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## Protests, signaling, and elections: conceptualizing opposition-movement interactions during Argentina's anti-government protests (2012–2013)

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the interface of protest movements and opposition parties, considering this remains conceptually under-specified. It does so by proposing a processual framework involving three mechanisms of party-movement interaction – signaling, frame-alignment, and coalition-building – at play in different phases of a contentious cycle unfolding under electoral conditions. Drawing on novel interview data, the article validates this proposal by tracing direct and indirect effects between protest signals, activists, and Argentine opposition parties during the year-long contentious cycle that preceded the defeat of the Kirchner government in the 2013 legislative elections. On this basis, it is argued that interactive dynamics between protest actors and political parties can significantly affect opposition politics, supporting the emergence of collaborative strategies that may have major electoral implications. The article thus makes relevant theoretical and empirical contributions, by both offering an analytical bridge between social movement and party politics literatures with potential for further elaboration, while illuminating new developments concerning the positioning of Latin American center-right parties in relation to mass protests.

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The relationship between movement, parties, and elections has become the object of an extensive literature nuancing the classical separation between institutionalized routine politics and non-institutionalized contentious action (Goldstone, 2004; İlgü Özler, 2013; Kitschelt, 1993). While Kitschelt (2006, p. 280) posed movements and political parties as alternative vehicles that political entrepreneurs may choose to deal with problems of collective action and social choice, others preferred to think their relations as ‘a continuum of alignment and influence’ between outsiders and insiders (Goldstone, 2003, p. 8). In this line, authors such as Schwartz (2010) have recently discussed party-movement interactions on the basis of coordinated, invasive, and hostile strategies, depending on whether they perceive each other in complementary or adversarial terms, while other scholars have emphasized the range of overlapping and dynamic interrelationships mediating the formation of coalitions and alliances between parties and social movements (Almeida & Van Dyke, 2014; Heaney & Rojas,

2015; Schlozman, 2015). The connection between movements and elections is somewhat less developed, both empirically and theoretically. This is partly due to the methodological challenges of testing the impact protest movements may have over electoral results (Amenta, Caren, & Chiarello et al., 2010), and partly due to the scarce systemic specification of the 'linkage mechanisms' bridging routine political processes and extra-institutional collective activity (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010, p. 532). This literature, however, points to elections as critical junctures that may generate important changes in movement and partisan dynamics and impact over the stability of institutional configurations: movements can condition electoral results, alter the structures, practices, and agendas of parties, and facilitate/disrupt the goals of influential state actors, while elections provide movements and parties with publicity and recruitment opportunities, and associational and collaborative incentives (Kriesi, 2015; McAdam & Tarrow, 2013; Piccio, 2016; Trejo, 2014). Not surprisingly, of late interest in the protest-election interface has accentuated, given the connection established in a number of democratic countries between protest-voting, the surge of anti-establishment and anti-elite movements, and the recent electoral success of radical parties and candidates (Kriesi, 2014).

A lingering gap, however, is that these linkages continue to be studied largely in indirect and static terms, maintaining parties and movements as groups that rarely come into contact and that have fixed positions, interests, and agendas (Banaszak, 2010, p. 3). Thus, recent quantitative research on protest signaling and party responsiveness points towards heuristic factors such as protest size, frequency, and media visibility, and to the role of ideological inclination and issue ownership in how parties decode protest events; these variables do not presume direct party-movement interaction (Hutter & Vlieghehart, 2016; Wouters & Walgrave, 2017). Similarly, the formation of alliances between parties and movements, particularly in the context of the US and Western Europe, is understood in terms of established parties 'learning' from movement repertoires, movements 'lobbying' parties or campaigning for specific candidates, or activists developing partisan identities, all indirect mechanisms consistent with the historical distancing of parties from the street following the institutionalization of party systems and the transition from mass- to electoral parties (Carty, 2004; Katz & Mair, 1995). Accordingly, direct contacts between parties and movements remains a feature of outlier regions and groups, be these left-of-center movement parties in Latin America or right-of-center populist parties in Europe, for example (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Roberts, 2002).

This article contributes to narrow this conceptual and empirical deficit. Examining the fluid direct and indirect interactions between opposition parties and movement actors during a period characterized by the proximity of elections, the article sheds light on the heuristic, strategic, and institutional mechanisms mediating movements, parties, and elections, the evolving positions of the actors involved, and the socio-political dynamics that facilitate the concatenation of multiple linkage mechanisms. It does so by proposing a processual framework that bridges the (indirect) signaling role of mass protests, the (direct) aligning activities conducted between party elites and activists, and broader associational and demobilizing logics affecting parties and movements prior and after elections.

This argument is supported by a qualitative case study of the Argentine protest cycle preceding the 2013 mid-term Congressional elections, when the (then) ruling Kirchnerist party *Frente para la Victoria* (FPV), led by former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (CFK), lost significant ground to a range of center and right-of-center opposition parties, such as (current President) Mauricio Macri's party *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO), the coalition *Frente Amplio UNEN* (FAUNEN), and the Peronist *Frente Renovador* (FR).<sup>1</sup> Against assessments where these protests are considered symptomatic of poor economic performance and having limited impact over party politics and electoral dynamics (Freytes & Niedzwiecki, 2016; Lupu, 2016), this article argues that the 2012–2013 protests performed a central function in terms of (i) signaling opposition parties the orientation of social discontent, (ii) promoting alignment between anti-incumbent protest frames and opposition party platforms, and (iii) reinforcing opposition collaboration and the formation of new electoral coalitions, a key factor to account for electoral outcomes.

