

**Measuring Variance in Subnational Regimes: Results from  
an Expert-based Operationalization of Democracy in the Argentine Provinces**

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# **Measuring Variance in Subnational Regimes: Results from an Expert-based Operationalization of Democracy in the Argentine Provinces**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents an operationalization of the degree of democracy in the Argentine provinces. Starting with a mainstream and “thick” definition of regime type, I measure each of its aspects using a subjective or perception-based strategy that taps the knowledge of experts. I present and justify the methodological design of the resulting Survey of Experts on Provincial Politics (SEPP) and conduct preliminary analysis of its results. Some aspects of the provincial regimes appear to be clearly democratic, while others are mixed or even leaning towards authoritarianism. Moreover, some show little inter-provincial variance, while others vary considerably from province to province. A systematic analysis of the central tendency and dispersion of the survey items allows for a general (although still incomplete) description of subnational democracy in Argentina. Inclusion is the strongest dimension of democracy, while institutional constraints is the weakest. Overall, the state of democracy in the provinces appears to be mixed (i.e., average levels are neither too high nor too low) and heterogeneous (i.e., there are significant inter-provincial differences).

Issues of conceptualization and measurement have been only lightly addressed by the recent literature on subnational regimes. Several works have highlighted the existence and analyzed the nature of “subnational authoritarianisms” in the context of national democracies, but it is often unclear what conceptual definition is used to describe these regimes as authoritarian and what operational definition is used to determine whether a given province or region is authoritarian or democratic. This paper presents the methodology (and preliminary results) of an original expert-based operationalization strategy applied to all of Argentina’s 24 subnational units for the period 2003-2007. In a previous paper I discussed conceptualization issues, identified the dimensions and subdimensions of the concept of “subnational democracy,” and made the case for a subjective or perception-based measurement strategy on the grounds that it is better suited to capture the subtle ways in which democracy is restricted in subnational polities that are embedded in national democracies (Gervasoni 2008). In this paper I focus on the actual measurement tool I used to gauge democracy in the Argentine provinces and on its results. The perceptions that are used as the basis of measurement are those of 155 experts on the politics on each of the provinces, as revealed by the responses they provided to the Survey of Experts on Provincial Politics (or SEPP). The methodological design of the survey and the results of some of its most important items are described below.

This SEPP has the following advantages: 1) it starts with an explicit and clear understanding of the concept to be measured, and of its dimensions, subdimensions, components and subcomponent, 2) it includes specific indicators for each subcomponent, 3) it measures each indicator several times (by consulting more than one expert per province), 4) it permits assessing the uncertainty of the descriptive inferences (King, Keohane and Verba 1994), and 5) it makes the procedures public by clearly describing each of the methodological decisions made. As a result, any researcher can replicate my study in Argentina or, with little adaptation to local political contexts, in any other nation with elected and reasonably autonomous subnational governments.

## **I. The Study of Subnational Regimes**

Three decades into Huntington’s “third wave,” it is clear that the extent to which citizens of many federal democracies enjoy the benefits of political freedom varies widely, not only across socioeconomic levels and ethnic lines, but also across subnational borders. From Argentina to Brazil to India to Russia, national electoral democracies include very imperfectly democratic subnational regimes along with more democratic ones.

In his classic *Polyarchy*, Robert Dahl stressed that “even within a country, subnational units often vary in the opportunities they provide for contestation and participation” (1971, 14). He recognized that not dealing with this issue was a “grave omission” of his book. Thirty-five years later, the matter remains very much understudied. Some recent attempts to measure democracy at the national level explicitly indicate that they fail to incorporate information about subnational regimes (cf. Foweraker and Krznaric 2001, 18). For the particular case of Latin America, Guillermo O’Donnell has called attention to the matter, wondering “how one conceptualizes a polyarchical regime that may contain regional regimes that are not at all polyarchical” and pointing to “abundant journalistic information and reports of human rights

organizations, that some of these regions function in a less than polyarchical way” (O’Donnell 1999b, 315). Although there are a few recent academic case studies of subnational authoritarianisms (Cornelius 1999; Snyder 1999; Gibson 2005), they often do not provide clear definitions or operationalizations of the *degree of subnational democracy*. The only studies I am aware of which define and measure democracy systematically in all the subnational units of a country are those conducted by Kim Quaile Hill (1994) for the US and McMann (2006) for Kyrgyzstan and a large subset of the subnational units of Russia (McMann and Petrov 2000).

## II. Subnational Democracy: Dimensions, Subdimensions, Components and Subcomponents

Regime type is conceived as a set of “procedural rules, whether formal or informal, that determine the number and type of actors who are allowed to gain access to the principal governmental positions, the methods of access to such positions, and the rules that are followed in the making of publicly binding decisions...” (Munck 1996:8). As explained elsewhere (Gervasoni 2008), this definition can be reduced to two sets of rules, those about how government positions are filled and those about what government officials can and cannot do. These “access to power” and “exercise of power” dimensions (Mazzuca 1998) are associated with the “democratic” and “liberal” components of modern representative liberal democracies. They are in turn, decomposed in three subdimensions each, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Genus, Differentia, Dimensions and Subdimensions of Democracy**

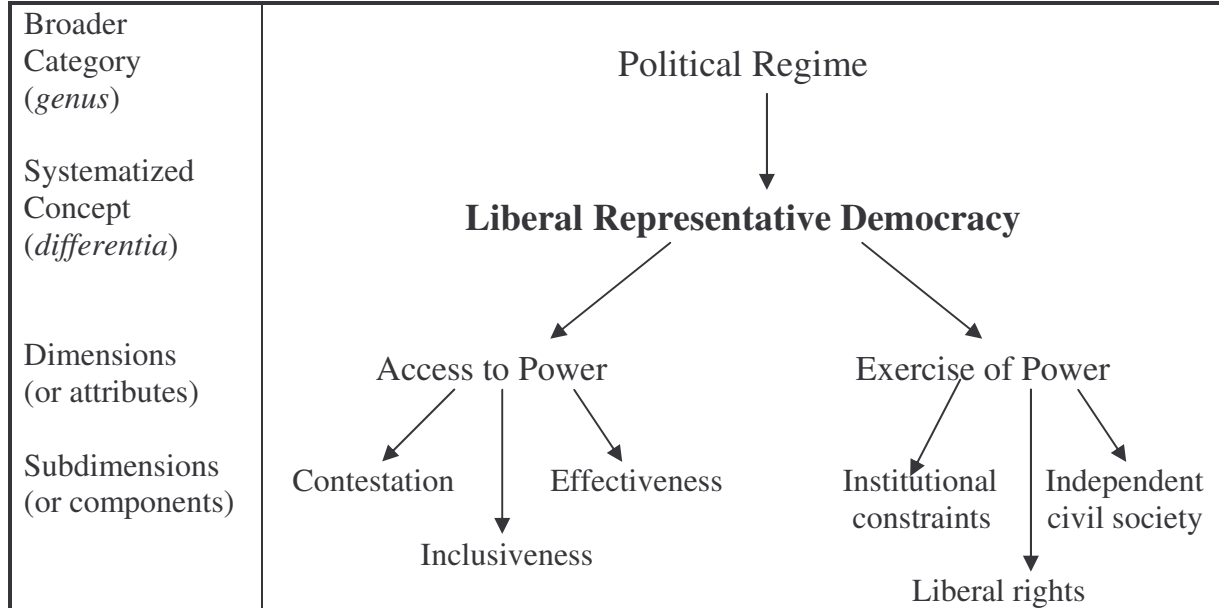


Table 1 presents the components and subcomponents in which each subdimension of democracy is decomposed. Each subcomponent represents the end of the operationalization of a concept and is measured by one or more indicators, which in the context of my perception-based

**Table 1. The Operational Dissagregation of the Degree of Subnational Democracy.**

<b>Dimen- sion</b>	<b>Subdi- mensions</b>	<b>Components</b>	<b>Subcomponents</b>		
<b>ACCESS  TO  POWER</b>	<b>INCLU- SION</b>	Extension of effective right to vote	Denial of right to certain individuals or groups		
		Extension of effective right to run	Denial of right to run		
	<b>CONTES- TATION</b>	Fairness of elections	Fairness of electoral framework	Fairness of Campaign	
			Fairness of electoral act and vote counting	Competitiveness of candidates' selection	
			Freedom of expression	Opposition leaders	Critical journalists
				Politically relevant media	Public employees
		General population			
		Freedom to form/join organizat.	Political parties		
	<b>EFEC- TIVE- NESS</b>	Unelected local powers	Unelected local powers		
		Elected national powers	Elected national powers		
<b>EXER- CISE  OF  POWER</b>	<b>INSTITU- TIONAL</b>	Legislature	Provincial legislature		
		Judiciary	Provincial justice		
			Federal justice in the province		
	<b>CONS- TRAINTS</b>	Agencies of Horizontal Account.	Independence OF agencies of HA		
		Incumbent Party	Constraints of party on governor		
		National legislators	Senators	Deputies	
<b>LIBERAL RIGHTS</b>	Freedom of expression and information	Right to consume alternative and diverse sources of information	Effective access to government information		
	Personal freedoms	Physical security	Privacy		
		Alternative minority lifestyles	Academic freedom		
	<b>INDE- PENDENT</b>	Economic organizations	Autonomous labor unions		
			Autonomous business organizations		
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY</b>	Non-profit organizations	Catholic Church	Good government, political or human rights organizations		

operationalization strategy, are questions in the survey of experts. The final data, then, are the answers to those questions (aggregated by province). The table presents the dimensions (column

1) and subdimensions (column 2) defined so far, plus a list of the components (column 3) and subcomponents (column 4) of each subdimension. Columns 1 through 4, then, are thought as general categories applicable to the elective subnational regimes of any country. The questions (=indicators), of course, have to be adapted to the context –in this case to the Argentine provinces– and to each particular province. Some of these indicators may be directly applicable to other countries, but some will need substantial redesigning to adapt them to different national realities. (For details about the overall conceptualization and decomposition into dimensions, subdimensions, components and subcomponents, see Gervasoni 2008).

