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

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Abstract: Democratisation studies have tended to focus on processes at the national level, but have often neglected the remarkable variation that may exist at the regional level. This paper draws on examples from Argentina and develops the concept of closed game to analyse the functioning of democracy at the sub-national level. It focuses specifically on two case studies of provinces 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. It argues that neither a national focus nor a focus on elections alone is sufficient to understand the whole array of political and social practices that enable regimes that are neither fully democratic nor conventionally authoritarian to reproduce themselves over time. The paper calls attention to the variation that may exist within a single nationally democratic state and discusses some of the concepts used to analyse sub-national democratisation.

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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. While at the national level a president was elected in free elections without the proscription of Peronism, in many provinces, 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 the inaugural elections.

Democratisation studies have tended to focus on processes at the national level, but have often neglected the remarkable variation that may exist at the regional or provincial level. In recent years, the importance of “scaling down” has become more evident and the research agenda has shifted to sub-national politics and the relation of these processes to democracy at the national level. In Latin America, studies of sub-national democratisation pointed to elite continuity in some Brazilian states; the Mexican transition to democracy, with its gradual opening of the PRI-dominated system to political competition, also provided examples of sub-national resistance to national democratisation; and more recently, Mexican and Argentinean sub-national cases have been analysed under the lens of sub-national authoritarianism.

The Argentine case offers a compelling example of the importance of understanding the variation that may exist within a single nationally democratic state. Democratisation is not an even or homogeneous process and democracy may unfold in diverse ways in different sub-national units within a same country. Some units may be more open and competitive, while other units may exhibit elite continuity and not result in alternation; in some provinces the press may be more independent and in others less, and so forth. This paper draws on examples from Argentina and develops the concept of ‘closed game’ to analyse the functioning of democracy at the sub-national level. It focuses specifically on two case studies of provinces 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. It argues that neither a national focus nor a focus on elections alone is sufficient to understand the whole array of political and social practices that enable regimes that are neither fully democratic nor conventionally authoritarian to reproduce themselves over time.

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1 Guillermo O’Donnell made a passing reference to this problem in, “On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries”, World Development, Vol. 21, No. 8, 1993, but other than that, sub-national democratisation was not on the initial agenda of the democratisation literature.
3 Frances Hagopian, Traditional Politics and Regime Change in Brazil, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
4 See Wayne A. Cornelius, Todd A. Eisenstadt and Jane Hindley, eds., Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico, La Jolla, Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California, 1999.
Regimes may be democratic 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. 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. They inhabit the middle ground between authoritarianism and full democracy, but although they may not be fully democratic, they cannot be considered conventionally authoritarian. Some hybrid regimes are characterised as diminished sub-types of democracy (delegative democracy, diminished democracy, democradura, etc.), while others are characterised as diminished sub-types of authoritarianism (competitive authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism, sub-national authoritarianism, etc.), therefore falling closer to one end or the other of the democracy-authoritarianism continuum. The concept of hybrid regimes has the disadvantage that it may function as a catch-all category where all regimes that are neither clearly democratic nor clearly authoritarian are lumped together. It may also obscure the differences between different kinds of regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian and it is therefore necessary to identify specific types of hybrid regimes. As Munck argues, more attention needs to be paid to

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6 Wayne A. Cornelius, “Subnational Politics and Democratization: Tensions between Center and Periphery in the Mexican Political System” in Cornelius et al, Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico, p. 7; see also, Gibson, “Boundary Control”.


defining the boundaries of intermediate regime categories. However, the notion of hybridity illustrates the fact that democratisation is not “a cut-and-dried one step shift to a new equilibrium”. 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 game in town”, 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 freedom of speech and freedom to organise public protests, there are opposition parties that win legislative seats or municipalities (even if they do not win the governorship), 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 and 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.

In competitive authoritarian regimes, electoral results may be manipulated, the opposition harassed, threatened, arrested or even assaulted.

