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Autoría: Alonso, Paula (*Warwick University. Department of Political and International Studies*)

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WORKING PAPER N° 21

VOTING IN BUENOS AIRES BEFORE 1912

Paula Alonso *

July 1995

ABSTRACT:

This paper analyses the nature of the electorate of the city of Buenos Aires at the turn of the century. It challenges received views on the city's political life arguing that electoral participation was growing at a fast rate before the passing of the Sáenz Peña Law in 1912. The increasing number of people voting had been overshadowed by the rapid growth of the city's population. A quantitative analysis of these variables shows and increasingly active electoral life, while a brief description of Buenos Aires' electoral culture points out some of the reasons lying behind these trends.

Keywords: Voting, Buenos Aires, Nineteenth Century, Early Twentieth Century

* Paula Alonso
Research Fellow Warwick University
Department of Political and International
Studies. Visiting Professor,
Universidad Torcuato Di Tella
Miñones 2159
(1428) Capital Federal - Argentina

The electoral reform of 1912 made the vote secret and compulsory in Argentina for all males over 18 years of age. The reform has been thought of as a dramatic turning point in the country's political development; as the turning of Argentina into a modern democracy. Previous reference to the electoral life of the pre-reform period has primarily concentrated on describing fraud and violence and, therefore, little is known about many aspects of the pre-1912 elections.

Focusing on the city of Buenos Aires, this article attempts both to enhance our understanding of pre-reform elections and to cast some doubts on the standard interpretations of the city's electoral and political developments. It should be stressed, however, that, given the profound differences between Buenos Aires and the rest of the country, generalizations about elections in the city cannot be applied to the rest of the country.¹ The first section of this paper briefly describes the history of the franchise in the province and city of Buenos Aires and analyses the received views on her electoral development. The article then concentrates on the voters of Buenos Aires. New findings of the nature of the electorate and the size of the voting population before 1912 offer an alternative account of the city's electoral life. As we shall see, these findings are closely related to socio-economic changes and the development of electoral practices over the decades preceding the 1912 reform.

An early start

In 1821, the constitution of the province of Buenos Aires established male universal suffrage. The only qualification required to vote was to be male and to be over 20 years of age. Buenos Aires was not the only province which adopted universal suffrage; at least three other provinces also established it at the time, although after a few years they

abandoned it and followed the more common pattern of introducing professional or educational restrictions.² In 1852, after several years of anarchy and dictatorship, Argentina became a unified nation and adopted a Constitution drafted according to the North-American model. The constitution of 1853 said very little about elections. Paradoxically, although the constitution did establish some requirements for becoming a representative, it said nothing about who would be entitled to vote. Regulation of the franchise and of the electoral system was left to Congress.

By then the principle of male universal suffrage had a long history in Buenos Aires, the country's leading province. Although most provinces had restricted voting to the literate or maintained professional qualifications for the franchise, these requirements were soon abolished by the National Congress following the example of Buenos Aires. By 1856 all Argentine males over 17 years of age had the right to vote in national elections. Between 1862 and 1930, when the first military coup took place in Argentina, national elections took place with the frequency established by the National Constitution and according to the regulations determined by national laws.

The question of the franchise was resolved in Argentina at a very early stage of its national organization. Perhaps because of this, it never became a significant issue in the frequent debates about the electoral system in the National Congress. Congressional debates on elections generally revolved around the allocation of votes, the size of wards, the registration of voters and the improvement of the system, but not around the franchise.³ This does not mean that there was unanimous agreement about the benefits of universal suffrage. Voices were raised from time to time against the absence of restrictions in a new and underdeveloped country. In 1886 for example, a prominent young lawyer published a treatise arguing for the introduction of at least literacy restrictions for those under 21 and for disenfranchising criminals and the unemployed.

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He expressed with horror,

No other country where popular suffrage is regularly exercised has an electoral body composed of such malleable and unaware elements. The Argentine law has not only happily given the right to vote to the ignorant, the criminal, the beggar and the tramp, but it has also given it to the weak and inexperienced adolescent, whose will is only that of his father or tutor.⁴

He was not alone in disputing the merits of unrestricted suffrage. In 1911, in the first opinion poll conducted in the country, a majority favoured restricting the vote.⁵ Nevertheless, demands for restrictions to the franchise never received much political support and were never introduced.

Despite the fact that universal suffrage was adopted at a very early stage in Argentina - there are few if any parallels - the electorate was initially reluctant to go to the polls. In the first elections in the province of Buenos Aires in 1821 only 328 men voted out of a population of 60,000.⁶ The turn-outs for the 1876 election are estimated at no more than 11.5% of the electorate.⁷ Many explanations were given, both by contemporaries and later by historians and social scientists, for the high levels of abstention. They all suggest that indifference, corruption and the predominance between 1880 and 1916 of one political party (the Partido Autonomista Nacional), were the main obstacles to electoral participation. The high levels of abstention were one of the principal considerations in the introduction of compulsory and secret voting in 1912. The reform was intended to increase the levels of participation (and hence of political involvement), put an end to electoral corruption, and promote the formation of opposition parties.⁸ The first presidential elections under the reform (1916) were won by the opposition party.