Hence, the article makes a series of contributions. Conceptually, it provides a detailed perspective of the complex mechanisms connecting protest movements and opposition politics in democratic conditions, with potential for further elaboration and application in other contexts, expanding the dynamic model introduced in Peña and Davies (2017). Empirically, it illuminates an unexplored dimension of recent mobilizations in Argentina, underlining the relevance of what Auyero (2007, p. 25) denominated the 'the gray zone of state power'; the informal, clandestine, and overlapping spheres of interaction between routine (party) and contentious (movement) politics, while outlining intriguing developments regarding how contemporary political parties accommodate to social discontent, as it shows an 'electoral' center-right party actively engaging with protest movements, in Latin America a repertoire more associated with the left.

## Methodology

Following Amenta's recommendation (2014, p. 27), the article departs from a 'political outcome' – the result of the 2013 mid-term elections – and works its way back to inquiry how this outcome was influenced by opposition-movement interactions. The argument 'process-traces' (Collier, 2011) these interactions and subsequent developments during a protest cycle defined by three mass mobilizations that occurred on the evenings of 13 September 2012 (13S), 8 November 2012 (8N), and 18 April 2013 (18A), plus a fourth failed one on 8 August (8A), on the eve of the 2013 primaries. This cycle is of relevance for several reasons. First, the sequence of growing mobilizations allows examining the gradual re-assessment opposition parties made of the orientation of the protests, from an initial position of concern to one of opportunity. Second, the case permits evaluation of the evolution of movement-opposition interactions in a relatively narrow period with an approximating electoral instance, as all mobilizations occurred within a year prior to a relevant election. Third, it examines the involvement of parties with 'Twitter'-like mobilizations characteristic of the 2010s, where new social media technologies support more horizontal, decentralized, and individualized forms of collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). To examine these interactions, the article relies on a multi-layered methodological approach triangulating three types of data gathered between October 2014 and February 2017. Data from three national newspapers (*La Nación*, *Clarín*, and *Página12*) was systematically collected prior and after

each protest event.<sup>2</sup> As indicated by Earl et al. (2004, p. 67), newspaper data is particularly useful to trace movement processes; in this case, the public reaction of authorities and political party leaders. Additionally, thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven activists and cyber-activists who acted as ‘digital vanguards’ supplying central mobilizing references online (i.e. setting key dates, diffusing motivational material) (Gerbaudo, 2017).<sup>3</sup> While not being party militants, nor assuming leadership roles or gaining public visibility during or after the events, these activists established direct and recurrent contacts with local opposition actors. Hence, their insights provide ‘inferential leverage’ (Bennett & Elman, 2006, p. 251) on the interactions between these actors during the contentious cycle, elucidating a difficult empirical domain, as politicians prefer to hide these links (many were in public office at the time, and currently occupy senior roles in Macri’s government), and cyber-activists are usually small and cagey groups.<sup>4</sup> Finally, secondary literature, including private polls and surveys, was used to contextualize the political opportunities structures surrounding these events, such as the fragmentation of party system, political ideologies, and the preferences of the protesters mobilized during the period in question.

The article is structured in the following manner. The section ahead outlines the framework conceptualizing the process of movement-opposition interactions, based on a series of relational mechanisms. In the second section, activist and opposition behavior is examined during a first ‘signaling’ phase, when opposition parties reassessed their positioning against the first protests, a second ‘alignment’ phase, when activists and opposition representatives engaged in direct contact and aligned their frames, and a third ‘electoral’ phase when mobilization gave way to partisan and electoral logics. The final section concludes.

### **Signals, alignments, and elections**

This article argues that protest movements can have a lasting effect on the behavior of opposition parties and be conducive to important electoral outcomes. To develop this proposition theoretically, the article draws from established social movement and party politics literatures, inferring a parsimonious analytical framework that links protests, opposition parties, and elections by way of three mechanisms. It is worth noting, that the operation of these mechanisms is contextual, conditioned by a range of political opportunity structures, and their interrelations and path-dependency causally complex, so that alternative causal trajectories not explored in this article are analytically and empirically possible (Bennett & Elman, 2006).

The first mechanism is heuristic, and highlights the function of protest movements as signals providing ‘open’ information to state and elite actors about the commitment of parts of the citizenry to certain issues, and the salience of specific grievances. Given that election cycles constitute common focal points for protests where multiple groups attempt to voice their demands, protest signals are particularly relevant for opposition groups, as they provide an indirect way of assessing the strength and popularity of the incumbent. In this sense, protests serve diverse heuristic functions, both in authoritarian and information-deprived environments, where among other things, they may cast over opposition groups an image of popularity that ‘may stimulate independent and undecided voters to join cascades of opposition participation’ (Hale, 2011, p. 338), but

also in democracies, where attention has been paid to the relationship between media coverage and agenda-setting effects (Sevenans, Walgrave, & Epping, 2016; Walgrave & Vlieghehart, 2012). In this sense, party responsiveness, the extent to which parties adjust their policy priorities to align with salient protest issues, is particularly high among opposition parties as these are less restricted by past activities or external factors, and have higher electoral incentives to address citizens' demands (Hutter & Vlieghehart, 2016, p. 3).

Moreover, mass protests often provide parties and political entrepreneurs with clues about 'aggregating' frames that may mobilize reactive coalitions and political majorities (Rosanvallón, 2008, p. 183). This resonates with the notion that in contemporary democracies protest movements increasingly compete with representative institutions, presenting citizens with legitimate and accessible channels for voicing demands, consolidating preferences, and punishing performances and behaviors by authorities (Krastev, 2014; Mair, 2013). In this form, the recent success of populist and anti-establishment parties has been directly linked with their ability to capture salient rejection frames and position them as 'thin' political ideologies (i.e. nationalism, immigration, anti-elitism) during highly mediatized electoral processes (Della Porta, 2015; Kriesi, 2014).

