

# UNION ELECTION DATA AS A POLITICAL INDICATOR\*

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In recent years, a considerable effort has been made in political science to facilitate cross-national research of a truly comparative nature. One common strategy is to assemble statistical data from as many nations as possible that then can serve as quantitative indicators for a variety of political, social, and economic phenomena.<sup>1</sup> The use of quantitative operationalizations allows for statistical testing of appropriate hypotheses. While the goals of such data collection are most certainly praiseworthy, a variety of questions can and ought to be raised about the quality of much of the data made so readily available to today's researchers. My purpose here is to illustrate the risks involved in the unwary use of one such "quantitative indicator"—trade union electoral statistics. What is true for the election data is also true in varying degrees for other types of statistical information from Latin America.

A steadily increasing literature on unions<sup>2</sup> has reflected the rising political importance of the working class in many Latin countries. As the number of workers has increased, many hitherto apolitical individuals have sought organizational input into the decision-making process of societies long dominated by traditional elites. Although rarely challenging the elites for direct control, the trade unions have become a major source of pressure for a more equitable distribution of income. The growing politicization and political activism of these trade unions have made their control a matter of considerable political significance.

Occasionally, control of individual unions may transcend purely economic considerations. In recent cases where a particular government faces challenges to its legitimacy, union elections may become tests of the regime's popular support, as well as the means through which future opponents might emerge into prominence. Witness the significance of the 1972 CUT (Central Única de Trabajadores) elections in Allende Chile,<sup>3</sup> those held in the same year on the nationalized sugar haciendas in Peru,<sup>4</sup> or the 1970 SITRAM-SITRAC elections at the FIAT auto plants in Córdoba, Argentina.<sup>5</sup>

Probably in no other Latin American country have unions been as important politically as in Argentina. As the major organizational force within Peronism after 1955, the Peronist-controlled CGT (Confederación General de Trabajo) provided the principal source of resistance to the series of civilian and military regimes that

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opposed General Perón and sought to weaken his hold on the majority of Argentine workers.<sup>6</sup> Given the events since the return of Peronism to power in May 1973, the union movement has become one of the most important power contenders<sup>7</sup> in Argentina today, a group worthy of serious study.<sup>8</sup>

The information available from the internal elections in Argentina provides a reasonable test of what can and cannot be done with such union election data elsewhere in Latin America. The Argentine data provide answers to a number of key questions. Which unions are controlled by what partisan (and ideological) tendency? Have there been any major shifts over time in the control of the Argentine union movement as a whole? How much real competition exists in any individual union? How meaningful is the election process for the membership as measured by the size of the turnout?

Two major sources exist for these electoral "indicators" of partisan control and internal democracy in the Argentine unions: *Resúmenes de Actos Sindicales* of the Inspection Department, the General Directory of Professional Associations within the Ministry of Labor; and the monthly periodical, *Serie Informes*, published by the DIL (Servicio de Documentación e Información Laboral) in Buenos Aires. The Ministry of Labor's summaries provide the total number of eligible voters in each union, the vote cast for each list of candidates, and any officially lodged complaints or protests. DIL repeats most of the above, but supplements it with particular comments on the partisan orientation of each list, prior election results, and more detailed comment, where warranted, on any election irregularities. The major limitation of DIL is that not all elections are reported. A very useful supplement to the monthly *Informes* is a special publication in its *serie documentos* entitled *Nucleamientos sindicales* (July 1972), where the political orientation of some ninety-two unions is indicated for six key dates between 1955 and 1972.<sup>9</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 provide data drawn from a representative sample of Argentine unions. The unions selected were those on the so-called "Commission of Twenty" of the year 1961. These were the unions, drawn equally from the two major political factions that regained control of the CGT from the Frondizi government after six years of official intervention. These twenty unions accounted for 64.4 percent of the two and one-half million members represented in the central union confederation.<sup>10</sup> Table 1 lists the political bloc affiliation for each of the abovementioned twenty unions during the years 1957, 1960, 1963, 1966, 1968, 1969–71, and 1972. Most of these blocs correspond roughly to partisan control. The major division in Argentine labor in those years was between Peronists and non-Peronists. The former were referred to as the "62 Peronist Organizations"; the latter were first called the "32 Democratic Unions," later the "Independents," and then the "Nonaligned." Within the Peronist bloc, divisions have existed, such as that in 1966 between those asserting some independence from the exiled leader (the *leales* group) and those urging complete obedience (the *de pie* group). More recent Peronist factions include the conservative "Nueva Corriente de Opinión" (NCO) and "Group of 8," and the more radical "62 Combatiente." The non-Peronists represented a loose coalition of unions sympathetic to democratic socialism and the Radical party. The 1968 blocs represented a split of the CGT itself