### III. Indicators: Subjective (or Perception-based) Measures of Democracy

In following Adcock and Collier (2001), in this section I go one level below the “systematized concept” to address the indicators that will be used to operationalize the concept of subnational liberal representative democracy, as defined above. Given the complexities of a “thick” concept (Coppedge 1999) such as *degree of subnational democracy*, and the additional difficulties posed by the fact that hybrid regimes restrict democracy in subtle ways, I propose to follow the subjective tradition of measurement of democracy (Bollen and Paxton 2000, 60). As opposed to the objective tradition that uses measures which do not depend on the judgment or opinion of the researcher, experts or secondary sources (e.g., Vanhanen 1990), the subjective tradition uses “perceptions-based” (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2005) indicators.<sup>1</sup> In this strategy a researcher makes an informed judgment about the status of a certain aspect of democracy in a given country using secondary sources and/or consulting country experts. This strategy is clearly illustrated by mainstream democracy measures, such as Polity IV (Jagers and Gurr 1995), Freedom House (2007, 983) ratings of political rights and civil liberties, and Coppedge and Reinecke’s Poliararchy Index (1991), all of which use a subjective strategy. Bowman et al. (2005, 940) make a strong case in favor of an index of democracy based on the judgments of experts with deep knowledge of the polities to be coded.

The subjective operationalization I propose consists of a survey of experts on the politics of the subnational units. Such strategy has to my knowledge only two precedents, carried out by Kelly McMann in Russia and Kyrgyzstan (McMann and Petrov 2000; McMann 2006). The main methodological difference between these surveys and my own is that the former interviewed a group of experts who resided in the capital cities and asked them to rank and rate all the regions (Kyrgyzstan) or the top ten and bottom ten regions (Russia) in terms of democracy, while mine selected a smaller set of experts for each province (most of the time residents of the province) and asked them to provide ratings only about it.

Experts are considered a more reliable source than secondary sources, in part because the

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<sup>1</sup> The word “subjective” is often loaded with negative connotations. It is sometimes associated with normative biases or interested opinions. Here it is used in a straightforward neutral way, just to describe a measurement process based on informed and educated judgments of certain “subjects.” It is important to realize that some well respected and widely used databases in political science come from subjective operationalizations. This is not only the case with measures of democracy, but also with measures of corruption, for example Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, and with measures of governance, such as the World Bank’s Governance Indicators. For a defense of the strengths of “perceptions-based” indicators over objective ones, see the methodological paper for the World Bank indicators (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi 2005, 27-31).

latter lack the necessary level of detail and quality for several provinces, and because the subtle ways in which democracy is restricted in hybrid regimes calls for very specific pieces of information. The questionnaire of the so called *Survey of Experts on Provincial Politics (SEPP)* includes many items aimed at tapping their assessment of the situation of each subdimension in the units they specialize on. Ideal interviewees are local, politically independent scholars and professionals (such as journalists and consultants) with deep knowledge of their provinces' politics. The only significant disadvantage of this approach is that, due to well-known memory limitations, interviewees will only supply reliable data for recent times.

Because experts are by definition knowledgeable of many characteristics of the political regime in place, multiple aspects of democracy beyond electoral competition and inclusion can be assessed, for example the effectiveness of legislative and judicial checks on the executive, the level of press freedom, the civil rights situation, the prevalence of human rights violations by the provincial police, and so forth.

#### **IV. Methodological Design of the SEPP**

The *Survey of Experts on Provincial Politics (SEPP)* is a face-to-face survey conducted in each of Argentina's 24 subnational units using a questionnaire that includes approximately 150 items about the 2003-2007 period (except for two provinces off the regular electoral schedule). Fieldwork started in late April 2008 and ended in mid November 2008. Below I detail the survey methodology:

**a. Questionnaire design and administration:** Given the length and complexity of the questionnaire, the survey was administered face to face by political scientists with background in Argentine provincial politics. The survey was carried out with a structured questionnaire including both closed-ended items (in which experts rate an aspect of democracy in a given province) and open-ended items (in which they can explain the reasons for their ratings, qualify their answers, or provide an answer different from those offered by the questionnaire). Given a well-documented tendency of intellectually sophisticated publics to resist the "straightjacket" of closed-ended questions (Putnam 1973; Aberbach et al. 1975), the open-ended questions also serve the purpose of allowing interviewees to elaborate their answers, which is useful both for the substantive goals of the research project and for the smooth progress of the interviews. The average length was of one hour and nineteen minutes. The questions were designed and tested so that they were clear, concrete, and unbiased. They were written following the standard advice of the literature on questionnaire design (Converse and Presser 1986; Oppenheim 1992; Foddy 1993) and on elite interviewing (Dexter 1970).

**b. Questionnaire pretests:** The questionnaire was pretested in several stages. First I circulated it among advisors and colleagues.<sup>2</sup> The resulting version was first read and

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Michael Coppedge, Fran Hagopian, Scott Mainwaring, Ernesto Calvo, Agustina Giraudy, Debra Javeline, Frauke Kreuter, Marcelo Leiras, Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, and Fernando Ruiz for their helpful comments on early versions of the questionnaire.

commented upon by the members of the fieldwork team,<sup>3</sup> which resulted in additional improvements. After this the interviewers and I conducted a pretest that included 14 experts of the politics of 11 provinces. These pretests helped us identify problems such as ambiguous wording, value-loaded terms, missing categories, and questions that were too demanding.

**c. Sampling:** Interviewees were intentionally selected using two broad criteria: 1) deep and broad knowledge of the politics of the province, and 2) reasonable level of independence from the provincial government and opposition. The ideal interviewee is a scholar in the social sciences, although my exploratory fieldwork in four provinces during 2006 indicated that political journalists and attorneys in the field of constitutional law are often as knowledgeable about the provincial regime as academic political scientists. As expected, finding such experts was difficult and time consuming, especially in provinces that are small, less developed and/or have no political science departments (such as Chaco, Formosa, La Pampa and Tierra del Fuego). I constructed a sample framework drawing on 1) personal academic contacts, 2) social scientist from the interior I met during the exploratory stage of fieldwork (July-August 2006), 3) colleagues from the provinces I contacted personally at the 2007 Argentine Political Association conference in Buenos Aires, 4) experts cited or interviewed in Buenos Aires newspapers when covering provincial politics, and 5) information provided by the political science schools and institutes of many provinces. From all of these original contacts I “snowballed” to create a larger framework. Experts with more distinguished academic, professional or journalistic credentials and experts mentioned by more sources were given priority. In the case of the most “difficult” provinces (those with smaller populations and few or no social science university departments), it was necessary to relax the criteria, sometimes interviewing prestigious political scientists who did have some kind of political position, and sometimes interviewing knowledgeable people who were not formally in an academic, professional or journalistic career.<sup>4</sup> The goal was to achieve a minimum of three experts per province so that inter-expert agreement could be calculated on a relatively solid basis. Because fieldwork progressed more quickly than expected, the effective sample includes a minimum of four and a maximum of twelve interviewees per province (for a total of about 155 experts, or an average of 6.46 per province). Note that there is no “small sample” problem here: this survey is different from public opinion or elite surveys, in that the goal is not to infer the characteristics of a larger population, but (as in the case of historical interviews) to systematically obtain factual information from knowledgeable sources. The measurement strategy, then, is comparable to that of the widely-used Polity IV dataset, which typically uses one coder per country, and a few coders for some countries to assess inter-coder agreement (Marshall and Jaggers 2002, 5-7). In my measure the experts function as coders, and, improving on Polity IV, every province is coded by at least four experts. In provinces in which average inter-expert agreement was high, the final number of cases was not changed. In provinces where it was middling or low additional interviews were conducted. The second stage

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<sup>3</sup> A wonderful team of research assistants: Andrea Cavalli, Adrián Lucardi, Maria Marta Maroto and Maria Eugenia Wolcuff.