Therefore, we pose that a second mechanism can 'kick' into motion following effective signal reception by relevant opposition parties, as these strategically re-assess their position and weigh alternative responses to social mobilization: from altering their agendas to try to capture disaffected voters, to direct participation in movements, to the formation of reactive electoral alliances and/or the co-optation of protest leaders (McAdam & Tarrow, 2013). In this regard, a void in the 'party response' literature is elaborating the actual mechanisms mediating the transition from protest signal to party reaction. Drawing from social movement studies, we argue that this can take place via an interactive mechanism of 'frame alignment', by which parties re-position their platforms, discourses, and interpretative orientations in relation to the demands, values, and repertoires of protesters (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1996; Snow, Benford, & McCammon et al., 2014). The bases on which diverse movement and party actors may come together are diverse, with recent comparative analyses on social movement coalitions pointing to a combination of shared political threats, compatible ideology, and diverse social ties (McCammon & Van Dyke, 2010).

Thus, the framing literature has distinguished an array of possible frame alignment strategies and outcomes, for instance, situations where political leaders try to graft pre-existing institutional frames onto movement campaigns ('frame-lifting'), from those where an outsider actor discursively seizes a movement frame and uses it for its own purposes ('frame-appropriation') (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 186). From this literature, a typology of frame alignment outcomes can be derived, considering the extent of discursive alignment and the level of cooperation between the groups involved. As synthesized in Figure 1 below, this distinguishes four possibilities ranging between from extremes cases where groups compete and devise oppositional frames ('counter-framing'), to instances of high cooperation and the coordinated establishment of common positions ('frame-synchronization').

The third mechanism deals with subsequent party-movement dynamics *if* frames have been synchronized, and as electoral competition approximates. The proximity of

		Level of Frame Alignment	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
Level of Group Cooperation	<i>Low</i>	<i>Counter-Framing</i>	<i>Frame Appropriation/ Lifting</i>
	<i>High</i>	<i>Frame Contests/ Disputes</i>	<i>Frame Synchronization</i>

**Figure 1.** Frame alignment and party/movement cooperation.

elections has been noted to affect opportunity structures for mobilization, as looming elections constitute high resonance events that compete with motivational calls by activists – albeit losing or ‘stolen’ elections can also trigger electoral movements in hybrid regimes and ‘young’ democracies (Anderson & Mendes, 2006; Kalandadze & Orenstein, 2009). Electoral victory also has been observed to impact on the mobilization of allied social movements. Wolff (2007), for instance, observed that resilient marginal movements allied with popular parties in Latin America, decayed as these gained power, through processes of incorporation, co-optation, and disciplining, while Heaney and Rojas (2015, p. 3) explored how a high degree of partisan alignment and identification of the anti-war movement with the US Democratic Party resulted in lasting demobilization following Obama’s victory. This suggests that while there can be virtuous synergies between movements and opposition parties in terms of signaling and alignment, this relationship can invert its sign if the latter are electorally successful, as protesters prioritizing partisan over movemental linkages would ‘defect’ back to routine politics.

Less covered have been broader post-protest dynamics experienced by parties. Some authors have noticed that state-movement and party-movement alliances are particularly likely in highly developed democratic bureaucracies and civil society environments, particularly if there are important organizational overlaps, either in policy or membership terms (Almeida, 2010; Van Dyke, 2003). Peña and Davies (2017) hypothesized that ‘centrifugal’ dynamics driven by antagonistic governmental responses to protest can stimulate alliances not only between movement organizations and parties, but between opposition parties themselves, even after protesters abandoned the street. This notion is compatible with findings in the coalition-formation literature, that indicate that pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form as the ideological distance between parties decreases and party system polarization increases (Golder, 2006; Kellam, 2017), with party polarization also positively correlating with ideology-led voting (Lachat, 2008). Similarly, looking at competitive authoritarian environments, Wahman (2011, p. 645) noted that coalition-forming requires a degree of ideological ‘unipolarity’ in the opposition, and a distinct policy line to the incumbent, so that opposition voters can punish alliances with the hegemon.

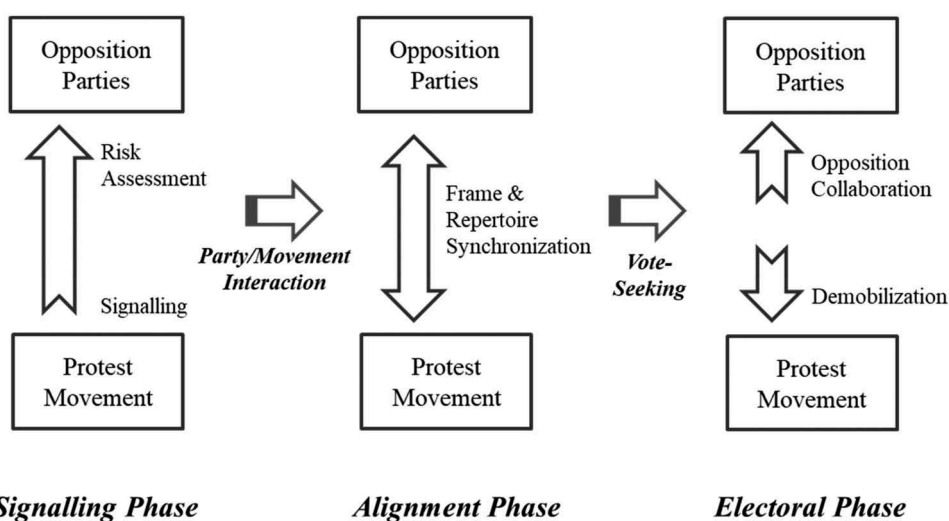
These considerations allow outlining certain scope conditions (Bennett, 2004) of relevance for the Argentine case, as it can be proposed that coalition-forming incentives



for opposition parties are particularly high in contexts of (i) high political polarization, (ii) incumbent hegemony, and (iii) opposition fragmentation. This is because (i) + (ii) would support oppositional frames to be set in contrast to those of the dominant party, and (ii) + (iii) would entice opposition leaders to accept that they cannot defeat the incumbent on their own. In this context, anti-incumbent protest movements are expected to reinforce these logics, as both signaling and frame alignment mechanisms would contribute to reinforce in/out group distinctions between incumbent and opposition supporters (Gallo-Cruz, 2012). The transition from signaling to alignment is also expected to vary according to the degree and type of opposition-movement interaction; active cooperation would allow for protest signals (including frames and repertoires) to become more firmly aligned with partisan positions, claims, and even identities. If this happens, new mobilizations can be read as a proxy of voters' preferences. As elections approach, this 'success', should encourage opposition parties to switch from contentious to electioneering and coalition-building strategies, prioritizing vote-seeking even if this is detrimental for movement action (Rohrschneider, 2002). The overall process described in this section is reflected in Figure 2.