TABLE 1 Union Political Affiliation

| Union          | 1957  | 1960          | 1963 | 1966  | 1968 | 1969–71 | 1972 |
|----------------|-------|---------------|------|-------|------|---------|------|
| Aguas Gaseosas | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 L  | A    | 8       | 62   |
| Alimentación   | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 L  | A    | 62      | 62   |
| Comercio       | 32    | I             | I    | I     | A    | NA      | 62   |
| Construcción   | 62    | Mucs<br>(Int) | 62   | 62 L  | NCO  | NCO     | 62   |
| Estado         | 32    | 62            | 62   | 62 DP | PC   | 62      | 62 C |
| Ferrovianos    | 32    | I             | I    | NA    | PC   | NA      | 62   |
| Fraternidad    | ?     | I             | I    | NA    | PC   | NA      | NA   |
| Gráficos       | 32    | I             | I    | NA    | PC   | ?       | C    |
| Luz y Fuerza   | ?     | I             | I    | NA    | NCO  | NA      | 62   |
| Marítimos      | 32    | I             | I    | NA    | A    | NA      | NA   |
| Metalúrgicos   | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 L  | A    | 62      | 62   |
| Municipales    | 32    | I             | I    | I     | PC/A | NA      | 62   |
| Papeleros      | 32    | I             | I    | NA    | ?    | 8       | 62   |
| Plásticos      | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 L  | A    | 8       | 62   |
| Telefónicos    | 32    | 62            | 62   | 62 DP | PC   | 62      | 62 C |
| Textiles       | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 DP | NCO  | NCO     | 62   |
| Tranviarios    | 62    | I             | I    | (Int) | PC/A | 8       | 62   |
| Vestido        | 32    | 62            | 62   | 62 DP | A    | NCO     | 62   |
| Viajantes      | (Int) | I             | I    | I     | PC   | I       | NA   |
| Vidrio         | 62    | 62            | 62   | 62 L  | A    | 8       | 62   |

Sources: For all years except 1968: *Nucleamientos sindicales* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones DIL, 1972), pp. 37–38; for 1968: Santiago Senén González, *Breve historia del sindicalismo argentino* (Buenos Aires: Sudestada, 1967), pp. 118, 123, 125, 183–97; Ruben Rotondaro, *Realidad y cambio en el sindicalismo* (Buenos Aires: Pleamar, 1971), pp. 332–33, 338, 344.

Key: 32=Non-Peronist, usually Radical party or Social Democrat; 62=Peronist; Mucs = Communist; I = Non-Peronist independent, usually Radical party or Social Democrat; 62 L = Peronist dissident; 62 DP = Peronist loyalist; NA = Nonaligned; A = Center Right; PC = Left; 62 C = Peronist Left; C = Left; 8 = Peronist Right; NCO = Peronist Right; (Int) = Intervened union.

into two separate bodies, the so-called *Azopardo* (conservative) and *Paseo Colon* (radical) factions.

In table 1, one sees that the CGT union confederation has included a variety of partisan and ideological groupings since the mid-1950s.<sup>11</sup> As the end of the period under study is approached, however, more and more unions chose to adopt the Peronist label. This gradual Peronist hegemony in the labor movement, particularly after 1970, paralleled the growth of Peronism in other sectors of Argentine society. Table 2 provides election data for the same twenty unions in the 1965–72 interval, reporting in each square first the total number of eligible voters and the number of competing lists, followed directly beneath by the percentages of the turnout and of the winning list as part of the total vote.