Yet, despite the existence of the freedoms associated with a democracy, some of these sub-national regimes do not result in alternation; there may be no press censorship, but the political elite owns the provincial media and therefore controls it; and, despite being theoretically open to contestation, these sub-national regimes remain, in practice, relatively closed.

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 and Vilas, 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.
term provincial political elite refers to individuals from a reduced group of families who hold office and compete for political and electoral positions.

I use the concept of ‘closed game’ to refer to a sub-national political regime 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, where regular elections that are reasonably free and fair are held for executive and legislative posts both at the national and sub-national level; there is universal adult suffrage; elections are contested; political rights and civil liberties are respected (including freedom of the press, freedom of association and freedom to criticise the government); and elected authorities are able to govern.

The literature on democracy and democratisation has often focused on elections and institutions. Yet, a focus on elections alone fails to pay attention to who governs, how they govern and how they elicit support. The framework of the closed game focuses on these central questions.

Closed games are a type of hybrid regime, but 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. Therefore, an approach that centres mostly on the authoritarian use of elections fails to grasp that there are other ways in which an elite may remain in power over time with the consent of the population. These sub-national regimes cannot be considered authoritarian and are therefore not cases of “sub-national authoritarianism”.

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-elected 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, but the result is a family-dominated system in which the boundaries between private and public remain blurred. 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 discretionary use of the state and of 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. 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. Control of the media tends not to be coercive. The political families own the most important provincial media and control the public television channel. Control of the judiciary tends to be 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. There may also be variation according to a province’s structural conditions (socio-economic structure, poverty levels), the kind of provincial state (a stronger state with its own resources or a weaker state that is more dependent on federal funding) and its political history. 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.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSIONS</th>
<th>MECHANISMS</th>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Free, fair and regular elections</strong></td>
<td>No direct interference in the electoral process.</td>
<td>Highly contested: more than one candidate has chances of winning.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Low contestation: there is more than one candidate, but only one has real chances of winning.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Not contested: the opposition sees no point in participating.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family politics: control of access to top government positions</strong></td>
<td>Only members of the families are nominated for top government positions.</td>
<td>Governor always belongs to the same family.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Governor belongs to a group of notable families.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Alternation between parties, which are dominated by few families.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Predominant party with alternation between families belonging to the same party.</td>
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<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>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-family members develop political ambitions and a political crisis ensues.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Control of the media</strong></td>
<td>Newspaper ownership.</td>
<td>There is only one newspaper and it is owned by the elite.</td>
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<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>
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<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>
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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, allowing non-family members few possibilities of entering the game or modifying its implicit rules. At the same time, the closure and the limits of the closed game lie 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 also tend to control the provincial branch of their political party if it is a national party and the design of electoral lists. And they usually have loyal voters.

Yet, provincial party systems and politics are not completely isolated from national politics and 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. Smaller provinces, which are over-represented in the Lower House, are often part of government coalitions. Provincial and national politics are also linked through political parties. Most provinces are governed by parties that are local branches of national political parties and are therefore part of the national party system. Because governors tend to be the heads of the provincial branch of their party, they have influence in the national parties. Their support is needed to approve legislation,
implement policy and ensure votes in national elections. Moreover, many presidents are former provincial governors and governors often have presidential ambitions. National governments may therefore not have many incentives to curb the power of provincial families that close the political game at the local level, but provide them with support at the national level.

The distinct qualities outlined above justify grouping regimes with these characteristics under the concept of closed games and not depicting them as sub-national authoritarianism, electoral authoritarianism or, more generally, “brown areas”. These cases are also not merely examples of patrimonialism or nepotism. Closed games are sustained by well-organised political systems with stable institutions, highly structured political practices, newspapers, families, clienteles and a judicial system. That is, the closed game includes an institutional account of a well-organised political system. In provinces with closed games, the state may not be entirely democratic, but it does reach in. Depicting the less democratic elements of a nationally democratic country as exceptional cases of sub-national authoritarianism, as authoritarian enclaves or brown areas suggests that they are isolated bastions of neo-feudalised power and fails to grasp how these less democratic units are functional to the way politics is practiced at the national level.