<sup>4</sup> Although practically all the respondents were –as planned– either local social scientists or political journalists, the second requirement (political independence) was sometimes difficult to meet. The few political scientists living in the smaller, less developed provinces tend to work for the state or be active members of political parties. So in these provinces there was a clear trade-off between criteria 1 and 2. When I had no choice but to interview somebody with a government position or party affiliation, we felt they almost always responded the questions as scholars and not as politicians or government officials. The inter-observer agreement analysis will help determine whether or not these provinces were particularly problematic in terms of measurement reliability.

of fieldwork added 32 cases (taking N from 123 to 155) in 10 provinces.

**d. Fieldwork:** Conducting 155 interviews with busy experts in 24 locations in the eighth largest country in the world poses logistic challenges. Previous experience indicated that 3 to 6 interviews can be obtained in one week. This includes finding and calling the interviewee (often multiple times) to arrange a personal meeting, traveling by bus to his/her city, and the interview itself. Such intensive fieldwork calls for a team of interviewers. A total of 5 people (including myself) completed the first stage of the fieldwork in a little over three months (it started on April 22, 2008, and the last interview was conducted on July 30, 2008). We contacted experts by email and/or phone a few days before visiting a given province. Those who we were able to find and reach tended to cooperate enthusiastically. There were very few outright rejections (the response rate was of 81% of all experts contacted). To facilitate the logistics, the country was divided in six regions. Each region had a “hub” city where interviewers are based. The six regions are: 1) Pampas (hub in the city of Buenos Aires), 2) Northeast (Corrientes), 3) Northwest (Salta), 4) Cuyo (Mendoza), 5) North Patagonia (Bahia Blanca), and 6) South Patagonia (Río Gallegos). Each region was in charge of one of the interviewers. I personally trained them in four meetings, for a total of about 14 hours. In these sessions they became familiar with the general goals of the research project and the survey, the questionnaire, the techniques appropriate for conducting interviews with experts, the human subject treatment standards, and the logistic and economic issues related to the fieldwork. Interviewers acquired additional expertise during the pretesting of the questionnaire.

**e. Questionnaire administration:** All interviewees received an email requesting an interview and explaining the nature of the project, the reasons for their selection, the importance of their participation, and the anonymity of their answers. To encourage positive responses experts were offered a small gift (one of several political science books we bought) and early access to a report with the survey’s main results. Small gifts (but not money) and access to results are commonly used in elite-level interviews in Argentina, and, given certain conditions, endorsed by much of the literature on interviews (Adler and Adler 2002). The experts I surveyed during the exploratory fieldwork were for the most part willing to meet and share information with me. Nonetheless, the incentives make personal interviews easier and faster to arrange, and interviewees more willing to spend an hour and twenty minutes answering a demanding and at times tedious questionnaire. Interviews were arranged at the places and times that were convenient to the experts. Their answers were recorded on the paper questionnaire, circling the pre-coded categories for the close-ended questions and writing down the answers for the open-ended ones (thus avoiding the often unwelcome tape recorder).

**f. Questionnaire quality-control and coding:** Immediately after completion of each interview (while answers are still fresh in their memories) the interviewers checked the open-ended answers for completeness and readability. Coding was necessary only for a few questions, as the experts’ answers to the closed-ended questions are considered final codes. However, in cases in which an expert refuses to choose one of the categories of the closed-ended items, I will use the information in the open-ended follow-up question to assign a code. If this question is also unanswered (or uninformative), the item is coded as a missing value. A small number of missing values is inevitable and not particularly harmful. However, interviews with more than 20% of missing values are considered invalid and replaced by an interview with a different expert.

**g. Index construction and reliability assessment:** Given the thick and multidimensional conceptualization of democracy underlying the questionnaire, it is possible that the items are empirically multidimensional, that is, that they tap more than one aspect of subnational democracy and that these aspects are statistically independent. Therefore, once scores have been determined for each province, I will conduct factor analysis on the data for all items in all provinces to determine the number of underlying dimensions. Given the scarcity of comparative descriptive data on subnational democracy and the many and diverse components of democracy that will be measured, there is not a clear basis for holding a priori theoretical expectations on the number and contents of the underlying dimensions. It may be the case that unidimensionality is confirmed, but it may also occur that subnational democracy has two or more empirically distinct dimensions. In either case, the dependent variable(s) will be a scale or scales constructed on the basis of the items with high loadings on the factor(s) (DeVellis 1991). I will conduct scale reliability assessments to insure that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8 or higher is achieved.

## **V. Preliminary Results**

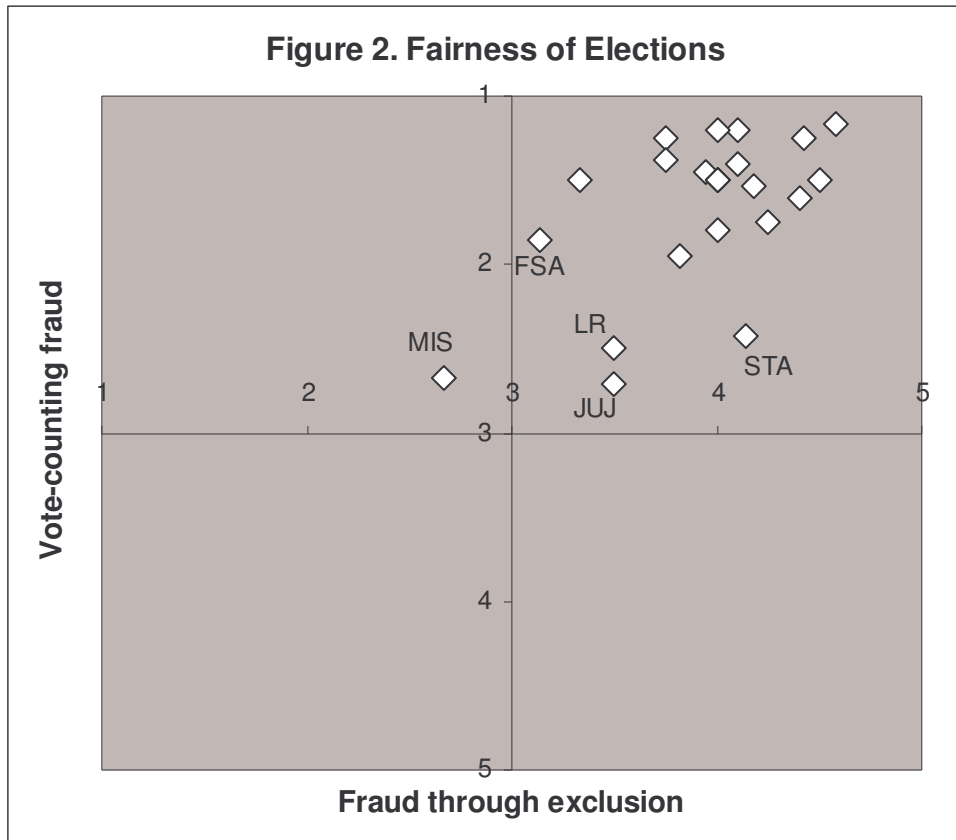
After the end of the second stage of fieldwork in November 2008, the questionnaires were revised, coded, and entered into an electronic database. The experts' answers to the close-ended questions have been averaged to form an aggregate score for each item in each province. Inter-expert reliabilities have yet to be calculated, so the figures below are presented without any consideration to their level of certainty. Below I present the preliminary results of many key survey questions (for reasons of space, and because some of them measure variables other than subnational democracy, not all survey's items are presented) for all the 24 provinces.

### **V.a. Contestation**

Contestation is the only element of democracy in which all definitions, including the most minimal ones, agree. Free and fair elections for the main executive and legislative offices is the central element of this subdimension of democracy. How free and fair are provincial elections in Argentina? Figure 2 displays the results of two questions measuring the fairness of the last gubernatorial elections, that is, the extent to which some people were arbitrarily excluded from the ballot and the extent to which votes were miscounted to favor a given party. (In this and the following figures the more democratic scores correspond to the upper-right corner and the least democratic ones to the lower-left corner; this sometimes means that categories in the graphs are reversed with respect to their order in the questionnaire). The text of the questions and the answers are shown under each figure.