### The 2012–2013 protest cycle

These three analytical phases can be applied to trace developments during the Argentine protest cycle. As shown in Figure 3, the signaling phase comprises the period prior to the second event 8N, when successful mobilizations granted activists with access and influence over party representatives, who were initially cautious about the significance of the protests. The second phase, ranging from the aftermath of 13S to the third protest 18A, involved direct and recurrent interactions between party representatives and activists with the purpose of coordinating positions and strategies. In the third phase, as protesters and activists demobilized, opposition party leaders managed to



**Figure 2.** A process view of opposition-movement interaction.



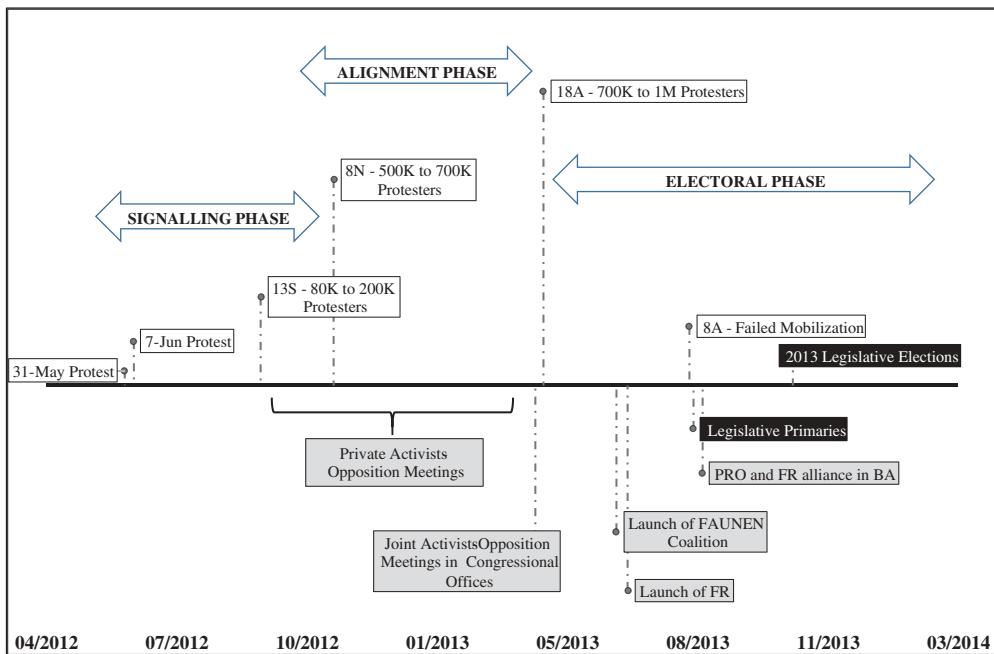


Figure 3. Argentine contentious cycle 2012–2013.

steer the debate towards the upcoming electoral contest, relying on the resulting anti-incumbent discourse to justify new electoral alignments.

### Signaling and risk assessment

The group of cyber-activists that promoted the first event 13S, started to organize during two minor ‘pot-banging’ protests happening on May 31st and June 6th, 2012, when hundreds of middle and upper-class citizens occupied main avenues in Buenos Aires city center to express discontent against the Fernández’ administration. These initial events had very low media coverage and political visibility, but consolidated the network of activists, as those with the most popular Facebook pages (in terms of ‘likes’ and visits), a group of less than twenty participants, started to meet regularly to coordinate a larger protest in September.<sup>5</sup>

Though all the activists shared a clear anti-Kirchnerist stance, they had an ambivalent view of the opposition, as they saw the weakness of opposition parties and the complacency of their leadership – which over the previous years proved incapable of maintaining any meaningful collaboration and resisting divide-and-rule strategies by the government – as a central problem affecting Argentine democracy (Catterberg & Palanza, 2012). This concurred with wider perceptions in society; a poll of April 2012 indicated that only 13 per cent of the population had a positive perception of the organized opposition (Poliarquía, 2012), leading some activists to contemplate the idea of creating a new protest party (Interview with DD, 1/11/2016):

*'The remaining opposition was destroyed, there was no one [...] (Interview with AA, 2/11/2016)*

*'At first, the opposition was completely shut down, quiet [...] One of the objectives of the demonstrations was for politicians to wake up. We perceived that everything was happening, and no one was doing anything' (Interview with II, 6/1/2017)*

These views reflected a major factor characterizing the Argentine party system prior to 2015: the fragmentation and brand dilution experienced by the non-Peronist opposition in the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, which granted Peronist candidates uncontested access to previously elusive constituencies, and inaugurated over a decade of FPV hegemony (Jones & Micozzi, 2013; Malamud & De Luca, 2015). In 2011, President Fernández won a second term in office with a record 54% of the votes, and by early 2012 still enjoyed an approval rating above 40%, higher than all its opponents combined. Notwithstanding, at that point the popularity of the president and her party started to be affected with the worsening economic situation, marked by the deceleration of growth (−1% in 2012 and −2,5% in 2014), rising double-digit inflation, and monetary instability, resulting in unpopular currency controls and increasingly fractious relations with labor and business (Giarraca, Teubal, & Palmisano et al., 2012; Tagina & Varetto, 2013).