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, 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. It may also occur that 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 concept of the closed game is an abstract model and there may be varying degrees of closure in different provinces, as the two cases analysed in the following sections show. The practice of the closed game is more varied and messy than the theoretical model outlined above. One extreme is where the game is absolutely closed and no matter what, only members of the provincial political families can become governor. In this case, challengers have no incentives to compete. Another scenario is where the game is heavily loaded, but, because of factionalism within the elite or other reasons, there is no certainty of the outcome of elections. Challengers therefore have incentives to compete. They may make mistakes and with hindsight it may become evident that they never had a real chance to win, but they still have incentives to try. A third variation is where the game is heavily loaded, but an intra-elite crisis or the

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15 For example, Gibson and Calvo show that President Carlos Menem built coalitions with the peripheral (less populous and over-represented) provinces to ensure the number of votes needed to approve his economic reform packages in the 1990s and, in exchange, spared them the cost of these reforms in the initial stage. See Edward L. Gibson and Ernesto Calvo, “Federalism and Low-Maintenance Constituencies: Territorial Dimensions of Economic Reform in Argentina”, Studies in Comparative International Development, Fall 2000, 35, 3.

16 “Brown areas” is the term coined by O’Donnell to designate sub-national regions where the political conditions for the existence of a polyarchy are met and a state bureaucracy exists, but there is a “neo-feudalisation” of power, power is privatised, citizenship is severely curtailed and the state is not fully present. See Guillermo O’Donnell, “On the State, Democratization, and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries”, in Counterpoints, p. 138-144.

intervention of the national government turns the odds and makes it possible for challengers to win elections. Yet, the most frequent case is that the political elite wins the votes of the electorate, but does not deliver most of the changes it promises, in part because of the need to preserve itself.

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, a province close to the centre of Argentina, 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.18 His brother Alberto was elected governor in 2003, 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 a reduced group of families succeeded in remaining in power for a remarkable number of years.

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 tended to alternate 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), continued to exist in Corrientes despite their disappearance in the rest of the country and subsisted as provincial parties. Corrientes was one of the few Argentine provinces where the provincial political system continued to be dominated by provincial instead of national parties after 1983.19 The province therefore remained relatively insulated from national political events 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.

18 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.
19 Other cases are the provinces of Neuquén and San Juan.
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.

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 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 2: Corrientes: electoral results for governor and provincial deputies, 1983-1999

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAL</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></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>22.94 %</td>
<td>23.10 %</td>
<td>18.87 %</td>
<td>18.44 %</td>
<td>18.6 %</td>
<td>32.75 %</td>
<td></td>
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<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></td>
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</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>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAL</td>
<td>43.86 %</td>
<td>43.74 %</td>
<td>47.73 %</td>
<td>47.13 %</td>
<td>41.80 %</td>
<td>41.10 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>33.97 %</td>
<td>33.03 %</td>
<td>37.62 %</td>
<td>36.74 %</td>
<td>31.69 %</td>
<td>31.69 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>17.84 %</td>
<td>14.77 %</td>
<td>11.61 %</td>
<td>12.61 %</td>
<td>13.94 %</td>
<td>13.94 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.33 %</td>
<td>8.27 %</td>
<td>3.04 %</td>
<td>3.52 %</td>
<td>12.77 %</td>
<td>12.77 %</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997 Governor</th>
<th>1997 Legislature</th>
<th>1999 Governor</th>
<th>1999 Legislature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PANU</td>
<td>48.49 %</td>
<td>70.34 %</td>
<td>47.44 %</td>
<td>28.06 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAL</td>
<td>19.67 %</td>
<td>29.66 %</td>
<td>19.91 %</td>
<td>20.65 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>18.23 %</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18.11 %</td>
<td>19.25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>13.27 %</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14.18 %</td>
<td>**23.75 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.34 %</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.36 %</td>
<td>8.3 %</td>
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</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 Romero Feris 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.

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.

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. 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.

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 province also had its own unemployment plan, called “Chamigo”. 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.