According to Figure 2, there are no important instances of electoral fraud. Most provinces cluster close to the democratic (upper-right) quadrant, while the lower-left quadrant is empty. These variables, then, seem to reflect a situation of relatively high and homogenous levels of electoral contestation in the provinces. However, the situation changes when we take a broader view of the electoral process. Figure 3 shows indicators of the pro-incumbent bias of the provincial media (TV in the X-axis and provincial newspapers in the Y-axis) in the most recent gubernatorial elections. The Federal Capital of Buenos Aires (CF) appears at the upper-right corner, and two other provinces are not far from there. However, all the quadrants are populated, and at least three provinces do very poorly in both TV and newspaper coverage. That is, there is

considerable variance in these measures, implying that in some provinces incumbent and opposition candidates have similar access to the media, while in others incumbents get much more and better coverage than opponents. Elections in the latter cannot be considered fair even if votes are counted fairly. Another important conclusion of the figure is that, although the variables are positively associated, the correlation is only moderately strong ( $r=0.58$ ) because of off-diagonal provinces like La Pampa in which the TV is biased but the newspapers are not.

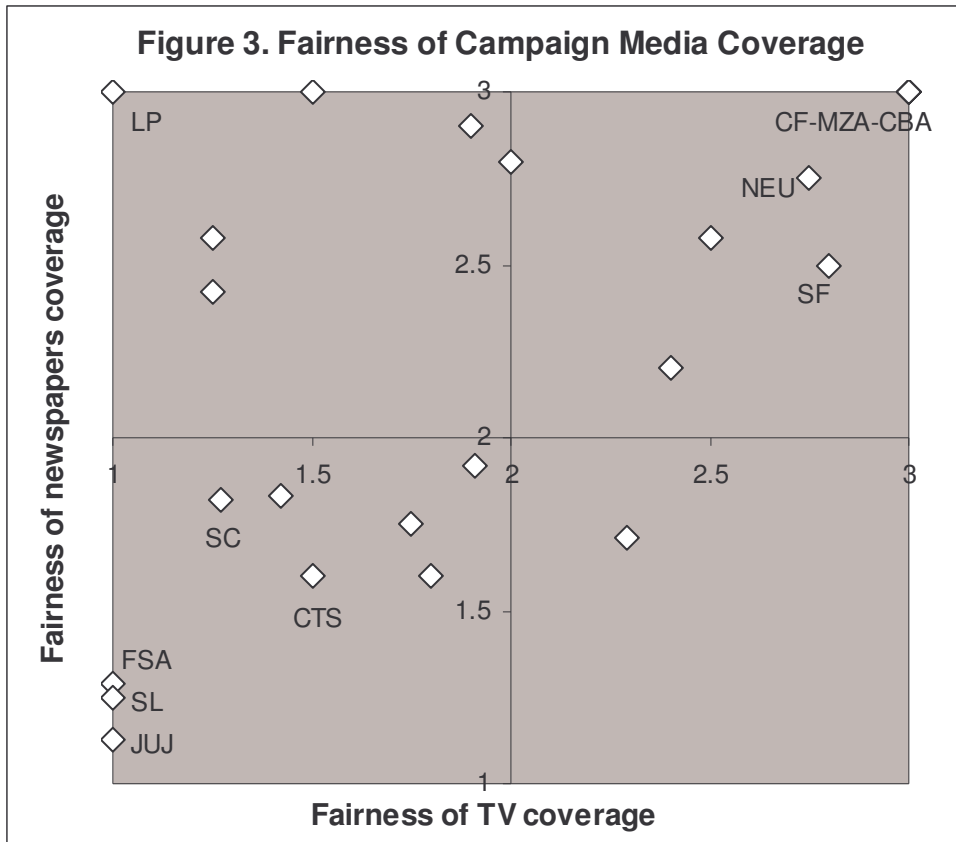


**X-Axis (Q.21):** “Sometimes citizens cannot vote because they are not given their ID cards on time, because their names do not appear on the voting rolls, etc. How serious do you think this kind of problem preventing citizens from voting was in the provincial elections of 2007? 1) Very serious, 2) quite serious, 3) somewhat serious, 4) not very serious, 5) not serious at all?”

**Y-Axis (Q.24):** “How fair was the counting of the votes by the electoral authorities? Do you believe there were 1) no irregularities in the counting of the votes, 2) few, 3) some, 4) quite a few, or 5) many irregularities in the counting of the votes?”

In sum, it seems that the electoral act in itself is not subject to important political manipulation in any of the provinces, but the pro-incumbency bias of the provincial media ranges from null to extremely high. Contestation, then, is in some provinces restricted in one of the most critical arenas of modern politics. As both classic liberal thinkers posited and

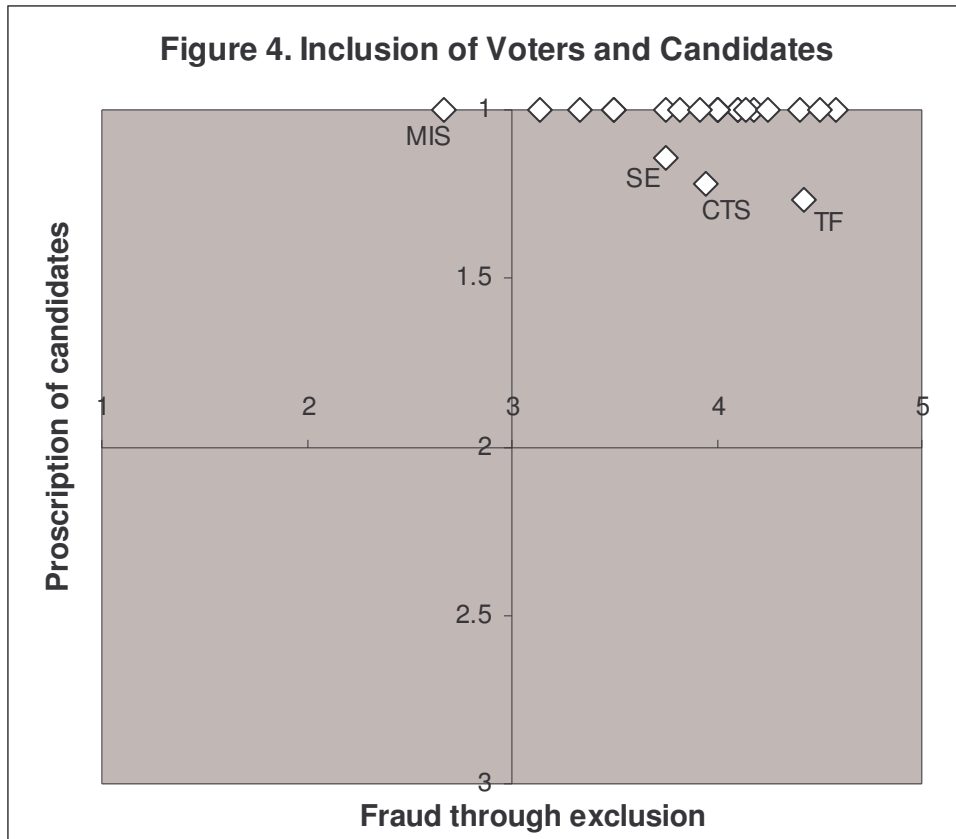
contemporary public opinion research shows, a reasonably-informed democratic public cannot exist in the absence of media pluralism.



**X and Y Axes (Q.32a-d).** “Please think about the provincial media coverage of the 2007 electoral campaigns. We mean the coverage by the media and not the publicity of the candidates. Taking into account both the quantity and content of TV broadcasting, would you say that on average it was 1) very biased in favor of the incumbent’s gubernatorial candidate, 2) somewhat biased in favor of the incumbent’s candidate, 3) balanced (including countervailing biases), or biased in favor of the candidates of the opposition? And what about the coverage of the main provincial newspaper/s? (same response options)”

### V.b. Inclusion

Figure 2 showed that there were little differences among provinces in terms of electoral inclusiveness. Figure 4 presents this variable again but crossed against another indicator of inclusion, the proscription of gubernatorial candidates. With only one exception, all the provinces are well within the upper-right quadrant. That is, both at the level of voters and of candidates these subnational units can be characterized, as McMann (2006) did for Russia and Kyrgyzstan, as “strong on participation, weak on contestation”: just as in those post-soviet states, in Argentina “the leaders of hybrid regimes ... seem to allow participation but stealthily undermine contestation” (p. 179-181).



**X-Axis (Q.21):** “Sometimes citizens cannot vote because they are not given their ID cards on time, because their names do not appear in the voting rolls, etc. How serious do you think this type of problems that prevent citizens from voting were in the provincial elections of 2007? 1) Very serious, 2) quite serious, 3) somewhat serious, 4) not very serious, 5) not serious at all?”

**Y-Axis (Q.26):** “A candidate can be banned openly, or, more subtly, through a doubtful interpretation of a legal requisite. Was any citizen denied, in one way or the other, the right to run for governor in the 2007 elections? 1) No, 2) yes, at least one minor candidate was denied the right to run, 3) yes, at least one candidate who was expected to be among the top vote-getters was denied the right to run.”

