

The national government contemplated the possibility of sending a federal intervention to the province, but President Néstor Kirchner’s recent experience with an intervention in Santiago del Estero had shown him that the electoral outcome might not benefit the national government. Despite opposition in the provincial capital, the Rodriguez Saá brothers had a large constituency and a political clientele; they had been winning elections with an overwhelming majority for years and it was likely that they would continue winning elections after a federal intervention. The national government therefore chose an electoral strategy. Kirchner put his weight behind the municipal government and encouraged the mayor to run for the Senate. Peronism was thus electorally divided in the province and the dissident Peronists won a Senate seat and representation in the Lower House.

The Rodriguez Saá brothers let the conflicts die out and negotiated separately with each sector, thus dividing the movement. After a while, the regime recomposed itself and the two brothers continued winning elections in San Luis: Alberto Rodriguez
Saá was re-elected in 2007 with over 80 per cent of the vote and the protest movement became a thing of the past.

**National-Provincial Relations and the Persistence of Closed Games**

Up to now, this paper has focused on the internal dynamics of closed games to explain how these regimes maintain the closure of provincial politics. As mentioned in the third section above, political elites seek to maintain the game of politics in their provinces closed in two respects: internally, in terms of who can access power and how power is exercised at the provincial level; and externally, with regard to national politics, in order to strengthen and maintain control of their geographical domain. This is not always possible because national and provincial politics are inextricably linked and mutually influence each other. However, the relationship between provincial closed games and national politics is not always one of “boundary control” by local elites, as federal governments often contribute to the persistence and reproduction of closed games.

In some cases, non-intervention or active support by the national government enabled the ruling families in both Corrientes and San Luis to maintain the closure of the game. In others, the closed game persisted despite national government involvement. The persistence and reproduction of closed games is therefore not explained by a single variable. It is explained by a combination of internal and external dynamics – of both local politics and federal strategies.

What explains the national government’s non-involvement in provinces with closed games outside moments of political crisis or elections? In first place, if provincial governments are not openly authoritarian or flagrantly violate human rights, the national government will not be concerned with the level of democracy. It will mostly focus on securing support for the implementation of policy and the approval of legislation. Closed games may be less democratic than the national political regime, but they play an important part in national representative politics and presidents need the support of political elites that run provincial closed games. How much leverage provinces have when negotiating with the national government will depend on their economic structure, fiscal situation and electoral weight. Provinces with a limited economic structure, like Corrientes, rely heavily on discretionary and non-discretionary federal transfers. The result is usually the exchange of congressional support for transfers, tax cuts for certain industries or other types of economic benefits. Provinces with a more solvent state, like San Luis, will tend to have greater independence from the national government and will be able to maintain their closed games more insulated. Therefore, as long as alliances between national and provincial governments function smoothly, the national government will tend not to get involved in provincial affairs.

But it may get involved if a governor strongly opposes the national government or confronts the president – for example, by seeking to run for president. In this case, the province will face increasing hostility from the national government. It may also get involved in elections where it stands to lose provincial support or when elections are seen by the rest of the country as a test for the national government. Finally, it may get involved if there is a serious political crisis that the local elite is incapable of handling smoothly.

Closed games are not stable and there are tensions and inconsistencies, as the outbreak of social protest and the rise of opposition within the elite in some of these provinces shows. Situations of local mobilisation and political conflict provide a window into the dynamics of the interaction between local and national politics. When
confronted with local challenges, the provincial elite will seek to “fence in” and keep the conflict localised. Keeping the conflict localised means that they are able to control it, while nationalisation of the conflict evidences a fissure in the closed game and in the provincial elite’s control of politics. Conflict nationalisation is likely to favour the provincial opposition. Two factors may prevent the elite from keeping the conflict within provincial boundaries: national government involvement and national media attention. National media attention will bring a local conflict to the national arena and this may put pressure on the national government to act at the local level. There are three main instruments of national government involvement:

a) Party politics: support for rival factions of the same party or support for opposition parties.

b) Fiscal mechanisms: withholding or increasing non-automatic or discretionary transfers.

c) Federal intervention: national government takes over one or more of the provincial branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial).

The most extreme form of national involvement is through a federal intervention, when provincial elected and non-elected authorities are replaced by federal authorities. Federal interventions are, however, exceptional cases. In some cases, they succeeded in democratising local politics, but in other cases, they were unable to put an end to the closed game. The two cases presented in this paper provide insights in this regard. Corrientes suffered two federal interventions during the 1990s. In the first, the national government explicitly sought to put an end to family politics and achieve the election of a candidate that belonged to the same political party as the president. Despite the federal funds that accompanied the intervention and a reform of electoral rules, a member of the Romero Feris family was elected in elections monitored by the national government following the intervention. When the second intervention occurred in 1999, the political elite was already divided and in crisis. After an unusually long two-year intervention, the national government achieved its implicit objective of overseeing the election of a governor from the same political party as the president, the UCR. Alternation occurred, but the logic of the closed game and the dynamics of family politics proved resilient. A similar situation occurred in other provinces that were intervened.