During the phase prior to the 13S protests, activists had very limited access to opposition leaders, given the apprehension these had to endorse or participate in extra-institutional activities that could potentially backfire:

*'We started to contact them since the beginning. We entered their web pages, "let's see, this Senator, this Congressman", and we wrote them. [...] But we only spoke to a few of them [...] There was a fear... I remember that in one of the first meetings we had with professional politicians, they told us: "well, you know, how far are you willing to go?" They had that fear [...]' (Interview with AA, 3/10/2014)*

In this sense, the absence of public endorsement by parties and other organized oppositional actors (such as business associations) for the 13S call constitutes an important difference with previous anti-government mobilizations, and reflected the lack of trust between the activists and these groups. Even if some activists – particularly those behind the two most popular pages; 'El Cipayo' and 'El Anti-K' – had ties with the rural associations mobilized during the 2008 protests, and with some secondary figures of the opposition such as Patricia Bullrich, Elisa Carrió, and Ricardo Buryaile, these were weak and insufficient to overturn the broader sense of distrust. In fact, the first interactions with party leaders were described by activists as 'cold', and that their actions were looked at 'with suspicion' (Interview with AA, 3/10/2014).

Notwithstanding, the 13S protest was a sound success, with between 80.000 and 200.000 people taking the streets of downtown Buenos Aires in the largest mobilization in the country since the 2008 rural conflict. Attendants were diverse in both age and socio-economic profile, albeit with a clear bent towards the middle and upper classes and the most educated sectors of society (Gómez, 2014). In similarity with many post-2010 citizen protests, participants rallied behind an array of demands, indicating a variegated but profound dissatisfaction with certain governmental behaviors and its performance. Prevalent were economic concerns, crime levels, deteriorating quality of

living and public services, corruption, the erosion of institutions, and the political polarization of society attributed to the Kirchnerist political discourse (Gold, 2015).

The response from the CFK government was antagonistic (though not violent), intending to delegitimize the protest and the protesters' motives by framing them as conservative, classist, anti-Peronist, and anti-democratic, an approach maintained through subsequent events (Peña & Davies, 2017). Opposition leaders, however, were divided between treating the protest as a hopeful augury or as a general accusation targeting the whole political class. This was evidenced, for example, in the call made by the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR)'s leader Ricardo Alfonsín for a 'national coalition', and in the warning by the leader of the Socialist Party, Hermes Binner, pointing that politicians had to listen to the people to not 'promote a spiral of protest similar to the one of 2001' (Abrevaya, 2012).

The magnitude of the 13S signal, however, had an immediate effect over the positioning of certain opposition actors, with activists mentioning that shortly after the event they started receiving calls to establish dialogue:

*'After 13S they started calling us, saying "where do you want me to go? I am available for you anytime". The guys called you, not even their secretaries. So before the protest we had certain open lines with them, but after the 13S we could have had whatever we wanted. [...]'*  
(Interview with AA, 3/10/2014)

Still, interviews suggest that the anti-government character of the protests was not fully established at the onset of the protest cycle. Reasonably, opposition figures remained hesitant about how to decode the orientation of public discontent, as activists accepted that opposition parties faced risks if they overstepped their involvement, as they could be publicly shunned by protesters if they were perceived as trying to co-opt the spontaneous character of the mobilizations (Interview with BB, 12/9/2014).<sup>6</sup>

However, the reaction by the government and the high level of mobilization in Buenos Aires city and other urban centers incentivized both activists and opposition parties to try to exploit the polarizing counter-frame being promoted from above, which associated the disjointed demands of the protesters with a critique of the capacity of the main opposition leaders to solve the fragmentation of the non-Peronist spectrum (Kollmann, 2012; Pertot, 2013). Thus, President Fernández stated after the 13S: 'This is the problem of contemporary Argentine politics: the absence of a political leadership that presents us with an alternative political project, but that is not our fault. We believe in our project, it is the job of those that don't believe in it to create ideas and proposals to deal with what the rest of society wants' (Pagina12, 2012b). As explained by Peña and Davies (2017), the reaction by the government facilitated the centrifugal dynamics approximating the protesting camp and opposition parties, with encounters between opposition activists and politicians becoming more frequent in the two months prior to the second event, as the latter re-assessed the benefits of embracing contentious tactics.

### **Frame alignment and synchronization**

By the time of the second event, the increasing level of frame and repertoire alignment between activists and opposition parties was evident. Arguably, this indicated that the signaling effect of the first mobilization, which revealed the level of anti-Kirchnerist

discontent within middle and upper-class sectors of Argentine society, had altered how the opposition perceived the protests, and eroded their initial reluctance to engage with the activists promoting them.

The result of this reassessment of risks and opportunities manifested clearly during the second and larger 8N event, which gathered between 500,000 and 700,000 protesters in downtown Buenos Aires, plus simultaneous gatherings around the world.

Better covered by local academics, surveys confirm that protesters were mostly middle-class, albeit involving a spectrum of occupations and income profiles, from: white collar employees and qualified workers, to pensioners, housewives, and students (Giarraca et al., 2012; Gómez, 2014). Moreover, these sources note that the 8N call remained rather generic and lacking any core claim beyond its anti-government character, with attendants brandishing signs that ranged from personalized attacks on government figures to issues such as corruption, crime, authoritarianism, inflation, and currency controls.

In any case, as pointed out by Gómez (2014, p. 94), the topics raised by protesters challenged the legitimacy, credibility, and competence of the government, and infused the mobilization with a markedly oppositional character. This reinforced the signal to political parties that discontent with the government was more widespread than initially thought, and that it was generally aligned with some of main claims of the opposition, incentivizing more committed behaviors. Thus, already on the eve of the protest, some opposition and dissident labor figures (including Macri) made supporting statements in the media, celebrating the voice of the citizenry though avoiding partisan references. Additionally, prior and during the march, young PRO militants distributed national flags and ribbons among attendants (LN, 2012), while a number of secondary opposition figures attended in person, but keeping a low profile and wearing white t-shirts to highlight their non-partisan involvement (Pagina12, 2012a). Interviews suggest that this was a coordinated strategy that followed from a secret directive by the activists who before the mobilization expressly told opposition politicians:

*'We don't want to see any politician. If we see one, he or she must be there as a common citizen. Don't you dare to take ownership because we will chop your head off. We saw they were desperate to capitalize from the event'* (Interview with AA, 2/11/2016).