Examination of the material presented in table 2 suggests several things. The most obvious is the widespread lack of real competition in most unions. Of the eighty-one elections reported here in the interval from 1965 to 1972, the voters were presented with but a single list of candidates thirty-four times! Looking at the percentages of the electoral winners, seven of the twenty unions reported average figures near or above ninety percent: *Aguas Gaseosas* (gaseous beverages), *Construcción* (construction), *Estado* (state workers), *Metalúrgicos* (metal workers), *Municipales* (municipal workers), *Vestido* (clothing), and *Viajantes* (traveling salesmen). In respect to the electoral turnout, the figures vary considerably from the low average of 13.0 percent in *Comercio* (workers in business) to the high of 85.5 percent reported in *Luz y Fuerza* (light and power). The average overall turnout of 46.9 percent reveals a moderate interest in elections.

The information presented in the above tables differs in the degree of its reliability. While the bloc affiliations of table 1 can be accepted at face value, the same cannot be said for the election results of table 2. Discussion with specialists on Argentine labor suggests that the official election results certified by the Ministry of Labor ought to be interpreted with varying degrees of caution, depending on the time period and the particular type of statistic. Figures on election turnout and margin of victory were commonly manipulated in the years studied. Apparently, only the short-lived Illia government (1963–66), that had few friends within the ranks of organized labor, made any kind of a serious effort to supervise union elections. Responding to specific complaints, Ministry of Labor inspectors (*veedores*) challenged elections in the construction trades, among government workers, bus drivers, and textile operatives in 1965–66.<sup>12</sup>

The extent of electoral manipulation that can occur is illustrated by the case of the textile workers at the end of 1963 and in early 1964. In the union elections held in December 1963, the union's election board announced that some 78,000 of the 105,000 eligible voters (74.3 percent) had participated, with 56,789 voting for the incumbent list and a mere 4,965 for any of the three opposition groups. No mention was made of the remaining 16,000-odd votes. Due to technical irregularities relating to the setting of the election date, the Illia government ordered new elections for that January. Quite importantly, during these second elections in the textiles union, some 1,500 government inspectors were present. The turnout here, just one month later in the same union, was only 49.7 percent. While the incumbent list still won, the share of the vote going to the other lists rose from 6.4 percent to 28.6 percent.<sup>13</sup>

These cases of fraud in four unions do not, in themselves, invalidate the reliability of all Argentine election figures as reported by the unions to the government of the day. What must be seen as far more damning is the almost complete absence of any turnover in control of the unions from an incumbent to an opposition list. As one authority on the subject states: "The analysis of the political process in the twenty unions of 20,000 or more members shows that between 1957 . . . and 1972, an incumbent slate was defeated in elections only twice by an opposition group."<sup>14</sup> The two exceptions—the printers and the municipal workers—both occurred in 1966 during the Illia government.

