Presidents against Governors: Federalism and Argentine Democracy

My summer conducting undergraduate field research in Buenos Aires, Argentina, has already proven an extremely valuable experience both personally and professionally. The skills that I have developed and the academic growth I have undergone provide me with a strong foundation to pursue my future endeavors, both in my senior year at the University of Notre Dame and following my graduation. However, my summer of senior thesis research is unique in that I am currently on an academic leave of absence to study abroad at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and extend my time doing fieldwork; I am still in the middle of gathering data and conducting interviews. Thus, this report would look quite different if written at the end of my fieldwork come December 2015.

In federal systems, presidents seeking to undermine mechanisms of democratic accountability and centralize power often face stark opposition from powerful state governors. Conversely, presidents sometimes attempt to promote national-level democratization in the face of resistant state governors who preside over subnational hybrid regimes or semi-democracies. How have ambitious presidents attempted to undermine the authority of opposition state governors in order to extend their influence? What specific tools do presidents employ in a federal system, what political costs do they face, and how successful have they been? My research explores these questions in relation to Argentine presidents since the transition to democracy in 1983, focusing especially on Presidents Nestor Kirchner (2003-07) and Cristina
Fernández de Kirchner (2007-15), with my primary methodology being semi-structured interviews and quantitative data.

The most exciting developments in my research have been my interviews with Argentine academics and the quantitative data I have gathered. The scholars that I read while designing my research proposal this past spring, the ones that inspired my research question – Carlos Gervasoni, Lucas González, Marcelo Leiras, Germán Lodola – are the same individuals I am working with in country. They have all proved invaluable resources during my fieldwork in helping me address the nuances of the Argentine system, pointing me to additional academic resources, and guiding my research. It was with their prompting that I attended the Sociedad Argentina de Análisis Político (SAAP) Congress, Argentina’s national Political Science Association’s biannual congress in Mendoza, Argentina, this August. While there, I attended the symposium on federalism, a great opportunity for me to both interview other academics and learn about the important research going on related to federalism and my thesis.

A primary component of my research is theorizing the tools that Argentine presidents can employ in order to undermine opposition governors and extend their influence. Based on the interviews I have conducted, my research indicates that Argentine presidents commonly use or withhold four categories of tools depending on whether they seek to bolster or undermine a provincial governor: (1) political endorsement (conditional on the popularity of the president, this includes media support and visits to the provinces); (2) financial support (including automatic and discretionary fiscal transfers and provincial debt rollovers); (3) central government policy to favor or punish governors (such as highly visible infrastructure investment, social and health programs, or pilot projects in favored provinces); and (4) emergency aid (providing or not providing assistance during natural disasters or police crises in the provinces).
Being able to define these tools through interviews relates to my second accomplishment: the access I have gained to quantitative data.

One of my biggest surprises during fieldwork has been how relatively accessible quantitative data is and the important role that it will play in my thesis and especially in the future if I continue with this project. This development is contingent on my relationship with Argentine academics. Given the unreliable statistical information published by the Argentine government, the most dependable data sources are, in the case of my project, directly from the research of other Argentine academics.

A minor – and very common – setback that I experienced as an undergraduate doing research was the need to “prove myself” before I could get into the real interview questions. This made the process of gathering information a lot slower as professors wanted to know how acquainted I was with the academic literature in order to know how to address me. Our conversations often revolved around the Argentine party system, discussions on using the terminology “opposition” governors in the Argentine context, and the theorization of actors’ preferences (as being simply power-driven vs. motivated by specific programmatic beliefs). I had to earn the respect of the professors before I could begin to expect their feedback, proving that my project was not just “some other thesis on fiscal federalism,” but that I really was posing a new, interesting question. Despite the slowness of both getting ahold of individuals and arranging times for interviews, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. While an ambitious project, my research will uniquely assess where Argentine presidents possess the greatest influence against opposition governors. This research will allow for further academic pursuit in Argentina as well as a comparative point of reference to the United States and other important federal systems such as Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela.
In addition to the time it took to develop contacts and arrive at a level where I could begin to ask my interview questions, the other main obstacle in my research has been one of time. This “summer” of undergraduate research also coincided with my study abroad experience at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso with the support of a Summer Language Abroad Grant (May, June) and my move to Argentina for the leave of absence (July). The day-to-day responsibilities of moving abroad – finding more permanent housing, jumping through the hoops to study abroad independently at a nonaffiliated university, applying for my visa and health insurance, etc. – and, most notably, the intensive application process for a Fulbright Study/Research Grant to possibly return to Argentina and continue working on this project, demanded much of my energy. Undergraduate research, while very fruitful, has also competed for my time and attention.

I have quickly found the value in working independently, knowing your support system, and being very patient and persistent. On a personal level, this summer has forced me to reflect on my plans after senior year. During my underclassman years at Notre Dame, I never picked up on the sheer confusion and anxiety felt by seniors figuring out their next step after graduation. I have wanted to earn a PhD in Political Science and teach at a research university since my first semester of political science coursework my sophomore year. While I know my passion lies in Latin American politics, this summer before senior year is when I had to ask myself: Am I willing to accept that such a passion might not lead to the typical fresh-out-of-college job? While I do not have to decide the next 40 years of my life right now, do I enjoy this field enough to pursue a doctorate, given what I know about the academic job market and the life ahead as a female professor? This summer challenged me to deeply consider what such a goal will demand of me and allowed me the time to discuss my thoughts with family and friends. Ultimately, my
time in Argentina has confirmed my desire to become a political scientist and deepened my enthusiastic yes to the aforementioned questions.

This project has been developed under the continued mentorship of my Senior Honor’s Thesis and International Scholars Program advisor, Professor Scott Mainwaring. I thank him for his unending support and instruction. I am especially grateful to the Kellogg Institute for all the doors they have opened to me. They have not only encouraged me to deepen and define my love for Latin America but have provided me with unending opportunities and tools to put this passion into practice. I thank all of the wonderful individuals at the Kellogg Institute and look forward to some day paying forward all of the support that they have shown me.