In the following period, encounters between the opposition and activists became frequent, and included high-ranking representatives of the main non-Peronist opposition (although a small number of dissident Peronists and unionists also participated). These encounters indicate that the signaling phase was by then concluded: having abandoned their initial mistrust towards activists and their abstract political demands, opposition parties reckoned the strategic opportunity to consolidate the widespread rejection towards the government. At the same time, with a record of two successful mobilizations, activists enjoyed greater access and could pressure politicians to not 'turn their backs on the people' and to endorse a third demonstration (Interview with II, 6/1/2017).

The planning for the third event (18A) occurred under the growing shadow of the approaching mid-term election of September 2013. In effect, while in September 2012 activists were mainly worried that politicians could try to co-opt the mobilizations, after November discussions increasingly revolved around how to link the discontent of the street with an electoral strategy to defeat the FPV:

*'We had always turned down politics until the 18A. Because 18A was planned from another point of view, elections were closer, and the truth is that some of us – not everyone – thought we had to get politics closer to the people. That meant trying to unify different claims and achieve real change. Because in this continuous fight against the entire political class you lose. And if you lose, the winner is the one already in office'* (Interview with JJ, 6/1/2017)

Expectedly, electoral considerations started to create internal tensions among activists, as it meant sidelining the autonomy discourse developed in the previous months. In fact, the decision to align the third event with the non-Peronist opposition generated a fracture in the group, confronting many activists with a difficult choice:

*'A lot of activists started criticizing us, but we thought that was the right thing to do; it was an electoral year, every problem has to be solved with politics, and politics is exerted by politicians. . . So we didn't have a choice'* (Interview with AA, 3/10/2014)<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, a series of developments prior to the third protest support the claim that, in spite of these differences, encounters between activists and opposition politicians resulted in frame synchronization. First, the secretive character of opposition-activists encounters was suddenly abandoned when a meeting taking place in one of the Congress buildings was leaked to the press, covered as an 'invitation' from pot-banging activists to the opposition to share the rally and make their paths converge (LN, 2013b). Second, albeit some opposition leaders remained unconvinced of the benefits of associating with activists, ultimately most agreed to support the third march, publicly stating their attendance and spreading the list of national meeting points that activists had put together through their official social media channels (LN, 2013a).<sup>8</sup> Interviewees indicated that these public statements of support were intended to peer-pressure reluctant opposition leaders and 'snow ball' reactions, again suggesting increasing repertoire coordination.

Third, the 18A relied on more sophisticated framing and repertoires, as activists tried to balance the active presence of partisan actors with the autonomous and 'self-organized' character of the mobilizations – a common strategic challenge known as the 'powerful allies dilemma' (Jasper, 2004, p. 9). The chosen tactic was to position the event in relation to a legislative project proposed by the FPV and opposed by most opposition parties, the media, and organized civil society: the *Reforma Judicial* (Judiciary Reform) bill. This bill involved a series of polemic changes to the judiciary branch, which specialists considered could limit its independence (Böhmer, Chayer, & Elena, 2013). As one of the main activist recalled, the bill was used to generate additional symbolic bridges between multiple actors opposed to the CFK government:

*'We made the announcement through a common subject, which was the demand for an independent justice. We told the politicians to go behind a unique flag; some wanted to go, others didn't, but most of them were there. The independence of the judiciary branch was the one issue that kept us all together. You are in, or you are out'* (Interview with AA, 2/11/2016)

The strategy seems to have functioned. Not only on April 18th between 700.000 and 1 million protestors mobilized in Buenos Aires alone, but a survey conducted during the event indicated that the main participation motives were the judicial reform (23.4 per cent), followed by corruption (22.9 per cent) and crime (18.4 per cent), with economic grievances appearing in fifth place (4.2 per cent) (CEIS, 2013a). The

third event also counted with a visible involvement of leading opposition figures across the non-Kirchnerist spectrum, captured by an image of them marching alongside a large Argentinian flag at the front of the columns advancing towards the government square. This image, amply reproduced in the media, provides a striking example of the extent of frame and repertoire alignment at this point: interviewees claim that politicians and activists were intercalated with each other alongside the flag, but as the activists' identities were not known, their presence was not reported. Moreover, as explained ahead, the increasing consolidation of a 'republican' discourse, calling for the defense of the country's institutions against the populist authoritarianism of the Kirchnerist government, started to crystallize as a core aspect within a unified oppositional frame.

The growing alignment between protesters and opposition parties did not go unnoticed by the government, which somewhat moderated its response after the third event, an action suggestive of strategic recalculation in light of protest intensity and electoral proximity (Obarrio, 2013). The ruling party may have initially considered that polarization would not translate into opposition expansion: if protesters were a minority anti-government group, their vote was already lost. Moreover, in a context of opposition fragmentation, anti-incumbent voting would result in vote dispersion. However, the success of activist-opposition alignment, with protesters growing in number as opposition involvement became more explicit, may have challenged this assumption.

On the contrary, for the opposition, the success of the mobilizations presented a major electoral opportunity: a survey conducted shortly after the 18A indicated that only 4 per cent of participants had voted for CFK in 2011 but almost 80 per cent of them still did not feel represented by any political party (CEIS, 2013b). This meant that most protesters were indeed anti-incumbent, but with less than six months to go before the elections, few were convinced by the alternatives. This underlined the need for opposition parties to switch to electioneering strategies in the last period.