The small turns-outs of the pre-reform period have been one of the main factors upon which historians have based the standard interpretation of Argentina's electoral and

political development. The predominant view has been that Argentina's early adoption of male universal suffrage makes her electoral development no different to those of countries which maintained literacy and property restrictions until the first half of the twentieth century. The political and electoral predominance of the landed oligarchy, which continued until 1916, the innumerable accounts of electoral repression, and the small turn-outs, have been seen as evidence that, until 1912, elections were simply an exercise in repression and manipulation by the landed elite. Elections prior to 1912 have been understood as one of the many mechanisms employed by the oligarchy to keep the reins of power in its hands.⁹

Accounts of the elections of the pre-reform period tend to an exclusive on violence, becoming little more than anecdotes of various fraudulent activities. The electoral reform of 1912 is then compared to the granting of universal suffrage in Western democracies; it is seen as the achievement in Argentina of a full democratic system. However, unlike Western democracies where the transition towards modern democracy was gradual, it has commonly been argued that in Argentina the transition was an excessively abrupt one. One of the main pitfalls of the pre-reform system is thought to have been its failure to provide for the gradual development of political parties and the gradual improvement of the electoral system. It is claimed that, overnight, turn-outs for national elections more than tripled, new social forces were included in the political system, elections were abruptly transformed from exclusive to inclusive affairs, and parties for the first time had to appeal to an electorate for votes instead of just relying on corruption and manipulation. Furthermore, many argued that the suddenness of this transition was responsible for the failure of the country's new democracy, which, unable to cope, was curtailed by a military coup in 1930.¹⁰

The voters of Buenos Aires

There has been wide agreement among historians and social scientists that the pre-reform elections did not mean the competition of political parties for the votes of the citizens. This interpretation is largely based on certain views of the nature and size of electoral participation before the vote became secret and compulsory. The traditional view has been that the voting population was composed of members of the elite who, by extensive use of electoral repression, kept the new social forces away from the polls. According to this view, the reform of 1912 meant the expansion of the vote from the top to the bottom of society.¹¹

However, in recent analyses of the city of Buenos Aires between 1850 and 1880, it has been argued that voters did not belong to the enlightened elite but to the least qualified sectors of the population (the peons, the journeymen and the railway workers) who were marched to the poll by party factions on election day. It was the early granting of universal suffrage that made possible the manipulation of an unqualified electorate. The reform of 1912, the argument follows, did not mean the expansion of the vote from top to bottom, as had been traditionally argued, but the creation of the citizenry as the well-to-do had previously remained indifferent to the country's electoral life.¹²

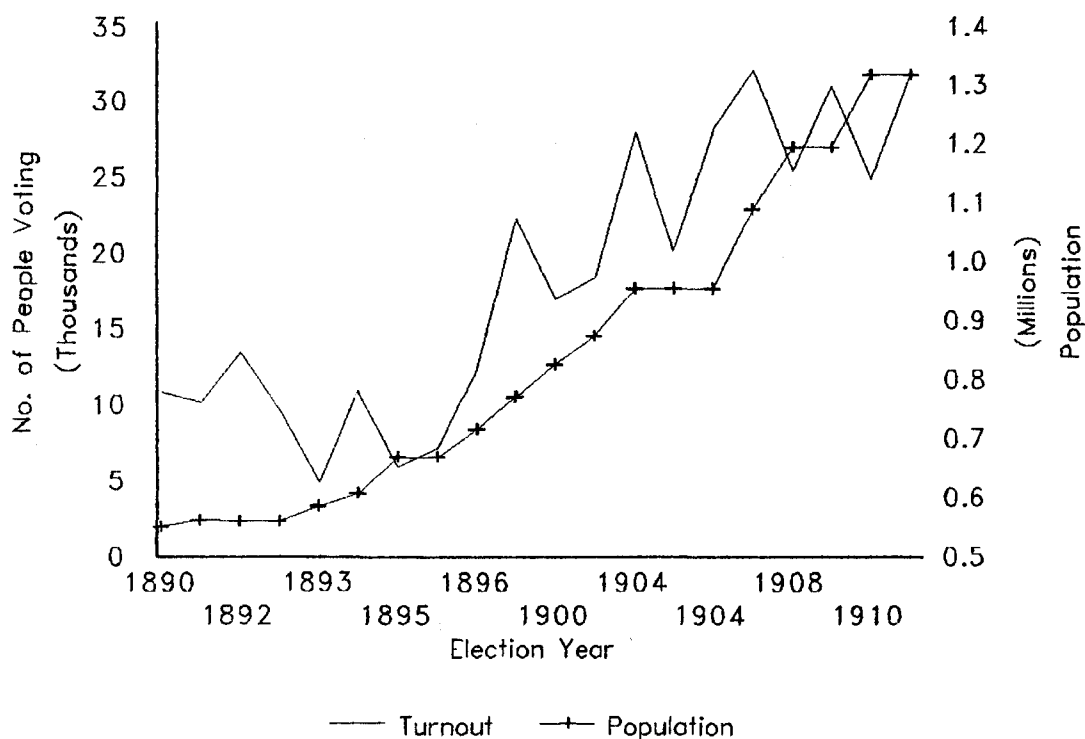
However, if the electorate of Buenos Aires between 1850 and 1880 was composed by the 'marginal sectors' of the city's population, by the 1890s the situation had significantly changed. Data on the electorate drawn from the Electoral Register of the city of Buenos Aires in 1896 shows that, in the 1890s, the electorate was neither restricted to members of the elite, nor was it composed of the least qualified workers deployed for street fighting on election day.¹³ An analysis by professions shows that all sectors of the population were broadly represented on the electoral roll. While the lower and middle sector of the

population represented 45% and 42% of the registrations respectively, the upper sectors composed a significant 13%.¹⁴ Furthermore, 92.5% of the potential voters did know how to read and write, a remarkably high percentage considering the literacy standards of the time.¹⁵

Current interpretations of pre-reform elections have been based not only on the nature of the electoral participation but also on its size. The undoubtedly small size of the voting population of the city of Buenos Aires before 1912 has led to the dismissal of the electorate as unworthy of serious consideration. It is time, however, to re-think two basic questions: how small was the voting population of Buenos Aires before 1912? And, more importantly, was its size stagnant or were there strong trends over the pre-1912 period?