Given the low reliability of most union election data in Argentina for

TABLE 2 Union Elections, 1965–1972

| Union   | 1965                    | 1966                     | 1967                    | 1968                     |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Aguas Gaseosas<br>(BA)                          | ? 1<br>? 99.5%          | 2,353 1<br>49.3% 95.8%   |                         | 2,627 1<br>49.5% 99.6%   |
| Alimentación                                    |                         | 9,213 2<br>51.3% 57.3%   |                         | 8,456 1<br>53.9% 91.9%   |
| Comercio<br>(BA)                                |                         | 78,933 2<br>11.3% 75.5%  | 76,818 ?<br>6.9% 73.0%  | 64,687 ?<br>12.1% 79.3%  |
| Construcción                                    | 32,000 3<br>58.3% 93.6% |                          | 38,453 1<br>59.1% 98.5% |                          |
| Estado  | 66,729 ?<br>41.5% 61.5% |                          | 60,000 1<br>24.6% 97.0% |                          |
| Ferroviarios                                    |                         |                          |                         |                          |
| Fraternidad                                     |                         |                          |                         |                          |
| All Elections Took Place in National Congresses |                         |                          |                         |                          |
| Gráficos<br>(BA)                                | ? ?<br>82.7% 82.7%      | 20,172 3<br>21.0% 38.7%  | 15,000 ?<br>25.1% 80.1% | 12,660 1<br>30.3% 97.5%  |
| Luz y Fuerza<br>(BA)                            | 49,907 1<br>78.8% 98.5% | 31,126 2<br>91.1% 70.8%  |                         | 29,979 ?<br>86.2% 75.3%  |
| Marítimos                                       |                         | 6,597 ?<br>90.0% 51.4%   |                         | 7,482 ?<br>69.2% 52.1%   |
| Metalúrgicos<br>(BA)                            | 58,000 ?<br>27.3% 80.5% |                          |                         | 45,000 1<br>37.5% 94.2%  |
| Municipales, UOEM<br>(BA)                       |                         | 63,422 3<br>30.0% 55.0%  |                         | 61,200 1<br>37.5% 98.9%  |
| Papeleros<br>(BA)                               | 2,900 ?<br>29.3% 64.6%  | ? ?<br>? 71.7%           | 2,400 3<br>29.0% 58.2%  | 2,241 ?<br>17.3% 68.5%   |
| Plásticos<br>(BA)                               | 5,250 ?<br>56.8% 71.0%  |                          | 5,385 1<br>63.0% 91.4%  |                          |
| Telefónicos<br>(BA)                             | 18,000 7<br>68.5% 60.1% |                          |                         |                          |
| Textiles<br>(obreros)                           |                         | 110,000 3<br>59.6% 52.9% |                         | 110,000 1<br>60.3% 90.4% |
| Tranviarios<br>(BA)                             | 9,120 ?<br>72.6% 82.0%  | 10,600 4<br>75.1% 64.7%  |                         |                          |
| Vestido   |                         | 44,400 2<br>34.2% 91.6%  |                         | 50,619 1<br>36.2% 97.4%  |
| Viajantes, AVIC<br>(BA)                         | 5,212 1<br>11.7% 96.9%  | ? 1<br>? 97.9%           | 1,123 1<br>49.2% 96.2%  | 7,643 1<br>8.4% 99.1%    |
| Vidrio<br>(obreros)                             | 8,186 ?<br>79.2% ?      |                          | 10,730 ?<br>73.6% 57.2% |                          |

Sources: For 1965–68 data: Secretaría de Estado de Trabajo, Dirección Nacional de Recursos Humanos, Dpto. Socio-Económico, *Participación de los trabajadores en elecciones gremiales* (Buenos Aires: Publicación interna, 1969); for 1969–72: Unpublished tables supplied by Leonardo Vaccarezza, using data from the Ministry of Labor.

Key: Top line each box = Number of eligible voters and number of lists; second line each box = Percent turnout and percent winning list. BA = Buenos Aires union branch only. \* = Several lists in various sections with strong opposition in each sector.

| 1969        | 1970        | 1971        | 1972        |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 2,059 1     | 2,230 1     |             | ? 1         |
| ? ?         | 50.7% 99.9% |             | ? 97.1%     |
|             | 7,627 2     |             |             |
|             | 69.1% 70.1% |             |             |
|             | 37,000 2    | 60,714 1    |             |
|             | 14.6% 67.2% | 20.0% 98.6% |             |
| ? 1         |             | 58,526 1    |             |
| ? 93.7%     |             | 70.7% 93.5% |             |
|             |             | 55,000 1    |             |
|             |             | 36.7% 98.6% |             |
|             | 116,000 *   |             | 168,510 *   |
|             | 40.6% *     |             | ? *         |
|             | 13,283 2    |             | 10,682 2    |
|             | 16.5% 70.6% |             | 34.7% 93.2% |
|             | 27,917 2    |             | 26,707 1    |
|             | 86.9% 79.5% |             | 84.5% 85.3% |
|             | 7,860 *     |             | 8,234 2     |
|             | 63.9% *     |             | 49.7% 62.3% |
|             | 34,700 1    |             | 44,483 1    |
|             | 45.0% 98.0% |             | 49.8% 95.8% |
|             | 63,009 1    |             | 62,640 1    |
|             | 42.0% 99.4% |             | 66.1% 99.6% |
| 2,200 ?     | 1,900 1     | 1,920 1     |             |
| 22.9% 80.0% | 22.5% 99.3% | 32.6% 99.0% |             |
| 6,680 3     |             | 9,519 3     |             |
| 71.2% 87.7% |             | 82.6% 89.5% |             |
| 18,252 4    |             | 17,411 5    |             |
| 36.9% 55.1% |             | 46.7% 64.4% |             |
|             |             | 111,800 2   |             |
|             |             | 68.8% 86.5% |             |
|             | 7,489 3     |             | 13,057 1    |
|             | 64.0% 33.3% |             | 51.8% 90.6% |
|             | 54,716 2    |             | 67,557 1    |
|             | 14.0% 75.3% |             | 21.2% 94.6% |
| 8,348 1     |             | 10,892 2    |             |
| 6.2% 99.2%  |             | 8.2% 76.7%  |             |
| 10,567 ?    |             | 11,031 ?    |             |
| 66.4% ?     |             | 75.8% ?     |             |

anything other than the name and political affiliation of the winning slates, the researcher needs to exercise extreme caution in the use of most figures. The outside observer who knows little about either Argentina or its politics hazards the possibility of arriving at seriously inaccurate conclusions through blind acceptance of the available union election data.