### **Coalition-building and protest decline**

According to the activists, the success of the third march constituted in a tipping point in the stance of the non-Peronist opposition: the moment when these parties shed their fear for the street, particularly among UCR and opposition personalities who had been at the receiving end of the 2001 *cacerolazos*. Thus, while activists held the mobilizational upper hand during the signaling and alignment phases, mobilizational success despite active partisan involvement enabled the opposition leadership to grow confident of their popular appeal:

*'At that moment the political class approached... before it was either the fear for another 'Que se vayan todos' ("everyone must go")<sup>9</sup> or accepting that all professional politicians were corrupt but some of them were necessary for the State to function [...]. But then there was a collective 'click', and they [politicians] made their move... those who had always helped, but also opportunists.'* (Interview with GG, 27/12/2016)

After the third event, therefore, electoral considerations started displacing movemental logics. This was supported on two factors influencing parties and activists alike. On the

one hand, the proximity of the mid-term elections accentuated concerns that a return to regular politics was needed to transform discontent into tangible results. On the other, the contentious cycle had contributed to cement a salient and unified anti-Kirchnerist frame in public opinion, that could be used to aggregate oppositional views, based on a widespread perception of the government as arbitrary and authoritarian. Several polls show that grievances highlighted during the three mobilizations, such as corruption, lack of public safety, inflation, and the quality of political institutions, had displaced traditional economic and policy concerns such as unemployment and education, mentioned as priorities before the protests (CEIS, 2013a; Pereyra, 2017; Poliarquía, 2013). Moreover, following rumors about a constitutional reform, projects to reform the media and justice systems, and the implementation of unpopular currency controls, the concern of opposition sectors that the country was moving in the direction of late Chávez's Venezuela aggravated. While a republican imaginary had always been a core component of the non-Peronist pole of the Argentine party system (Ostiguy, 2009), research confirms that since 2013 PRO's political cadres were possessed by an authentic 'moral panic' for the potential 'Chavization' of Argentina, understood in terms of the weakening of representative institutions, greater centralization of power in the executive, and increasing intervention of the state in the economy and public life (Vommaro, 2017, pp. 108–130).

This fear, which was shared by most of the cyber-activists, enabled a tacit understanding on the pressing need to electorally challenge the ruling party in order to 'save the Republic' (Ferrero, 2017).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, after the third protest and before the elections, this republican framing colored the campaign platforms of the non-Peronist opposition. Thus, when the new centrist coalition FAUNEN was launched in June 13th, out of the alliance of multiple parties active in the alignment phase, it did so on an agenda focused on public ethics, the fight against corruption, and closing the possibility of CFK's 're-reelection'. The center-right PRO also changed its orientation in this interim period, moving away from crime and the environment, the two core issues the party had promoted until 2011,<sup>11</sup> to underline the defense of democratic institutions, the ordering of the economy, and the need to 'balance' the Argentine political system (Morresi & Vommaro, 2014). As mentioned in the second section, this is relevant as polarization and the narrowing of partisan opposition positions are two conditions supporting eventual coalition-building.

As the August primaries approached, the divergence in priorities between parties and activists accentuated. Politicians explicitly avoided making references to protest to highlight electoral platforms, pointing to the primaries on August 11th as the ultimate showdown. Activists, on the other hand, wanted the opposition to participate in one final rally on the 8th, but received negative answers:

*"They told us, in a clear tone: "you are going to rally on Thursday, and on Friday starts the electoral ban; so, the media, that on Saturday and Sunday are supposed to be talking about us, will talk about your protest. We are trying to receive the attention of the citizenship, but the attention will be focused on you". (...) (Interview with AA, 3/10/2014)*

The divergence of contentious and electoral rationalities widened two days before the last protest, when a building accidentally exploded in downtown Rosario (a major city



in central Argentina). The President declared two days of national mourning, and several opposition leaders travelled to show support for the families of the casualties. Activists however, insisted on running the 8A event, proposing a frame that linked the accident with the lack of government control and institutional weakness. This was perceived as a strategic mistake by politicians, who preferred to avoid politicizing the accident. When the protest failed, with only 8,000–20,000 people participating in downtown Buenos Aires, the fragmentation of the activist collective accelerated, between those that defended movement autonomy and those embracing partisan strategies. Reflecting on this, an activist recognized the exhaustion of the mobilization phase:

*‘Once the cycle was completed, and politics returned to its place, we had no place anymore. With the renaissance of the opposition, and the possibility to achieve a change through a natural political mechanism – voting – energy was channeled towards that place, and it’s okay’.* (Interview with JJ, 6/1/2017)

The positive outcome of the primaries, attesting that non-Kirchnerist parties would make significant gains, confirmed this assessment. Moreover, the results suggested that electoral coalitions could challenge the majority the FPV enjoyed in the lower chamber (Tagina, 2014). Thus, as activists polarized and demobilized, the immediate period after the primaries witnessed further electioneering and alliance-building among opposition parties, confirming the appeal of new coalitions such as FAUNEN, and Macri justifying PRO’s temporary alliance with the FR in Buenos Aires province on the basis that ‘party politics needed renovation’ (LP, 2013).

This associational logic was reinforced after the mid-term elections, when the FPV lost approximately three million votes (Murillo, Rubio, & Mangonnet, 2016). The successful *Cambiamos* coalition, which would bring Macri to the presidency in 2015, emerged from negotiations conducted during 2014 between PRO and the more centrist elements of UCR and FAUNEN. These negotiations brought together the three non-Peronist groups whose leaders had the most active involvement during the frame alignment phase – with many of those attending the meetings going to occupy top governmental, ministerial, and congressional roles after the 2015 victory – and that more actively promoted the anti-Kirchnerist discourse emerging from the protest cycle, with one of the leaders of the UCR (who attended the meetings) justifying the alliance as a unique opportunity for ‘democratic republicanism to defeat authoritarian populism’ (LN, 2015).<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The article elaborated the linkage between protest movements, party politics, and electoral outcomes, tracing the process by which developments during the 2012–2013 protests cycle impacted on the behavior of Argentine opposition parties and supported the development of anti-incumbent frames and associational strategies; two factors of relevance to account for the opposition victory in the 2013 legislative elections (and in the 2015 presidential one).