A first response to these two questions is revealed in the following graph which displays the turn-out figures and the total population of Buenos Aires from 1890 up to 1910, the last election before the 1912 reform.¹⁶ When comparing the turn-outs to the total population it should be remembered that for six decades after 1869, immigrants comprised two thirds to three quarters of the total adult population. Immigrants could only participate in national elections after acquiring citizenship, which they seldom did. As a result, in the city of Buenos Aires, as in most other areas of high immigrant concentration, between 50% and 70% of the adult males could not vote.¹⁷

Graph 1: Turn-outs and total population. Buenos Aires, 1890-1910



Sources: Population figures are taken from national and municipal censuses, years: 1865, 1887, 1895, 1904, 1909 and 1914. The number of voters are taken from the electoral results published by La Prensa in each election.

It is undoubtedly the case that the numbers actually voting were a minority. However, what has generally remained unnoticed is the strong trend in the absolute number of people voting.¹⁸ From as early as 1895, the turn-outs of Buenos Aires were growing very strongly indeed. The figures are rather volatile; this is due to the inclusion of all the national elections of the period. The graph includes by-elections (1893); uncontested

elections (1890, 1891, 1892:2); elections that took place in only half the city of Buenos Aires after a temporary change in the electoral system (1904:2); and elections which, although contested, displayed little competition given the comfortable predominance of one of the parties (1900; 1908; 1910).¹⁹ However, even taking these elections into account, the trend after 1895 is clear; it does not suggest a stagnant electoral participation but a strongly growing interest in elections. The graph also shows that turn-outs grew fast in a city where the population was also growing at high speed. Indeed, between 1904 and 1909, the city of Buenos Aires grew at an annual rate of 5.8%; the second highest annual rate in the Western world.²⁰ However, as the graph shows, from 1895 to 1910 the growth in the turn-out kept pace with the total population growth.

In a city where the adult population was predominantly composed of foreigners who were reluctant to acquire Argentine nationality and therefore could not vote, the turn-outs are best related to the electorate, that is to the adult-Argentine-males over 17 or 18 years of age rather to the total population.²¹ However, before doing this it is best first to consider a significant characteristic of the electorate of Buenos Aires before 1912 that has been previously overlooked. Table 1 illustrates the size of the electorate in relation to the total population.²²

Table 1: The total population and the electorate, Buenos Aires, 1887-1914.

	The Electorate (1)	Total Population (2)	Electorate as % of the Total Population (3)	Annualized Growth Rate Electorate (4)	Annualized Growth Rate Population (5)	Annualized Growth Rate Electorate Whole Period (6)	Annualized Growth Rate Population Whole Period (7)
1887	43867	433375	10.1%				
1895	51089	663854	7.7%	1.9%	5.5%		
1904	81436	950891	8.6%	5.3%	4.1%		
1914	156366	1575814	9.9%	6.7%	5.2%	4.8%	4.9%

Sources: As in Graph 1.

In a city whose growth has generally been attributed to the high level of immigration, the rapid growth of the electorate has remained unnoticed. However, Columns 1 and 2 show that as the population grew, so too did the electorate, particularly between 1904 and 1914. Column 3 shows that the electorate as a percentage of the total population remained roughly constant, or in other words the growth in the electorate kept pace with the growth in the population. In terms of annual growth rates, Columns 4 and 5 show strong rates of 4.1 and 5.5%. More significantly however, they also show that although the growth rate in the electorate was relatively low between 1887 and 1895, it outpaced population growth in subsequent years. Admittedly, the growth rates for the electorate are faster from a small base but the general point remains, the electorate grew strongly during the period. The average annual growth rates across the whole period displayed in the two final columns are roughly equal again showing a dynamic electorate within a dynamic population.

What, then, was the relationship between the electorate and the turn-outs? Although this could be analysed in every election year, for clarity of presentation two representative two-year periods at the beginning and at the end of the sample (1890-1892 and 1908-1910) are discussed.²³ In each of these two-year periods there were four elections and in Column 2 of the table the average turn-out over the four elections is presented.

Table 2: The electorate and the turn-outs. Buenos Aires, 1890-1910.

	The Electorate (1)	The Turnout (2)	The Turnout as a % of The Electorate (3)	Annualized Growth Rate Electorate (4)	Annualized Growth Rate Turnout (5)
1890-1892	49245	10840	22.0%		
1908-1910	115467	28155	24.4%	4.8%	5.4%

The first column of Table 2 gives an estimate of the electorate in each period,²⁴ while the third column shows that the turn-out does not decrease as a percentage of the electorate even though the electorate is growing strongly. The annual growth rates displayed in Columns 4 and 5 show that the annual rate of growth of the turn-out was actually faster than that of the electorate. Again, it must be noted that this rapid growth of the turn-out is from a small base but the general point is that turn-outs as a percentage of the electorate remain roughly constant even though the electorate was growing strongly.