### V.c. Freedom of Expression

Democracy can only function properly when citizens can voice their political views without fear of punishment. The *SEPP* includes a number of questions about freedom of expression. Two of them, one about public employees and another about the population in general, are presented in Figure 5. Only two provinces appear on the left sector of the graph, indicating that the citizens of most provinces enjoy significant levels of freedom of expression. When this attribute is evaluated only for provincial public employees, who are often thought to run larger risks if they express critical views of the government, inter-provincial differences become larger: several provinces are located in the lower half of the chart. Public employees, then, are not so free to speak about politics publicly. This is a major limitation of democracy in many provinces where most jobs (and the overwhelming majority of the best jobs) are controlled directly or indirectly by the provincial government. The finding is consistent with interpretations

of differences in subnational regimes as emerging from differences in levels of “economic autonomy” (McMann 2006; for a similar interpretation for Argentina, see Gervasoni 2006). Overall, only a few provinces are well into the upper-right quadrant. These results and the findings above on campaign coverage by the media suggest that one of the main ways in which provincial incumbents limit contestation is by restricting political communications.



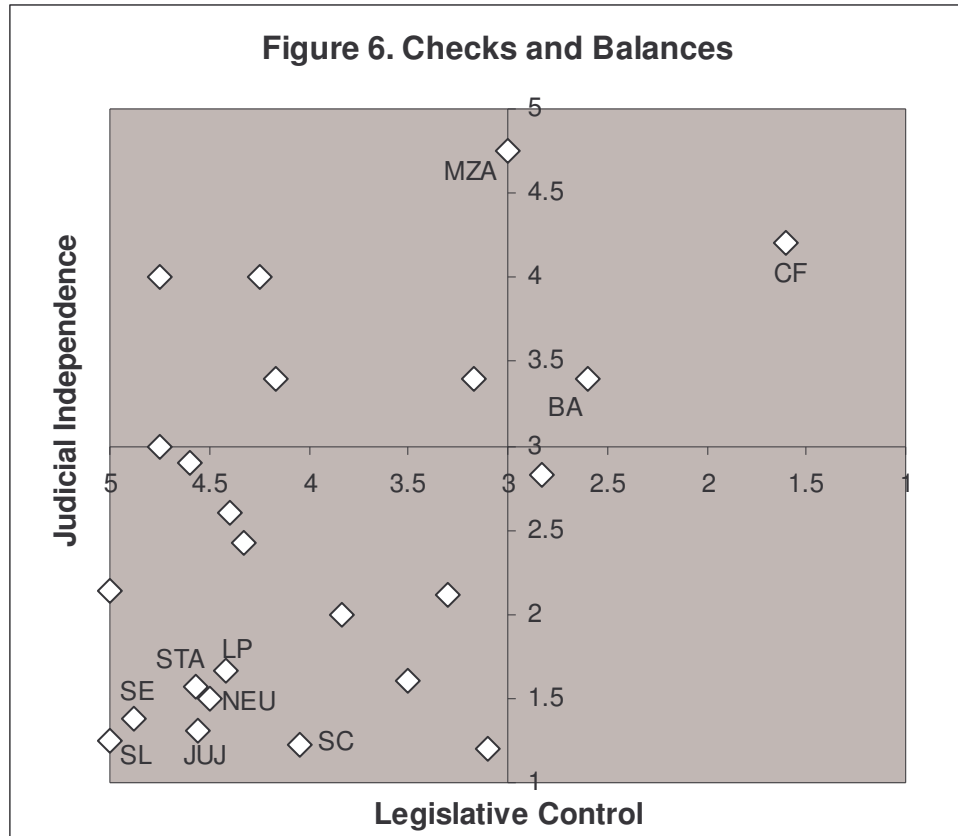
**X-Axis (Q.36):** “How free to criticize the provincial government without fear of punishment were regular citizens during 2002-2007: 1) Very free, 2) quite free, 3) somewhat free, 4) not very free, 5) not free at all?”

**Y-Axis (Q.35):** “We would like to know whether provincial public employees were at risk of being punished if they were openly critical of the administration of governor XX. Would you say that career administrative employees 1) ran serious risks such as being fired, 2) ran moderate risks such as not being promoted, or 3) did not run risks?”

#### V.d. Checks and Balances

The SEPP assesses institutional constraints through questions about the role of the provincial legislature and the provincial supreme court of justice in functioning as limitations on the power of the executive (all of Argentina’s provinces are “presidential” and have, constitutionally, three clearly separated branches). Figure 6 shows that only the Federal Capital has effective legislative and judicial controls on the power of the executive. The provinces of Buenos Aires and Mendoza appear in relatively democratic positions too. Most notably, there is a large group of provinces clustered towards the lower-left corner. The governors of Santiago del

Estero, San Luis, Santa Cruz, La Pampa, Jujuy and other provinces enjoy almost total freedom from the other powers, a finding consistent with journalistic accounts and academic case studies (Bill Chávez 2003; Gibson 2005) of some of these provinces. Contrary to the findings above about vote-counting fraud and inclusion, the “checks and balances” subdimension appears as a deficit of democracy in many (but not all) provinces. An interesting additional finding is that provinces with decent levels of judicial independence outnumber those with effective legislative control.



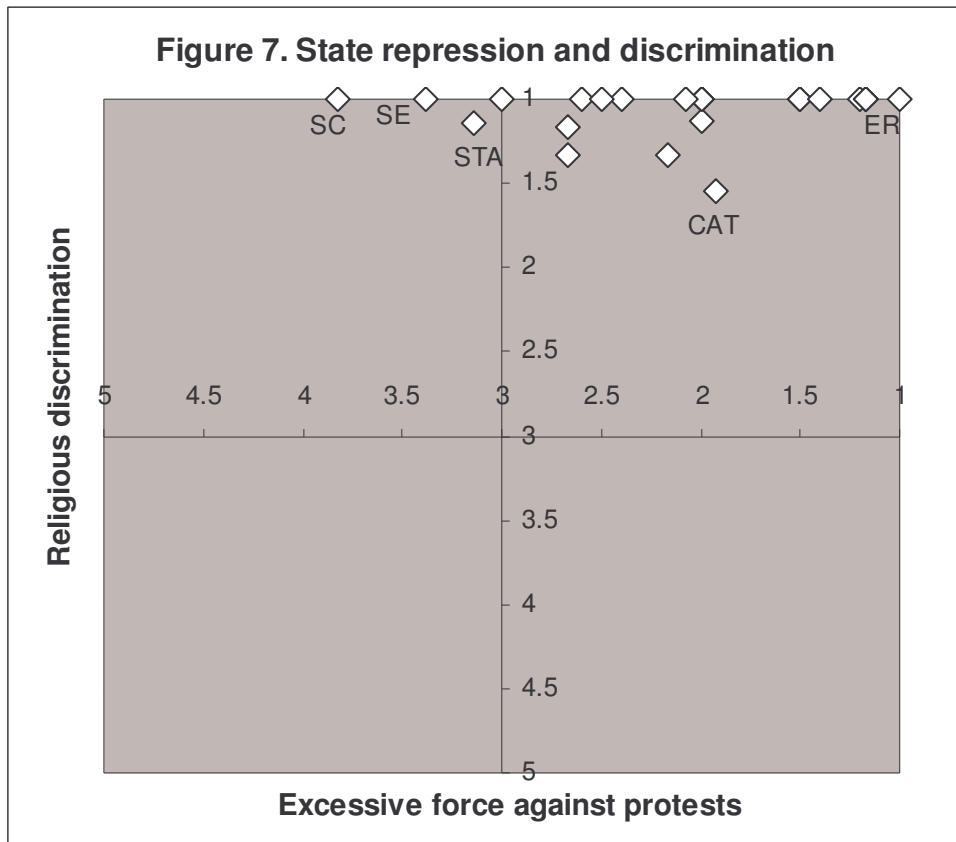
**X-Axis (Q.6):** “¿How limited was Governor XX’s power by the provincial legislature during the 2003-2007 period: 1) Very limited, 2) quite limited, 3) somewhat limited, 4) not very limited, or 5) not limited at all?”

**Y-Axis (Q.7):** “¿How many of the provincial supreme court justices were independent enough to make decisions contrary to the preferences of the XX administration: 1) No justice was independent, 2) fewer than half were independent, 3) half were independent, 4) more than half were independent, 5) all justices were independent?”

### V.e. State Repression and Discrimination

So far I have presented some indicators with little inter-provincial heterogeneity (like those tapping inclusion and outright electoral fraud) and others that did vary considerably from province to province (such as freedom of expression and institutional constraints). The last aspect of democracy I analyze, state repression and discrimination, combines one variable of each type. As Figure 7 shows, all provinces boast very high ratings in terms of discrimination

against religious minorities (similar results obtain with other types of discrimination). However, they do differ when repression of public demonstrations is assessed: although no province is located at the lowest level in this variable, four of them are at or below the mid-value. One possible interpretation of these differences is that discrimination of minorities is hardly ever needed to keep an incumbent in power, while repression of demonstrations against the government might be.