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 and allocated to new owners in the province. Some of the units were built with special funds sent to Corrientes after intense flooding on different occasions in the 1990s.

Control of Business Opportunities

Control of access to business opportunities played a very important role in a province like Corrientes, which has very little industry. In 2001 there were only four large firms in the province and 43 small and medium-sized businesses. Most of the provincial political families belong to a landed oligarchy and own agro-businesses in the province. But the 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 (Dirección Nacional de Energía) and the provincial road-building institution (Dirección Nacional de Vialidad), all of which involved members of the Romero Feris family.

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.

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’”.

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 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

25 Author’s interview with J.A. Romero Feris.
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.\textsuperscript{30} In the context of the protest, the governor of Corrientes and the mayor of the provincial capital were impeached. A coalition government was formed, but the political elite was unable to propose a political solution that could satisfy the sector of the population that had taken to the streets. The government intervened the province and after two years, a governor from another party and another family was elected. The dynamics of family politics, elite agreements and factionalism, however, continued after the election of the new governor, Ricardo Colombi, and his cousin succeeded him as governor in 2005. The political party in power had changed, but yet another family had reached power.

\textit{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 Rodríguez 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 that benefited the province, and sound financial management of the province’s accounts enabled them to achieve a great deal of economic independence from the federal government and therefore have greater scope for political manoeuvre.

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.\textsuperscript{31} 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. Indeed, by 2003, the number of votes won by the brothers reached 90 per cent (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.

\textbf{Table 3: San Luis: Electoral results for governor and provincial deputies, 1983-2003}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1989</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>40.48%</td>
<td>45.50%</td>
<td>52.13%</td>
<td>44.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>37.27%</td>
<td>49.08%</td>
<td>32.87%</td>
<td>33.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>22.25%</td>
<td>5.42%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1997</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>51.78%</td>
<td>44.76%</td>
<td>71.62%</td>
<td>52.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>36.95%</td>
<td>28.69%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>27.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.27%</td>
<td>26.55%</td>
<td>11.38%</td>
<td>20.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{30} Two people were killed and 25 injured in the repression.

\textsuperscript{31} Rodríguez Saá had only three percentage points more than his contender, which amounted to 3,873 votes. Source: Interior Ministry.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Governor</td>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>54.32 %</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>63.57 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>44.99 %*</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>12.87 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0.69 %</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>23.57 %</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td>Governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>36.05 %</td>
<td>86.26 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ/FV</td>
<td>16.48 %</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUL***</td>
<td>14.22 %</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCR</td>
<td>8.44 %</td>
<td>--</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.

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 mid-1940s, when Juan Perón was elected president of Argentina.32 From then on, the family only appeared sporadically in politics33 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.

After 1983, the Rodríguez Saá brothers and the local Peronist Party under their control consistently won elections in the province. The constitutional reform 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

32 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.
33 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.
A few years later, collaborators of Rodríguez Saá purchased *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 positions and since 1996, the director of the newspaper has been the Rodríguez Saá brothers’ sister, Zulema Rodríguez Saá de Divizia. 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 Rodriguez 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 because of pressure from the government. It was bought by a close collaborator of Rodríguez Saá. 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 had industrialised the province, provided employment opportunities linked to industrialisation, undertook public works and built cheap housing with federal funds from the FONAVI.

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). Twenty-five per cent of the government budget was assigned to this programme.

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 benefits to industries that settled in the

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34 Many of the properties that allegedly belong to the Rodríguez Saá family are registered under the names of front men. See the journalistic investigation undertaken by Miguel Wiñazki, *El Adolfo*, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 2002.
35 *La Opinión* was then shut down in 2004.
36 According to Wiñazki, 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, *El Adolfo*, p.138.
37 Author’s interview with a San Luis journalist.
38 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.
province. 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 the local taxes collected by the provincial government 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, among other, were awarded to companies owned by the family or by family trustees. 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 access to business opportunities in the province by deciding which companies would be awarded the tax benefits. Many companies denounced that they had been asked for bribes in exchange for receiving the 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 Rodríguez 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 Rodríguez 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 approved. According to a report by the Centre for Legal and Social Studies (CELS), 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. The approval of this legislation was accompanied by a fierce slander campaign in El Diario de la República against judges, 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 who had close links to the government and in most cases had held key positions in the executive or legislative branch.