One of the reasons why the rapid growth of the pre-1912 voting population has remained overshadowed relates to its frequent comparison to the turn-outs under compulsory voting. When analysing the impact of the 1912 reform on the number of voters, it has been argued that the size of the voting population more than tripled.²⁵ This argument is based on the comparison of the turn-out in 1910 (with an average of 23% across the two elections) with that of the 84% in the first election of 1912. However, Table 3, which presents data on national elections in an extended period from 1890 to 1930, offers a slightly different picture.²⁶

Table 3: Turn-out in Buenos Aires, 1890-1930

1890	21.3%
1891	20.1%
1892	27.9%
1892	19.6%
1893	9.8%
1894	22.4%
1895	11.3%
1895	13.6%
1896	22.0%
1898	36.1%
1900	25.0%
1902	25.1%
1904	34.2%
1904	24.5%
1904	34.6%
1906	33.4%
1908	23.3%
1908	28.5%
1910	20.1%
1910	25.7%
1912	84.0%
1914	74.1%
1916	76.2%
1916	75.6%
1918	72.8%
1920	73.0%
1920	73.0%
1922	73.6%
1922	71.0%
1924	65.3%
1926	63.8%
1928	91.6%
1930	86.1%

Sources: The electorate between 1890-1910 inclusive is estimated from the census data in 1887, 1895, 1904, and 1914. From percentages of the electorate over the total population, a linear trend is used to estimate the percentage eligible to vote in the intervening years. This number is then multiplied by the total population in the actual year to obtain the estimate of the electorate. The estimates between 1912 and 1930 are taken from, D. Cantón, Materiales para el estudio de la sociología política en la Argentina, Buenos Aires, 1968.

As Table 3 shows, the average turn-out of 23% for the elections of 1910 is one of the lowest turn-outs in the 20th century before 1912, while 84% for 1912 is the highest turn-out under secret and compulsory voting (until 1928). In similar fashion the highest turn-out under "free voting" (36% in 1898 or 34% in 1904) could be compared to the lowest turn-out under compulsory voting (63% in 1926); it could thus be argued that after 1912 the turn-out did not even double.

While it is clear that the impact of the 1912 in the electoral mobilization has been exaggerated, it is more important to look at the overall trend. The average turn-out for the 10 elections before 1912, including low turn-outs in by-elections and in uncontested elections was, 27.4%. After 1912, the turn-out grew rapidly for the first election of 1912 (84%), but then gradually declined. The average turn-out for the ten elections after 1912 was 71.8%. In other words the turn-out did double but certainly did not more than triple.²⁷ The impact of 1912 on the electoral mobilization of the city, although undoubtedly significant, was less dramatic than it has been assumed. This makes the expansion of the Argentine electorate due to the reform of 1912 a less exceptional case than has commonly been thought.²⁸

The city of Buenos Aires and its electoral culture

One of the main pitfalls of most analyses of different aspects of the pre-1912 elections has been treating the pre-reform period as a single block, as if there had been, no

changes in the nature of the electorate or in the electoral practices of the city in the 60 years and more prior to the passing of the 1912 reform. Anecdotes of fraud and violence in the 1860s or 1870s have been used to characterise the electoral practices of the whole pre-reform period and randomly-quoted turn-outs have been thought to be representative of the electoral participation of the period as a whole. There are two main reasons for this. The first and most obvious one is the incipient stage of the research on pre-reform elections. The second and more surprising reason is the reluctance to link the topic of electoral politics with other areas studied in more depth, such as the development of the city of Buenos Aires or the development of political parties. As a result, we tend to think about the electoral politics of ~~the~~^a modern city, which by 1911 had almost one and half a million inhabitants, in the same terms as those of the city of the 1860s, whose population was only 180,000.²⁹ Similarly, electoral practices for the 1860s and 1870s are assumed to be no different from those of the first decade of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, the failure to take into account the rapid changes that took place during the pre-reform decade, has caused historians to exaggerate the impact of the 1912 reform on the political development of the country. The analysis presented above on the nature of the electorate in the 1890s and on the rapid growth of turn-outs can be better understood when placed in the context of a growing and modernizing city where electoral politics changed gradually over the years.

The great speed at which Buenos Aires grew has been documented above. Less than one thousand men and women were concentrated in each square km of the city in 1869; 3,300 in 1895, and almost 8,000 in 1914.³⁰ However, the transformation of Buenos Aires was not only in terms of numerical expansion; the population also experienced a rapid development in its living standards. In 1834, for example, free and compulsory primary education was introduced, and, twenty five years later, illiteracy had

been reduced from a third to 14% of the population.³¹ The rising standard of living was reflected in other related factors, such as the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals in the city. By the end of the 1870s, 83 newspapers and periodicals circulated in Buenos Aires. Twenty years later, 334 periodicals and newspapers were published in the city, 26 of them were dailies and more than 100 appeared weekly. There were publications in seven different languages.³²

The rapid growth of the population and the general economic expansion stimulated the internal market which resulted in a great increase in the number of industrial and commercial enterprises and the growth of public services. These activities resulted in the growth of a substantial middle class. According to the available data, the middle layers of the society increased from 11% of the population in 1869 to 25% in 1895 and to more than 30% in 1914.³³ It is then not surprising that the rapid socio-economic changes of the city were reflected in the changing nature of the electorate. As we have seen, while in the 1860s and 1870s the voters of Buenos Aires were the less qualified sectors of the society, by the 1890s the electorate was almost entirely literate and represented all the different socio-economic segments of the population.

The transformation of the city of Buenos Aires undoubtedly had significant political effects. Three interrelated aspects of the city's life were of crucial importance: the rise of new political parties; the changes in party organization; and the changes in electoral practices.