The article illuminates the related and dynamic character of mechanisms generally studied in isolation by the more quantitative-oriented political participation literature.

On the one side, it highlights frame alignment as a central mechanism that can alter the behavior of opposition parties during and after contentious events, while also indicating that indirect mechanisms such as signaling may operate differently depending on the type and quality of interactions mediating parties and movements. As shown in the case study, initially the non-Peronist opposition was apprehensive and read early protests as a risk, but as frame alignment evolved, mobilizations were decoded as popular endorsement for a renewed anti-Kirchnerist front. On the other, the article connects frame-aligning interactions with coalition-forming dispositions. In the context of polarization and opposition fragmentation characterizing the Kirchnerist period, the iterative process of signaling, alignment, and mobilization taking place throughout the contentious cycle appears to have simultaneously validated certain protest demands as oppositional frames capable of bridging multiple anti-incumbent positions, simultaneously reinforcing incentives to adopt collaborative electoral strategies. In this sense, while the article considers that voter- and protest-centered approaches sidelining direct contacts between movement and parties will struggle to capture relational dynamics of this sort, it also reckons that the proposed analytical framework could be enriched through additional comparative and quantitative research, considering other mechanisms, contexts, and trajectories between ‘the ballot and the street’, as well as different scope conditions and temporal horizons.

Lastly, the article highlights the relevance of further engagement with the gray zone of movement *and* partisan politics, and with the informal character of party competition, particularly but not only in the Latin American context, claiming it can illuminate new developments concerning party behavior in contemporary democratic settings characterized by highly mobilized citizens. In this regard, the case study indicates that informal and semi-formal interactions with protest groups are not exclusive of populist and left-wing parties, and that some conventional electoral parties could be developing new forms of involvement in extra-institutional action. Similar developments noted in Brazil during the anti-Dilma impeachment protests of 2015–2016, and in Colombia during the 2016 Peace Agreement Referendum, provide general support for this hypothesis in the Latin American context. This is a matter worthy of further inquiry, as it could provide relevant insights on similar innovations taking place in other regions and contexts, where the state-party-movement divide is being renegotiated.

## Notes

1. The FR emerged in June 2013, shortly after the launch of FAUNEN, representing a Peronist but non-Kirchnerist faction led by Sergio Massa, CFK’s former Chief of Staff.
2. The resulting database comprised 497 articles, gathered during the fifteen days prior and after each protest event, from the ‘Domestic Politics’ and ‘Opinion’ sections of the three sources.
3. The interviews involved the leaders of nine Facebook fan pages promoting the rallies (albeit some were managed by three or four individuals), and two activists linked with both the activists and some secondary opposition figures (see [Table A1](#) in Annex). The relevance of these pages was established by triangulating information such as their number of ‘likes’, references in the local press, and mentions in secondary academic sources.
4. Although the fan pages were singled out by newspapers as the diffusers of the protests, only one activist publicly recognized his/her involvement. Moreover, even when most participated

in the marches, their identities remained ignored. For this reason, in [Table A1](#) their names have been anonymized. Interviews were in Spanish and translated by the authors.

5. The socio-economic profile of the cyber-activists largely matched the character of these protests: 90% of them lived in Buenos Aires City and its immediate suburbs, and most were of middle-class background, holding independent occupations. They were also mostly male (73%).
6. Some activists claim that funding was offered by bodies such as the Argentine Rural Society (SRA), a strongly anti-Kirchnerist agrarian federation, later in the protest cycle, but this offer was allegedly rejected.
7. Although activists held a variety of political stances, the main split was between those who advocated for the creation of a new independent party, and those who viewed an alliance with opposition parties as the most practical path to defeat Kirchnerism.
8. Holding a meeting with Mauricio Macri and Marcos Peña, his main advisor and Chief of Staff when elected President, activists characterized their attitude as 'lukewarm' (Interview with AA, 2/11/2016).
9. The famous rallying cry behind the 2001 protests, that culminated with the resignation of the UCR president Fernando De la Rúa.
10. Mauricio Macri expressed his endorsement of the third protest via social media, calling for a civic movement to 'stop Kirchnerism', defend the country's institutions, and prevent the FPV's from turning Argentina into Venezuela (Rosemberg, 2013).
11. Relevantly these were sub-national issues, of higher relevance in Buenos Aires and its suburbs than in other parts of the country.
12. In addition to Macri, this included Gabriela Michetti (current vice-President), Marcos Peña (Chief of Staff), Alfonso Prat-Gay (Minister of Economy until December 2016), Patricia Bullrich (Minister of Security), Sergio Bergman (Minister of Environment), and Ricardo Buryaile (Minister of Agriculture until 2017), among others.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.


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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Interviews.

NO.	Interviewee	Role	Date
1	Activist AA	'El Cipayo', Fanpage Administrator	3/10/2014
2	Activist BB	Independent activist	12/9/2014
3	Activist CC	Independent activist	8/10/2014
4	Activist DD	'El Anti-K', Fanpage Administrator	1/11/2016
5	Activist AA	'El Cipayo' fanpage administrator	2/11/2016
6	Activist EE	'Somos el 46%&'Argentinos en el exterior', Fanpage Administrator	21/12/2016
7	Activist FF	'Ciudadanía activa', Fanpage Administrator	26/12/2016
8	Activist GG	'La Solano Lima', Fanpage Administrator	27/12/2016
9	Activist HH	'ONG Salvemos la Argentina', Fanpage Administrator	28/12/2016
10	Activist II	Independent activist	6/1/2017
11	Activist JJ	'No más K', Fanpage Administrator	6/1/2017
12	Activist KK	'E1 Cipayo', Fanpage Administrator	6/1/2017
13	Activist BB	Independent activist	3/2/2017