In San Luis, the national government decided against intervening because polls showed that the Rodriguez Saá brothers would continue winning elections even after a federal intervention. Many presidents are former governors who ran provincial bastions of their own and they are unlikely to feel inclined to dismantle other governors’ closed games. Dismantling a closed game may also prove a challenging task. National

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29 This expression was used by the former governor of San Luis, Adolfo Rodriguez Saá.
30 Gibson (2009, 19-20) also makes this point.
31 In Santiago del Estero, after a first intervention in 1991, the same family was returned to power. But after a second intervention, the game began to open in 2005, when the national government’s strategy to maximise the hegemony of its party failed and the candidate it supported lost the elections. A regime that appears to be opening the local political game and forming new alliances was installed (Ortiz de Rozas 2009).
32 In the province of Catamarca, the Saadi family was overturned at the polls after a federal intervention in 1991, but was replaced by the Castillo family, which remained in power for three consecutive terms, from 1991 to 2003. It is too early to tell whether the current governor, Eduardo Brizuela del Moral, who has been in power since 2003 and was re-elected until 2011, will also follow a similar pattern of closing the game.
governments will intervene in provincial affairs only when they have certainty that the outcome will benefit them or help an ally reach power. Even then, their motives might not be entirely democratic nor result in provincial democratisation.

Paths towards Sub-national Democratisation

This paper has sought to conceptualise one type of hybrid sub-national regime and to take a step in the direction of furthering our understanding of the unevenness of democracy across a national territory through case studies of two Argentine provinces. Although I do not consider closed games to be openly un-democratic or authoritarian, they are also not fully democratic. This raises the question of how further sub-national democratisation may be achieved, particularly when formal democratic institutions are already in place and elections are reasonably clean and fair. Because of the interaction between different levels of government, sub-national democratisation is a far more complex process than national democratisation. As Gibson (2009) argues, in sub-national democratisation, territorial politics comes into play.

The examples of Corrientes and San Luis show that closed games may develop in provinces with hegemonic party rule and in provinces with slightly more competitive party systems. They may also develop in provinces with a stronger and more solvent provincial state or in provinces that are fiscally dependent on the national government. The framework of the closed game puts the focus on families and on the various mechanisms used by provincial elites to effectively close the game of politics and maintain provincial power, but it also emphasises the relationship of these provincial regimes to national politics and points to the need to look at the interaction between different dynamics – internal and external – in the analysis of sub-national democracy.

The preservation of sub-national closed games is not the result of local strategies alone. Interaction with national politics and the support traded between national and provincial governments plays a central role in this dynamic. How can change and further democratisation therefore occur at the provincial level? Gibson (2009, 24) identifies two likely paths of democratic transition at the sub-national level: party-led transitions and centre-led transitions. In the former, democratisation occurs via party competition within the existing local rules of the game; in the latter, democratisation is initiated by intervention from national authorities, which transforms the local rules of the game. Both these democratising paths award a significant role to national political actors. In the party-led transition, the local opposition is strengthened by its alliance with national party authorities; in the centre-led transition, national actors directly intervene in the process.

The evidence from the two case studies presented in this paper poses some problems to how far this interpretation may be applied. The first is that the election of an opposition party does not guarantee democratisation, as the case of Corrientes shows. The local political opposition is not necessarily more democratic than the incumbents. It may simply want to be where the incumbents are, as many interviewees said. In the framework of the closed game, the political logic of control that underlies the game is so strong that it is reproduced in both the ruling party and the opposition. The second point is that national government intervention is not necessarily democratising. It may simply aim at achieving the election of a political ally. Although change may in some cases occur from above, it is important to bear in mind that in their intervention in provincial politics, national governments have partisan interests. In Argentina, the incentives are not there for non-partisan change from above. The incentives and history
lead to partisan thinking that maximises the hegemony of the national ruling party. Moreover, the practice of federal intervention, albeit legal and constitutionally grounded, has been much abused and there is an argument to be made that the removal of elected provincial authorities by the national government is not altogether democratic. And, finally, if the local population overwhelmingly votes for these families, as occurs in San Luis, why would national government intervention be more democratic than the popular vote? In order for a centre-led transition to take place, we would have to imagine a national government with no partisan thinking underlying its involvement or a scenario in which the centre’s strategies to maximise hegemony fail. The question is also whether local informal institutions can be dismantled using national leverage.

In a context of national democracy where democratic institutions are in place, the type of national intervention that is most likely to lead to sub-national democratisation will be one that erodes the economic base of the local elite’s power and makes the electorate less dependent on the provincial government for its subsistence. That is, federal policies that create conditions in which a different kind of politics may arise or in which voters are persuaded that a different kind of politics will also benefit them. The Brazilian case shows that one possibility for achieving this is through federal social policies that involve vertical competition between national and state-level governments (Souza 2009; Borges 2009), or through economic transformations that have an impact on a state’s population (Montero 2007, 2009). In closed games, the population votes for the incumbent families because it makes sense for them to do so. For change to occur there has to be an alternative that is not part of the closed game. Voters need to see that there are reasons not to vote for the incumbent elite and that the political opposition is not simply another family that wishes to install its own version of the closed game.

33 Article 6 of the Argentine Constitution enables the intervention of the federal government in a province “to guarantee the republican form of government, or repel foreign invasions, and at the request of its constituted authorities to sustain them or re-establish them, should they have been destituted by sedition, or by invasion by another province”. However, in practice, federal interventions were historically used as a form of controlling opposition provincial governments or attempting the election of political allies in the context of a provincial political crisis (Botana 1977; Solá 1982).
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