During the 1860s and 1870s two political parties contested elections in the city of Buenos Aires. During those years political parties were loose groupings which rallied behind a well known leader who was generally the presidential candidate. The parties were known by the names of these leaders, who had complete control over electoral strategy

(such as the formation of coalitions), over the party-candidates, and over the electoral campaign itself. The campaign had different stages. It generally began with a banquet where the leader launched his own candidature. Then a committee would be appointed, composed of the leader's closest friends who were in charge of setting up the list of party candidates for the forthcoming election. The candidates were appointed, not elected; the choice was not questioned by other party members, but needed the final approval of the party leader.³⁴

The next stage was the formation of clubs. These clubs adopted different names, such as '25 of May' or 'Electoral Club'. They were of a transitory nature and were formed a few days before each election. Their meetings were small and informal, taking place in the private house of a club member. The electoral campaign was mainly conducted through the press. Each party owned a newspaper and before the elections its editorials intensified attacks on the rival party and printed party platforms - all of these were remarkably similar. The campaign generally finished in one of the few theatres of the city where the party leader delivered a speech and the list of candidates was read out to the cheers of the spectators.

The most important role of the clubs was performed on election day. Elections took place on Sundays, from 9am to 4pm.³⁵ Polling stations were placed in the local churches of each of the electoral districts into which the city was divided. The polling stations were supervised by randomly chosen local citizens, although party members were also at the polling tables to check for irregularities. In the 1860s and 1870s, elections were generally a violent affair. Commercial enterprises, the theatre and public places closed several days before the election.³⁶ On election day, voters, who were generally armed either with guns or knives, were guided and guarded on their way to the poll stations by the members of the party clubs.³⁷ Often the event ended in shootings and deaths which took

place either at the time of voting, when opposition groups met at the polling tables, or when the votes were counted at the end of the election day. There is, alas, no comprehensive study of the turn-outs of the 1860s and 1870s. An estimate of the number of voters in the election of 1876, which was a particularly violent one, shows a participation of over 11% of the electorate.³⁸ As mentioned above, the voting population of the city in the 1860s and 1870s, was composed of the lowest sectors of the population - the peons, the journeymen and railway workers, most of whom were foreigners.³⁹

In the 1890s, however, significant changes began to take place. The most obvious was the rise of new political parties to compete against the Partido Autonomista Nacional (PAN), consolidated in the 1880s. The National Civic Union and the Radical Party were created in 1891, the Socialist Party was organized in 1896, and the PAN itself faced a series of splits in the early twentieth century. The rise of new political parties had a significant impact in the city's electoral life. Elections in the city now became a highly competitive affair. Against the received view that the PAN dominated the country's electoral life, making it almost impossible for the other parties to compete in elections, it has been shown that in the 1890s elections in each electoral district of the city of Buenos Aires had to be furiously contested by each party.⁴⁰

The political parties also underwent important changes in their internal organization. By the 1890s, the old style of sporadic party organization created around a leader had become increasingly unpopular and it became clear that political parties had to be modernized. Modernization meant adopting the model of the United States and, without exception, all political parties adopted the US system of committees and conventions. Parties became permanent organizations with internal written rules for the selection of candidates and for the functioning of the committees. These committees were different from the old clubs. They had elected authorities, they were permanent, and they had a

permanent address where meetings were held. There were as many committees as electoral wards of the city. Their members had various functions but the major one was to promote the party in order to increase the list of affiliations in their district. This was done through different means, such as inviting the leaders of the party to speak at local meetings, or organizing "popular dances" or free barbecues.⁴¹

Funds were provided by the wealthiest party members or were raised by collecting contributions or by organizing local sales of objects donated by members and sympathisers.⁴² The committee had frequent sessions; during electoral campaigns they met at least once a week. The authorities of these committees had to take minutes of the discussions and the resolutions taken were published in the party's newspaper. Parties generally began their preparations for the electoral campaigns two or three months before election day. The Socialist Party spent as much as six months preparing for elections. Party candidates, who were elected by party conventions, attended local committee meetings where they delivered speeches during the campaign. As the election approached the parties' offerings of barbecues, dances and empanadas (a local dish) intensified.⁴³

As the committees became permanent and began to function regularly throughout the city, their authority gradually increased. Sometimes the presidents of these committees were well known party members or university students (generally law students) taking their first steps in political life. Most often however, they were thought of as the "men of action" of the party, men "whose importance [was] related to the number of votes they could deliver on election day by legal or semi-legal means".⁴⁴ It was here that the local presidents of the committees found their strength as agents of the electoral contests in their locality.

The territorial electoral control given to these local presidents by the committee system also provided them with considerable power vis-à-vis the higher ranks of the party. The presidents of the local committees, gradually began to make their voices heard within

the party ranks. They often challenged decisions taken by the central committee about electoral strategies and coalitions.⁴⁵ At times, they challenged the list of candidates elected by the party conventions, refusing to contest the forthcoming election in their own district.⁴⁶ At other times they made deals with the presidents of local committees of the opposition, defying directions from the central committee.⁴⁷ Sometimes, these local presidents had to be brought to order. In 1896, for example, the authorities of a local committee were sacked because the party had lost the election in their district. The election day had been sunny, and they had preferred to enjoy an asado con cuero (barbecue) rather than organize their local forces to contest the election.⁴⁸ The committee system therefore, provided the city leaders with formal authority over electoral districts and, although the system proved electorally successful, as it permitted the new political parties to rapidly gain electoral power, the party's higher ranks sometimes feared their autonomy and often attempted to weaken their power.⁴⁹