**X-Axis (Q.47):** “Please tell me whether the police or other agents of the provincial government used excessive force against demonstrations or marches during the 2003-2007 period. [IF YES] Did this happen 2) a few times, 3) some times, 4) quite a few times, 5) many times?”

**Y-Axis (Q.50):** “I am going to mention several groups that sometimes suffer government discrimination. Did the XX administration discriminate against religious minorities such as Evangelicals, Jews or Muslims? [IF YES] Did this happen 2) a few times, 3) some times, 4) quite a few times, 5) many times?”

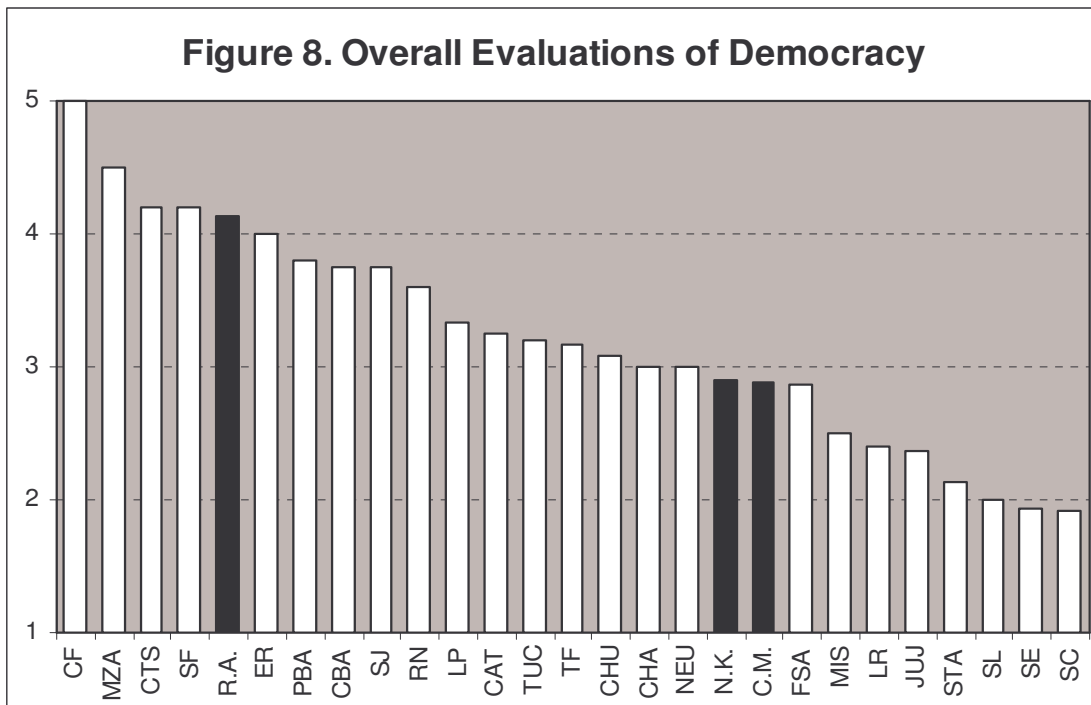
### V.f. Overall Assessments of Democracy

As an alternative (and last) way of measuring the level of democracy in each province, a set of items towards the end of the questionnaire gave the experts a definition of democracy and asked them to rate the 2003-2007 period in their provinces and several national-level administrations. The question read as follows:

Q.52. “For the next questions I need to define democracy as ‘a political regime in which: 1) the executive and legislative branches are elected in free and fair elections with universal adult franchise, 2) there are effective checks and balances among the executive, legislative and judicial branches, and 3) basic constitutional rights such as freedom of speech are respected.’”

“I am going to mention several provincial and national governments, and I would like you to tell me, using this definition, whether each of them was very democratic, quite democratic, somewhat democratic, not very democratic or not democratic at all.”<sup>5</sup>

Each expert was asked to assess the 2003-2007, the current, and two previous provincial administrations, plus the Nestor Kirchner, Carlos Menem and Raúl Alfonsín administrations at the national level. Figure 8 presents the results (those for the national administrations are based on the opinions of all experts and are highlighted in black).



The national-level ratings provide a useful (and interesting in itself) point of reference for comparison. As the figure shows, the Federal Capital, Mendoza and Santa Fe (along with the 1983-1989 Alfonsín administration) are considered basically democratic. On the other hand, the

<sup>5</sup> “Para las siguientes preguntas necesito definir la democracia como ‘un régimen político en el que: 1) los poderes ejecutivo y legislativo son elegidos en elecciones libres, justas y con voto universal, 2) hay pesos y contrapesos efectivos entre los poderes ejecutivo, legislativo y judicial, y 3) se respetan los derechos constitucionales básicos, tales como la libertad de expresión.’”

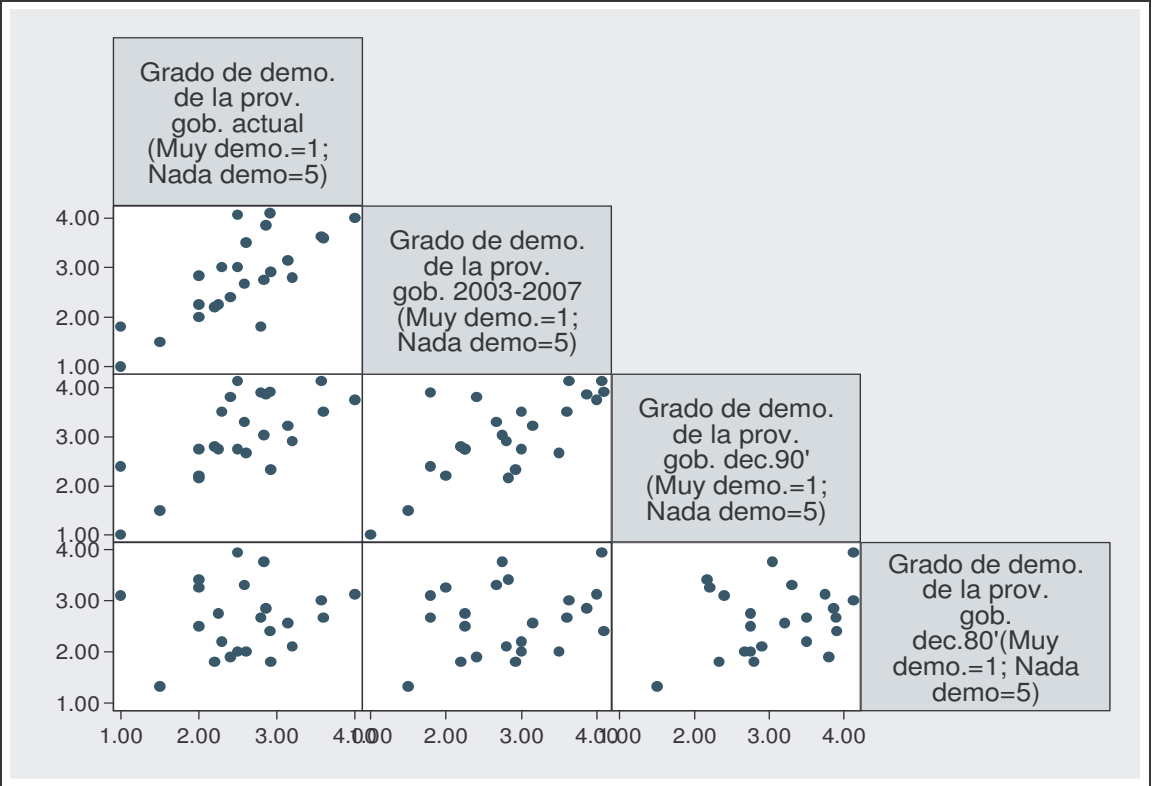
“Le voy a mencionar varios gobiernos provinciales y nacionales y quisiera que me diga, tomando en cuenta esta definición, si cada uno de ellos fue muy democrático, bastante democrático, algo democrático, poco democrático o nada democrático.”

Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and Carlos Menem (1989-1999) administrations are evaluated as considerable less democratic. The subnational regimes in San Luis, Santiago del Estero, and Santa Cruz are seen as the least democratic, well below most other provinces. These figures (and some of the previous ones) show a wide variance in terms of degree of democracy. They also show that provinces can be more or less democratic than the national-level regime.