What is much more serious is that the dangers of working with little-known official statistics are hardly confined to either Argentina or to trade union elections. Probably most, if not all, official statistics available from Latin America require thorough examination of their quality before the serious researcher can use them with confidence as the raw data for analysis. While such data quality control ought to be the responsibility of those assembling the handbooks of indicators and the data banks, such considerations may be too easily sacrificed to the desire to achieve geographical completeness. The unwary innocent who is long on computer time and short on knowledge of what he is using as data appears to be inviting disaster. Given the present state of Latin American research in much of the social sciences, ought we not repeat once again, let the buyer beware?

#### NOTES

1. Several of the most widely known collections of such "indicators" are Charles Taylor and Michael Hudson, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); Arthur Banks, *Cross-Polity Time-Series Data* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971); and Arthur Banks and Robert Textor, *A Cross-Polity Survey* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1963). A first edition of the Taylor and Hudson work by Bruce Russett, *et al.*, appeared in 1964.
2. For a partial listing on the unions of three Latin American countries, see Kenneth Erickson, Patrick Peppe, and Hobart Spalding, "Research on the Urban Working Class and Organized Labor in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile: What is Left to be Done?" *LARR* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1974):115-42.
3. The *Central Única de Trabajadores* was the principal Chilean trade union confederation between 1953 and 1973. The opposition Christian Democrats suggested that the small increase in their minority share of the vote in the 1972 elections indicated workers' dissatisfaction with the Popular Unity government.
4. The victory of *aprista* slates in all haciendas except one (where a Marxist ticket won) showed the total failure of the Velasco military regime to discredit its bitter enemy among the sugar workers. Members of the APRA party had been feuding with the Peruvian military since 1931.
5. The SITRAC and SITRAM stand for *Sindicato de Trabajadores de Concord* and *Sindicato de Trabajadores de Materfer*, respectively, the two large FIAT plants in Córdoba. The militant union leadership that came to power in 1970 was to play a major role one year later in the so-called *viborazo* where thousands of disgruntled workers and students seized temporary control of the city of Córdoba, thereby helping to oust the Levingston military government from national power.
6. See my "Politicization and Income Redistribution in Argentina: The Case of the Peronist Worker," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 23, no. 4 (July 1975): 622-29.
7. For use of the term "power contender," see Charles Anderson, *Political and Economic Change in Latin America* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1967), p. 90.
8. Gilbert Merx presents a provocative account of the recent role of Argentine labor in

- 1975 in "Argentina: Peronism and Power," *Monthly Review* 27, no. 8 (January 1976): 38–51.
9. Some of the same information on the political orientation of individual unions, although much less systematically presented than in DIL, can be found in recent labor histories like Santiago Senén González, *El sindicalismo después de Perón* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1971); Santiago Senén González, *Breve historia del sindicalismo argentino* (Buenos Aires: Alzamor, 1975); Roberto Carri, *Sindicatos y poder en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sudestada, 1967); and Ruben Rotondaro, *Realidad y cambio en el sindicalismo* (Buenos Aires: Pleamar, 1971).
  10. *Nucleamientos sindicales* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones DIL, 1972), pp. 17–23.
  11. A detailed account of the internal CGT divisions in the 1957–72 period will be offered in another article.
  12. See DIL, *Informes* 64 (May 1965): 29; 65 (June 1965): 35; and 73 (March 1966): 27.
  13. Juan Carlos Torre, *El proceso político interno de los sindicatos en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Documento de Trabajo 89, Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, 1974), pp. 28–30.
  14. Torre, *El proceso*, p. 13. Torre here is excluding cases of overt government intervention in the electoral process.