As party organization gradually changed over the decades, so did the electoral practices in the city. By the 1890s, violence on election day was remembered as a feature of the "savage" electoral practices of the past, of the 1860s and the 1870s.⁵⁰ As was repeatedly stated at the time, the fact that elections ended "without bloodshed, or without a couple of dead bodies being left near a poll station"⁵¹ was viewed as sign of progress in the country's political life. In the 1890s, elections had ceased to be a violent day feared by the inhabitants of the city; they were generally reported as 'peaceful' and 'without incident' by the contemporary press. Shops and theatres stayed open, and only seldom did disturbances interrupt the voting in the poll stations placed in the local churches. "The ladies attending Sunday mass" La Nación reported in 1891, "would not have realized that an election was taking place in the same church, had it not been for the officers who guarded the entrance".⁵²

However, as was pointed out at the time, the absence of violence in the elections did not mean that the vote had become "clean". It only meant that more ingenious tricks had gradually replaced the electoral violence of the past.⁵³ The lists of complaints drawn up by the parties after the elections provide endless examples of electoral manipulations: false registrations, false voters, men voting several times.⁵⁴ In the first years of the twentieth century, particularly after the election of 1904, a market for votes developed in the city, particularly in the poorer neighbourhoods.⁵⁵ Many had thought that the absence of violence in elections was a significant step forward; they also thought that the development of a market for votes was a further sign of the gradual pacification of the country's electoral practices. If people could sell their vote, that meant they could not be intimidated.⁵⁶ By the 1890s there was no mention of guns, violence or deaths, and disturbances in elections were limited to occasional fist-fights.⁵⁷ By the first decade of the twentieth century the disorders reported were the occasional exchange of "whistling and insults" between members of contending parties on their way to the polls.⁵⁸

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, over the years, elections involved increasing numbers of voters, as shown by the rapid growth in turn-outs. Violence rapidly diminished and practically disappeared, while all sorts of incentives were used to encourage the electorate to participate. Barbecues, dances and money were increasingly used to tempt the electorate into abandoning their political apathy on election day. By the twentieth century, cars were placed at the disposal of the local committees by affluent party members and, after being decorated with party flags and symbols, were used to transport party voters to the polling stations.⁵⁹ Increasingly long electoral campaigns, the pacification of electoral practices and the new means of mobilization rapidly transformed the nature and size of the city's voting population.

Conclusions

Analysis of pre-1912 elections has tended to rehearse time and again the electoral malpractices of the time. As a result, important characteristics of the voting population and of the electoral practices of the period have remained largely unnoticed.

The electorate of Buenos Aires experienced significant changes over the years of the pre-reform period. Qualitative descriptions of the voting population of the city in the early decades of national organization show that the 'socially marginal' were the main participants in the elections. By the 1890s, the electoral registers displayed a varied social composition and a predominantly literate electorate. The characteristics of the electorate of the 1890s were not very different to those of the electorate of 1918, six years after compulsory voting had been introduced.⁶⁰

Not only did the electorate of Buenos Aires change markedly in nature, it also grew dramatically in numbers. The impact of immigration in the city of Buenos Aires has commonly overshadowed the important fact that the electorate of the city also grew at incredible speed. One of the most remarkable features of the electorate of the pre-reform period was that the turn-outs kept pace with the strong growth of the electorate. Turn-outs were small, but they were strongly growing also before the 1912 reform. Indeed, their growth is remarkable if we take into account the fact that, between 1898 and 1910, the Radical Party abstained from elections. The Radicals returned to electoral competition only in 1912, after the reform was introduced, winning the first elections they contested in the city of Buenos Aires and the first presidential elections held under the new system in 1916.⁶¹ Despite the fact that a political party with such power of mobilization abstained in

the elections of the early twentieth century, the turn-outs grew dramatically.

The population's increasing involvement in the city's electoral life was due not only to the transformation of the city of Buenos Aires, but also to changes in the city's electoral culture. The rise of new political parties and the changing nature of electoral practices, provided a series of incentives which attracted the electorate in increasing numbers. More research is undoubtedly needed on many aspects of the city's electoral life of the pre-reform period, particularly on the relationship between the city's local bosses and the voters. Evidence on the nature of the electorate in the 1890s, the growing size of the voting population of the city, the changes in the political parties, and the gradual transformation of electoral practices show that elections became an increasingly important mean of political involvement. They would also seem to show that the political development of the city up to 1912 was more gradual than has been assumed.

¹ .For the peculiarities of the city of Buenos Aires see Paula Alonso, "Politics and Elections in Buenos Aires, 1890-1898: The Performance of the Radical Party", Journal of Latin American Studies, 25, (1993), pp.470-472

² On the early history of the suffrage in Argentina see David Bushnell, "El sufragio en la Argentina y en Colombia hasta 1853", Revista del Instituto de Historia del Derecho, N.19; 1968, pp.11-29; Hilda Sabato and Elías Palti, "Quién votaba en Buenos Aires?: Práctica y teoría del sufragio, 1850-1880", Desarrollo Económico, V.30, N.119 (Oct-Dec. 1990), pp.407-422; Diana A. Tussie and Andrés M. Federman, "La larga marcha hacia las urnas", Todo es Historia, VI, N. 71, (March 1973), pp.9-47.

³ At least until discussion about the extension of the franchise to women in the 1930s and 1940s.

⁴ J.N. Matienzo, La práctica del sufragio popular. Breve estudio sobre la ley electoral argentina, (Buenos Aires, 1886), p.5.