**V.g. Subnational Democracy over Time**

A limitation of the subjective measurement strategy is that memory-limitations make it unadvisable to use expert judgments to code specific characteristics of regimes far in the past. Moreover the need to keep interviews reasonably short makes it in practice impossible to repeat all questions for several periods in the past. Taking into account these constraints, the SEPP attempted to obtain some information about the past by asking the “overall democracy” question described in the previous section for two previous provincial administrations, i.e., the 1995-1999 gubernatorial term, and the 1983-1987 term (the first after the 1983 redemocratization). Moreover, since the survey was administered after the end of the 2003-2007 term (on which practically all items focus), the “overall” question was also asked about the current (2007-2011) period. Although the average level of democracy does not show a clear ascending or descending trend, Figure 9 and Table 2 below show a pattern of association that reveals important information about the persistence of provincial regimes over time.

**Figure 9. Scatterplots of Overall Evaluations of Democracy in different time periods**



**Table 2. Correlations between Overall Evaluations of Democracy in different time periods.**

	Current	2003-7	1990s	1980s
Current	1.00			
2003-7	0.70	1.00		
1990s	0.63	0.63	1.00	
1980s	0.11	0.27	0.32	1.00

The overall assessments of democracy at different periods are always positively associated. That is, provinces that are more (or less) democratic today tended to be also more (or less) democratic in previous gubernatorial terms. As it is the case at the national level, provincial regimes tend to persist over time. Such persistence, however, weakens as measurement points are temporally farther apart. The pattern of correlations in Table 2 indicates that the longer the period between two terms, the lower the (positive) correlation. The especially low coefficients associated with the 1983-1987 term are likely to reflect its larger distance in years to the other periods. But it may also be a function of larger measurement error. In effect, one would expect that, other things being equal, expert judgments are less reliable for older periods. If so, the higher (hopefully random) error would result in downwardly-biased (or attenuated) correlations. In all likelihood both factors –regime change over time and time-dependent measurement error– are at work. If so, then all the correlations above are to some extent attenuated, which means that regimes are more persistent than these graphs and figures suggest. It is illustrative to note that, even containing significant levels of measurement error, none of the scatterplots in Figure 9 shows cases clearly located in the upper-left or lower-right corners, that is, in the positions that would indicate radical changes from democracy to authoritarianism and vice versa.

**VI. A Systematic Analysis of the Central Tendency and Dispersion of the SEPP items.**

A first characterization of democracy in the Argentine provinces could be carried out by just looking comparatively at the overall means of the items. To make this analysis easier, I normalized all items so that their lowest category equals 0 and their highest category equals 1, and recoded them so that 1 is always “high level of democracy” and 0 is “low level of democracy.” The normalized means range approximately from 0.17 (two items related to the campaign resources available to incumbents and challengers) to 1 (an item on government killing of critical journalists). This means that the SEPP covers a wide range of issues that go from those in which the provinces rank consistently high (in none of them the government kills journalists) to those in which they tend to do poorly (in general incumbents’ campaign funds are much larger than those of the challengers).

The central tendency of the items, as measured by their means, provides information about the average provincial situation on a number of aspects of democracy. However, item means are not the only characteristic of interest. Equally important is inter-provincial dispersion. Only items with significant levels of heterogeneity provide information about differences among

provincial regimes. I use the standard deviation of each item to estimate dispersion, a measure that in the context of variables that range at most from 0 to 1 has a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 0.5 (in a situation in which half of the provinces are coded 1 and the other half are coded 0). Low standard deviations indicate that provinces are similar, while high standard deviations imply that inter-provincial differences are significant.

The combination of information on the mean and the standard deviation provides a useful basis for an initial analysis of democracy in the Argentine provinces. If, for the sake of simplicity, we assume that both statistics can be either “low,” “medium,” or “high,” then 7 situations are possible, as shown in table 3.

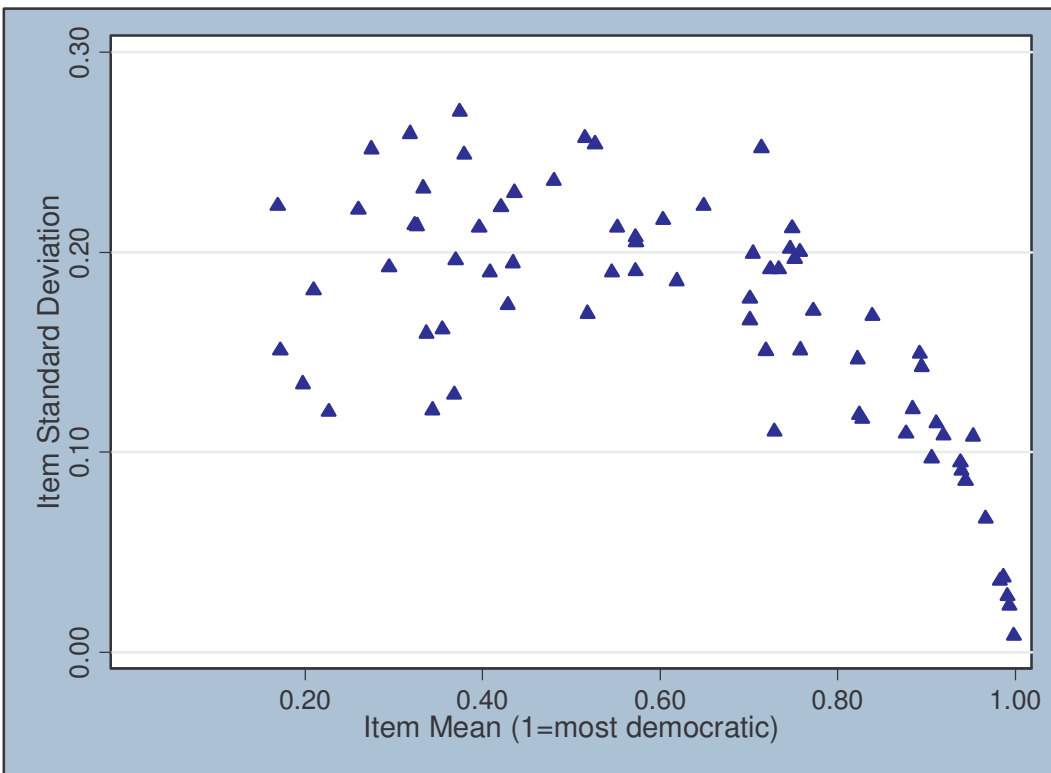
**Table 3. Classification of Items by Mean and Standard Deviation**

Standard deviation	Mean		
	Low	Medium	High
Low	Consistently non-democratic	Consistently mixed	Consistently democratic
Medium	Non-democratic with exceptions	Mixed and dispersed	Democratic with exceptions
High	-	Polarized	-

Left-to-right movement in Table 3 implies going from less to more democratic situations. Movement from top to the bottom, on the other hand, is associated with low to high inter-provincial differences. The actual distribution of the survey items are displayed in Figure 10. Notice, first, the empty area on the left of the graph: no item has a very low mean, that is, there is no aspect of democracy that performs consistently poorly in all provinces. At the right end of the graph, however, there are many items with high means: some features of democracy appear to be prevalent across the national territory. The declining level of dispersion as the item means approach one is inevitable: a very high mean can only be obtained if all cases rank high, a situation that implies inter-provincial homogeneity and, therefore, low standard deviations.

Standard deviations do differ considerably toward the center of the figure, ranging from a low of approximately 0.10 to a high of 0.27. It should not be surprising that no item approaches a standard deviation of 0.5 (the “polarized” situation of Table 3), as this would mean that about half of the provinces are at the democratic extreme, half at the authoritarian extreme, and none in between, a highly unlikely distribution for any social science variable. However, the fact that all items in the central area of the figure are above 0.10, and many above 0.20, shows that non-trivial inter-provincial differences are always present, and that sometimes they are rather large.

Figure 10. Scatterplot of SEPP Item Means by Item Standard Deviation



Is there a pattern in the type of items that appear in each sector of the graph? Figure 11 is a rough reproduction of figure 10 where the small triangles are replaced by short descriptions of the substantive content of each item. All items are colored according to the subdimension of democracy they belong to.<sup>6</sup> Two sets of items tend to cluster in a specific sector of the figure. First, the two purple items (associated with the inclusion dimension) are on the lower-right corner, indicating that they are consistently democratic: all provincial regimes tend to be highly inclusive both in terms of the right to run and the right to vote. Second, the red items (institutional constraints) are mostly located on the left half of the figure, and generally on the upper half (the only partial exception is the federal justice, a non-surprising finding given that federal courts are part of the national, not the provincial government). This pattern implies that institutional limits on the incumbents' power is the weakest aspect of subnational democracy in Argentina. Both the provincial legislatures and the provincial Supreme Tribunals (and lower courts) appear to be generally ineffective in checking the power of the governor. The same is true about provincial agencies of horizontal accountability (HA; O'Donnell 1999a) and incumbent parties. Notice, however, that the relatively high standard deviation of these red items indicates that at least in some provinces checks and balances do work. The items associated with institutional constraints, then, approach the “non-democratic with exceptions” pattern in Table 3.