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

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39 Eager to have good relations with Peronist governors and prevent the factionalism that had led to political instability in the 1970s, Radical President Raúl Alfonsín favoured four provinces with industrial promotion regimes.
42 Ibid.
provincial 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 a federal intervention in the province of Santiago del Estero had shown him that the electoral outcome might not necessarily benefit the national government. Despite opposition in the provincial capital, the Rodríguez Saá brothers had a large constituency and a political clientele; they had been winning elections with an overwhelming majority for many years and it seemed likely that after a federal intervention they would once again win the elections. 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 Rodríguez 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 Rodríguez Saá was re-elected in 2007 with over 80 per cent of the vote and the protest movement became a thing of the past.

Conclusions: National-Provincial Links and the Persistence of Closed Games

Up to now, this paper has focused on the internal dynamics of closed games to explain how these political regimes maintained the closure of provincial politics. But 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 closed with regard to national politics, in order to strengthen control of their geographical domain. This is, however, not always possible because national and provincial politics are inextricably linked and mutually influence each other.

Non-intervention by the national government enabled the ruling families in both Corrientes and San Luis to maintain the closure of the game. But what explains the national government’s non-interference in provinces with closed games on a day-to-day basis? Closed games may not be entirely democratic or 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 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 support for transfers, tax cuts for certain industries or other types of economic benefits. Provinces with a stronger economic structure, like San Luis, will tend to have greater independence from the national government and will be able to maintain their closed games more insulated.

As long as alliances between national and provincial governments function smoothly, the national government will tend not to get involved in provincial political games, except during elections. One possibility of national government involvement is when 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, which may range from withholding
discretional federal transfers, to support for the opposition or a rival faction of the ruling party, or, in extreme cases, a federal intervention. The national government may 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.

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 evidences. 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. Yet two factors may prevent the elite from keeping the conflict within provincial boundaries: national government involvement and national media attention. Attention or coverage from national media will bring a local conflict to the national arena and national attention may put pressure on the national government to act at the local level. Conflict nationalisation therefore brings the national government into the closed game.

The most extreme form of national involvement is through a federal intervention, when provincial elected and non-elected authorities are replaced by federal trustees or interventors. Federal interventions are, however, exceptional cases and in themselves not altogether democratic. They are also unlikely to bring about further democratisation or 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 the 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 a two-year intervention, the national government achieved its implicit objective of overseeing the election of a governor belonging to the same political party as the president. Alternation occurred, but the logic of the closed game proved resilient. The new governor appeared to reproduce the dynamics of family politics: at the end of his term, he was replaced by his cousin, who then reformed the provincial constitution to enable his re-election. A similar dynamic has occurred in other provinces with closed games that were intervened by the federal government.

In San Luis, the national government decided against intervening because polls showed that the Rodríguez 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 intervene in, or dismantle, other

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43 This expression was used by the former governor of San Luis, Adolfo Rodríguez Saá.
44 Gibson also makes this point in “Subnational Authoritarianism and Territorial Politics”, p. 19-20.
45 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. In Santiago del Estero, after a first intervention in 1991, the same family was returned to power. In 2005, after another federal intervention, a new governor who did not belong to the traditional Juárez family or to the Peronist Party was elected. He was re-elected in 2008 and appeared to be closing the political game in a similar way to his predecessor.
governors’ closed games. National governments will tend to 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.

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. Because of the interaction between different levels of government, sub-national democratisation is a far more complex process than national democratisation. As the examples of Corrientes and San Luis show, 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 with weak states. The framework of the closed game points to the need to look beyond electoral data and party systems in the analysis of sub-national democracy. It 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.

The preservation of closed games at the sub-national level 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. The question that remains open is how change and further democratisation may occur at the sub-national level.