⁵ N. Botana, El orden conservador. La política argentina entre 1880 y 1916, (Buenos Aires, 1977), p.295.

⁶ Bushnell, "El sufragio", p.24.

⁷ Darío Cantón, "El Sufragio Universal como agente de movilización", Documento de trabajo, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 19, (1966) p.5.

⁸ See R. Sáenz Peña, Escritos y discursos, (Buenos Aires 1935), Vol II, pp.72-76; 111-114. For the most compelling analysis of the reform see Botana, El orden conservador, pp. 217-345.

⁹ For this standard interpretation and its main pitfalls see Alonso, "Politics and Elections", pp.465- 487. For a critique of the standard argument from a different perspective see, Hilda Sabato-Ema Cibotti, "Hacer

Política en Buenos Aires: Los Italianos en la escena pública porteña 1860-1880", Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina Dr. E. Ravignani, Tercera Serie, N.2, (Sep. 1990); Sabato and Palti, "Quién votaba en Buenos Aires" and Hilda Sabato, "Citizenship, Political Participation and the formation of the Public Sphere in Buenos Aires 1850s-1880s", Past and Present, N. 136, August 1992.

¹⁰ This argument is fully developed in K. Remmer, Party Competition in Argentina and Chile. Political Recruitment and Public Policy, 1890-1930, (Lincoln and London, 1984), pp.24-34; 221-222.

¹¹ For an analysis of this argument see Alonso "Politics and Elections", pp.465-487.

¹² Sabato and Palti, "Quién votaba en Buenos Aires?", pp.402-407; Sabato, "Citizenship", pp.142-148.

¹³ The Electoral Register of the city of Buenos Aires for 1896 - the only one available prior to 1912 - contains the names, addresses, level of literacy, ages and professions of those enrolled. For an analysis of the Register and its wider implication for the understanding of the electoral and political development of the city see Alonso, "Politics and Elections".

¹⁴ The relatively small percentage of 13% for the upper sectors should not be underestimated, as in nine of a total of sixteen electoral wards the upper sector amounted to more than 10% of the registrations. Alonso, "Politics and Elections", p.479.

¹⁵ For analysis of the Electoral Register and its wider implications in the understanding of the country's political development see Alonso, "Politics and Elections", pp.465-487.

¹⁶ The following analysis on turn-outs aims to complement the single work on the subject developed by Botana, El orden, pp.189-213.

¹⁷ For the impact of immigration in the country see Germani, "Mass Immigration and Modernization", pp.289-330; his Política y sociedad, pp.222-225.

¹⁸ As has been pointed out by Botana, El orden conservador, pp.189-197.

¹⁹ In the election of 1900, for example, the opposition obtained a total of 135 votes.

²⁰ E. Zimmermann, "Liberals, Reform and the Social Question: Argentina, 1890-1916", unpubl. PhD diss., Oxford University, 1990, p.82; for the development of the city see also pp.79-89. The most complete study on the population growth of the city is Zulma L. Recchini de Lattes, La Población de Buenos Aires. Componentes demográficos del crecimiento entre 1855 y 1960, Instituto T, Di Tella, (Buenos Aires, 1971); for annual rates of growth see p.31.

²¹ In 1904 the age restriction for voting rose from 17 to 18 years of age.

²² Figures on the electorate over this period have been taken from the national and municipal censuses of 1887, 1895, 1904 and 1914.

²³ Table 3 below provides figures for every year and shows that the turn-out as a percentage of the electorate remains roughly constant throughout the whole period.

²⁴ This estimate is calculated using the figures in Table 1 for the four years when numbers are available (1887, 1895, 1904 and 1914). It is then assumed that the electorate as a percentage of the total population (Column 3 of Table 1) adjusts between these years in a linear fashion; in other words, that this percentage declines from 10.1% in 1887 to 7.7% in 1895 by steady annual reduction. Hence an estimate of the percentage of Argentine males relative to the total population is made. This percentage is then multiplied by the total population in any particular year to get an estimate of the size of the electorate.

²⁵ Cantón, "El sufragio universal", pp.12-16; and his Elecciones, pp.42-48.

²⁶ Table 3 shows that estimates for the elections of 1910 are 25 and 20 %. Cantón does not specify how he arrived at the estimate of 23% in 1910; it must be assumed that an average of the two elections of that year was taken.

²⁷ After 1912, turnouts for the rest of the country followed a similar pattern of decline. After a sharp increase in the first election of 1912, they declined to an average of 40% in the 1920s. Anne L. Potter, "The Failure of Democracy in Argentina, 1916-1930", Journal of Latin American Studies, 13:1, (May 1981), p.84.

²⁸ Ibid, and Oscar Comblit, "La opción conservadora en la política argentina", Desarrollo Económico, Vol. 14, N. 56, (1975), pp.635-639.

²⁹ F. Korn has convincingly argued that by 1895 Buenos Aires already enjoyed the features of a modern city.

30 Censo General de la República Argentina, 1947, Vol 1, p.1.

31 For the development of the city of Buenos Aires see Zimmermann, "Liberals, Reform and the Social Question", pp. 79-103; J. Scobie, Buenos Aires. Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910, (New York, 1974); C. Sargent, The Spatial Evolution of Greater Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1870-1930, (Arizona, 1974); F. Korn, Buenos Aires. Una ciudad moderna, (Buenos Aires, 1981); J. Scobie, "The Argentine Capital in the Nineteenth Century" in S.R. Ross and T.F. Mc Gann (eds), Buenos Aires: 400 years, (Austin, Texas, 1982), pp.40-52.