<sup>6</sup> As measures of the dimensions “Independence of Civil Society” are “effect indicators” more than constitutive aspects of democracy, I decided not to include them in figures 11 and 12. The point is that it is logically possible for a democratic political system to exist in the midst of a weak civil society, even if such situation is unlikely.

The “liberal rights” (green) items are somewhat more common on the right half of the figure, and especially so when the substantive content includes overt repression. Thus, executions of detainees are very rare, and arbitrary detentions or excessive use of force by the police not too common. The only liberal rights that perform poorly are freedom of information (FOI, which measures the ease of access to government data) and the availability of alternative sources of information for the poor. That is, core liberal rights such as physical security and liberty are for the most part respected, while violations occur in the realm of less critical rights or for the less privileged sectors of the population.

The items associated with contestation, the most central feature of democracy, do not follow a clear distributional pattern. They appear in all populated sectors of the figure, but seem to move from left to right as the substantive content becomes more associated with traditional forms of electoral fraud. For example, electoral irregularities, the arrest of opposition leaders, or the harassment of opposition campaigns are relatively uncommon. Indicators of the fairness of electoral campaigns in terms of financial resources or media coverage, on the other hand, show a generally lopsided picture: incumbents often (but with important inter-provincial differences) prevail over their opponents because of privileged access to campaign funds, state resources, and favorable media coverage.

Not surprisingly, the overall indicator of democracy (in black and bold in the picture) is located approximately at the center of all items: experts surely took into consideration many aspects of democracy in their provinces and concluded that the overall situation is some type of weighted average of all of them. On average then, democracy in the provinces is “mixed” and has a considerable level of dispersion.

Figure 12 is the same as Figure 11 but with the most visible government democratic violations in bold. Acts such as vote stealing, threats, physical attacks, arrests, and executions appear always on the right side. It appears that, following the logic of hybrid regimes (Zakaria 1997; Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2006) and “boundary control” (Gibson 2005), provincial executives try to avoid blatant (and therefore visible) violations of democratic principles. There are strong theoretical reasons to expect that subnational incumbents in national democracies will tend to curtail democratic rights in subtle and relatively peaceful ways (McMann 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Different aspects of democracy in the Argentine provinces, as measured by the SEPP questions, range from (on average) very good to rather poor. Most survey items also have a significant level of inter-provincial variance. These findings mean that subnational regimes in Argentina are heterogeneous in two respects. First, they vary with respect to the particular component of democracy under consideration. For example, provinces tend to be democratic in terms of inclusion but authoritarian in terms of checks and balances. Second, provincial regimes vary with respect to their overall average: for a large majority of the items some are significantly more and some are significantly less democratic. There is, then, plenty of inter-provincial variance to be described and explained.

The descriptive results presented above suggest that the less democratic subnational regimes in Argentina are characterized by weak checks and balances and by sophisticated ways of undermining contestation. Inclusion requirements, and to a lesser extent liberal rights, are generally respected by Argentine provincial incumbents. Additional analyses of the SEPP data might allow the elaboration of a more general and sophisticated typology of regime type components using both their substantive content and their central tendency and dispersion. Such a typology would not only provide information about (quantitative) levels of democracy, but also about the (qualitative) nature of provincial regimes.

Figure 11. Mean and Standard Deviation of SEPP items

SD	Mean									
	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8	0.9	1.0
0.30			SC independence	TV camp. bias	Newsp. bias					
0.25		Party constraints		Punishment of staff (p)	Biased govt. advert.	Spying				
			TV bias	Newsp. camp. bias	Federal justice					
	Camp. spending	Prov. Justice constraints			Police brutality	Threats journ./oppon.				
		Legisl. constraints	Nation. limit.	Overall D	Police detentions					
0.20			Radio camp. bias	Alt. sources (middle)	Freedom of protest					
		HA institutions		Media self-censor.	Excessive police force					
	Punishment of staff (c)				Tutelary powers					
		Alt. sources (poor)	Radio bias		Elector. irregul.	Politicized. educat.				
		FOI			Freedom of criticism					
0.15	State resources for camp.				Camp. harassment	Oppon. attacked				
						Discrim. of natives				
		Legisl. support	Journ. bias			Execution of detainees				
						Vote counting fraud	Oppon. arrested			
					Elect. exclusion	Alt. sources (rich)				
0.10							Discrim. of women./gays			
							Discrim. of immigrants			
0.05	Inclusion	Contestation	Effectiveness	Institutional constraints	Liberal rights				Discrim. of religions	
									Candid. exclusion	
									Oppon. executed	



## APPENDIX: Original Question Wording in Spanish

### Figure 2

**X-Axis** (Q.21): “A veces los ciudadanos no pueden votar porque no se les entrega el DNI a tiempo, porque sus nombres no aparecen en el padrón, etc. ¿Cuán graves cree usted que fueron este tipo de problemas que impiden que los ciudadanos voten en las elecciones provinciales de 2007: 1) muy graves, 2) bastante graves, 3) algo graves, 4) poco graves, o 5) nada graves?”

**Y-Axis** (Q.24): “¿Y cuán limpio fue el conteo de los votos por parte de las autoridades electorales? ¿Le parece que hubo 1) ninguna, 2) pocas, 3) algunas, 4) bastantes o 5) muchas irregularidades en el conteo de los votos?”

### Figure 3

**X and Y Axes** (Q.32a-d). “Por favor piense en la cobertura de la campaña electoral de 2007 por parte de los medios de comunicación provinciales. Nos referimos a la cobertura de los medios, y no a la publicidad de los candidatos. Considerando tanto la cantidad como el contenido de la cobertura de la TV abierta, ¿usted diría que en promedio fue 1) muy sesgada en favor del candidato a gobernador oficialista, 2) algo sesgada en favor del candidato oficialista, 3) equilibrada [incluyendo sesgos compensatorios], o sesgada en favor de candidatos opositores? ¿Y la del/de los principal/es diario/s provincial/es?”

### Figure 4

**X-Axis** (Q.21): “A veces los ciudadanos no pueden votar porque no se les entrega el DNI a tiempo, porque sus nombres no aparecen en el padrón, etc. ¿Cuán graves cree usted que fueron este tipo de problemas que impiden que los ciudadanos voten en las elecciones provinciales de 2007: 1) muy graves, 2) bastante graves, 3) algo graves, 4) poco graves, o 5) nada graves?”

**Y-Axis** (Q.26): “Un candidato puede ser proscrito en forma abierta o, más sutilmente, haciendo uso de una dudosa interpretación de un requisito legal. ¿Se le negó de una u otra forma a algún ciudadano el derecho a ser candidato a gobernador en las elecciones de 2007? 1) no se le negó el derecho a presentarse a ningún ciudadano, 2) se le negó el derecho a presentarse a un candidato menor, 3) se le negó el derecho a presentarse a un candidato que hubiera estado entre los más votados.”

### Figure 5

**X-Axis** (Q.36): “¿Cuán libres de criticar al gobierno provincial sin miedo de ser castigados eran los ciudadanos comunes durante 2003-2007? ¿1) Muy libres, 2) bastante libres, 3) algo libres, 4) poco libres o 5) nada libres?”

**Y-Axis** (Q.35): “Ahora quisiera saber si los empleados públicos provinciales corrían el riesgo de ser castigados en caso de que fueran abiertamente críticos del gobierno del gobernador XX. ¿Diría que los empleados administrativos de carrera 1) corrieron riesgos graves tales como ser despedidos, 2) riesgos moderados tales como no ser ascendidos, o 3) no corrieron riesgos?”

### Figure 6

**X-Axis** (Q.6): “¿Cuán limitado estuvo el poder del gobernador XX por la legislatura provincial durante el período 2003-2007: 1) muy, 2) bastante, 3) algo, 4) poco o 5) nada limitado?”

**Y-Axis** (Q.7): “¿Cuántos de los jueces de El Superior Tribunal de Justicia eran lo suficientemente independientes como para tomar decisiones contrarias a las preferencias del gobierno de XX: 1) ningún juez fue independiente, 2) menos de la mitad, 3) la mitad, 4) más de la mitad, o 5) todos fueron independientes?”

## Figure 7

**X-Axis (Q.47):** Por favor díganos si la policía u otros agentes del gobierno provincial usaron excesivamente la fuerza contra manifestaciones o piquetes durante el período 2002-2004. [EN CASO QUE SÍ] ¿Ocurrió 2) unas pocas veces, 3) algunas veces, 4) bastantes veces o 5) muchas veces?”

**Y-Axis (Q.50):** Voy a mencionarle una serie de grupos que a veces sufren discriminación por parte del gobierno ¿El gobierno de XX discriminó en contra de Minorías religiosas tales como evangélicos, judíos o musulmanes? [EN CASO QUE SÍ] ¿Lo hizo 2) una s pocas veces, 3) algunas veces, 4) bastantes veces o 5) muchas veces?”

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