32 Boletín Demográfico Argentino, Buenos Aires, (Marzo, 1901), N. 5, Año II, pp.5;13.

33 Germani, "Mass Immigration and Modernization", pp.303-304. Although these figures are for the whole country, this pattern was most pronounced in the large cities, particularly in the largest Buenos Aires. This is also analysed in Germani, "Hacia una democracia de masas" in T. Di Tella, G. Germani and Jorge Graciarena, Argentina, sociedad de masas, (Buenos Aires, 1965), pp.208-217.

34 Félix Luna "Los hábitos políticos después de Caseros", Todo es Historia, Año XVII, N. 197, (Oct. 1983), pp.22-24; Paula Alonso, "Historia del comité, 1890-1898", unpubl., Aug.1991; Cárcano, Sáenz Peña, pp.51-75. For the reports of the contemporary press on the campaigns and elections see for example La Nación, 13 March 1877; El Nacional, 7 Feb. 1872; April 1873; Sept. 1878, where these events are described in detail.

35 The hours changed over the years, at times the election day was from 8 am to 4 pm.

36 Cantón, Elecciones, pp.41-42

37 Cárcano, Sáenz Peña, pp.52; 75

38 Cantón, "El Sufragio Universal" p.5.

39 As argued by Sabato and Palti, "Quién votaba en Buenos Aires?", pp.402-407; Sabato, "Citizenship", pp. 142-148.

40 Alonso, "Politics and Elections", pp.480-482.

41 For the development of the committee system see P. Alonso, "The Origins of the Radical Party, 1889-1898", Unpub. PhD diss., Oxford University, (1992) pp.114-128, and Alonso "Historia del comité"; see also Archivo General de la Nación, (AGN) Archivo del Dr. Juan Angel Farini. Papeles del Dr. Adolfo Saldías: President of Santa Lucía (no name) to Adolfo Saldías, 23 Sep. 1891, 3-6-3 N. 276.

42 AGN, Farini (Saldías): Rufino Pastor to Adolfo Saldías, 12 June 1893 3-6-3 276; AGN, Archivo del Dr. Próspero García: P. Argerich to Próspero García, 29 Aug. 1892, 30-3-12.

43 Accounts of the electoral campaigns have been based on the contemporary press, mainly La Prensa, La Nación, Tribuna, and El Argentino, during the days preceding the elections. For the campaign and organization of the Socialist party see also N. Repetto, Mi paso por la política, (Buenos Aires, 1956), pp.86-87.

44 Tribuna, 12 Oct. 1894. Presidents of these committees were always male, with the exception of Luisa Mitchel who presided over a local committee of the Radical Party between 1895 and 1898.

45 See for example, La Prensa, 16 Feb. 1896; Tribuna, 13 and 26 Feb. 1896; 21 Aug.; and 8 Sept. 1897.

46 See for example, La Prensa, 9 Jan. 1896; Tribuna, 13 and 14 Feb. 1896.

47 Tribuna, 7 Feb. 1894.

48 El Argentino, 14 March 1896.

49 This was the expressed purpose of the reform of the committee system introduced by the Radical Party in 1895. La Prensa, 6 June 1895.

50 There was a very wide consensus about this analysis of the electoral practices. See for example the opinions expressed by Tribuna, 19 March 1895; La Nación, 5 April 1897.

51 La Nación, 5 April 1897.

52 La Nación, 16 March 1891.

53 Ibid; see also Sáenz Peña's "Manifiesto al Pueblo", 28 Feb. 1912, in R. Sáenz Peña, Escritos y discursos, Vol II, p.111; Cantón, Elecciones, pp.41-42; Cárcano, Sáenz Peña, pp.131-132.

54 See for example the list of complaints raised by Francisco Barroetaveña (of the Radical Party) in Congress, Diario de Sesiones de la Cámara de Diputados, 5 May 1896; pp. 33-41.

55 Juan Carlos Torre, "La primera victoria electoral socialista", Todo es Historia, N. 76, (Sep. 1973). For the market of votes in previous and later years see also the analysis of each election published by La Prensa, 10

May 1902; 6 March 1904; 13 and 14 March 1904; 11 March 1906. The market for votes seems to have declined around 1908, see La Prensa, 8 March 1908.

⁵⁶ This was for example the outspoken view of ex-president Carlos Pellegrini. L. Sommariva, Historia de las intervenciones federales en las provincias, (Buenos Aires, 1910-1931), Vol II, pp.314-315.

⁵⁷ The only exception was one death that took place in an election in 1896; this greatly shocked contemporary opinion. See La Prensa, 9 March 1896.

⁵⁸ See for example La Prensa, 14 March 1910.

⁵⁹ See the descriptions of the election day offered by La Prensa, 14 March 1910.

⁶⁰ Using the Electoral Register of 1918, Richard Walter has found that working class voters represented 37.7% of the registered voters, the middle class 46.3 % and the upper class 15.9%. Middle and upper class registrations grew slightly in comparison with those of 1895, while the working class registration shrank. The differences in the social composition of the registers of 1895 and 1918 are, in any case, far from significant. Richard Walter, "Elections in the city of Buenos Aires during the first Yrigoyen administration. Social Class and Political Preferences", Hispanic American Historical Review, Vol 58, N. 4, (Nov. 1978), pp.595-624.

⁶¹ For the electoral results and its causes see, Natalio Botana, "La reforma política de 1912", in M. Gimenez Zapiola (comp.), El régimen oligárquico. Materiales para el estudio de la realidad argentina (hasta 1930), (Buenos Aires, 1975), pp.232-245.