



## **Texas Papers on Latin America**

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**Charismatic Leadership and the Transition to Democracy:**

**The Rise of Carlos Saúl Menem in Argentine Politics**

**by**

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### **Introduction**

In December 1983 Raúl Alfonsín took office as president of Argentina to end almost eight years of military rule. As the country started its transition to democracy, a process begun in late 1982, after Argentina's defeat in the South Atlantic War, a discredited and humiliated regime decided to call for general elections to avoid social and political chaos. The two main political parties, the Peronists and the Radicals, ran candidates for president: Ítalo Luder for the Partido Justicialista (PJ, the Peronists) and Raúl Alfonsín for the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR). The Peronists hoped a prestigious ticket would attract the votes of the middle class. Luder was president of the Senate during the previous Peronist government and was a recognized specialist in constitutional law. Deolindo Bittel, his running mate, was a respected politician from the Province of Chaco.

Both Luder and Bittel received clear support from the trade unions, which played a leading role in the organization of public rallies during the electoral campaign. For various reasons, however, labor support turned out to be harmful. To start with, the campaign's continual references to the old Peronist traditions were

inappropriate in a country that had changed radically from the one Perón ruled as president beginning in 1946, and later in 1973. Second, the violent and aggressive attitudes of the trade unionists scared away not only part of the middle class but also the lower classes, who did not feel represented by the gangs that attended the Peronist rallies.

Raúl Alfonsín, on the other hand, was relatively new to politics. After the death of Ricardo Balbín, the leader of the UCR, Alfonsín became president of the party and engineered a gradual change in the UCR's traditional stance toward positions more akin to those of Europe's Social Democratic parties. The perception of him as a modern and progressive politician surrounded by young, talented advisers with political experience gained during the recent resistance to the military dictatorship gave Alfonsín a halo of heroism and boldness. Well-crafted political and propaganda campaigns targeted not only to the UCR's traditional constituency, the middle class, but also to the poor neighborhoods, which had traditionally voted for Peronists, allowed the UCR to defeat the Peronists for the first time in a clean presidential election in October 1983.

Many politicians, academics, and journalists essayed different interpretations of the election results. Some maintained that the Argentine electorate had finally matured and was leaning toward politicians who no longer spoke with the heart. Others rejoiced because Argentine political practices had grown to such an extent that Peronism's irrational and emotional speeches had been replaced by more rational and "scientific" arguments.

Nevertheless, in the presidential elections held six years later, the Radicals were defeated by Carlos Menem, the Peronist candidate, a populist leader from a poor province of the interior who reminded the electorate of Perón's political style. This time the emotional and sentimental speeches defeated the "rationality" of Eduardo Angeloz, the Radical candidate, and again gave rise to various interpretations about why the election had turned out as it had. In general, analysts pointed out that Menem represented a new leader who had taken up Perón's charismatic leadership style. Further, ordinary people, tired of technical explanations about the current social and economic crisis, had followed this new "caudillo," who told them hope and faith could overcome their problems.

This phenomenon has been interpreted in various journalistic and academic works. My aim here is to place Carlos Menem's ascent within the framework of its importance for political theory. Unlike analyses that focus only tangentially on Menem's victory and emphasize the first years of his presidency within the framework of the transition to democracy in Latin America, this paper will try to unveil the principal causes of the Peronist triumph in 1989 by examining Menem's personal history and Peronism after the 1983 defeat.

I shall first try to relate Menem's rise to the presidency to theories of rationality in political behavior, charismatic leadership, and the charismatic tradition in Peronism. Then I shall analyze Menem's apparently charismatic leadership by

examining his political speeches during the 1988 primaries in the Partido Justicialista and the 1989 presidential elections. I shall also examine the true relationship between the crisis at the end of the Alfonsín government and Menem's rise in popularity as Peronist presidential candidate. Finally, I shall use public opinion polls to verify why people decided to vote for the Peronist ticket.

This analysis will, then, endeavor to revive the study of emotion and myth in modern politics with a contemporary case study. It will also try to establish that such mythical behavior is an unavoidable element if one is to understand the transition to democracy in Argentina during the 1980s.

### **Political Rationality and Charismatic Leadership**

In the course of his campaign for the nomination as presidential candidate for the Partido Justicialista in the 1989 general election, Menem was considered Peronism's new charismatic leader. Therefore, we must first refer to the development of the theory of political charisma and then locate Menem within this conceptual characterization.

The study of charismatic leadership initiated by Weber in the first decades of this century created a vast bibliography on the topic. Yet, since this kind of leadership entails a response from followers that goes beyond mere obedience to a doctrine or a political program, the most convenient way to analyze it is by referring to the debate about rational and irrational behavior in politics.

The concept of the "rational" to define human social activity has changed. In the last century, rationalism and scientificism understood the human condition as essentially rational. Because human beings were thought to follow fixed patterns of behavior, it was assumed that human sciences should use methods comparable to those of the natural sciences to analyze society. The generation of sociologists who emerged in the first decades of this century—Pareto, Weber, Mannheim, and Parsons, among others—doubted the supposed rationality of human behavior. All of them revealed the significant emotional and instinctive component of human behavior.

In the 1950s, the "rational choice" theory was greatly influenced by economic thought that even the apparent most irrational behaviors, for example, magic, were produced by persons conscious of the material benefits they would gain in exchange. In other words, human behavior was based on cost-benefit considerations

More recently, although the concept of irrationality continues to appeal to those who study human behavior, sociological schools influenced by anthropology and economics have discarded irrationality because they think all human activity had to be considered rational. For some anthropologists and social scientists, rationality and irrationality are merely cultural concepts. Social behavior cannot be understood without a study from "within" the social environment in which it

has emerged. Therefore, all human activity, including the mythic, is considered rational..

This tangled discussion about rationality and irrationality relates strongly to the concept of "charismatic leadership." At the beginning of this century, Weber used the term "charisma" for the first time in political sociology. According to him, "charisma" was the extraordinary quality of a person whereby he was thought to have supernatural or superhuman forces. This virtue could be found not only in magicians, sorcerers, and priests but also in *caudillos* and political leaders. Weber also spoke of a type of "charismatic domination," which, like "rational" and "traditional" domination, based its legitimacy on particular arguments. "Charismatic" leadership differed from the other two types in that its legitimacy originated in the people's recognition of the extraordinary virtues of their ruler.

Weber defines charisma as an irrational type of domination that is not attached to any rules. However, if we wanted to analyze the phenomenon according to the thesis of the anthropological and the rational choice schools, the relationship between the charismatic leader and his followers would turn out to be related not to purely emotive and spontaneous behavior but to rational behavior. In other words, consciously or unconsciously, the follower would support the leader for the benefits the people would receive once he was in power. Without entering into philosophical discussions about the rational or irrational essence of human behavior, we should therefore conclude that the charismatic element exists as a sociological category for analyzing those political phenomena in which the leader-follower relationship involves strong doses of emotion and mysticism.

Among the recent works on charisma, those by Ann Willner and Douglas Madsen and Peter Snow deserve mention. Willner maintains that the virtues of a leader, as perceived by his followers, is the decisive factor in the emergence of charismatic domination. Willner describes some traits that she considers essential for the existence of charismatic leadership, especially followers who consider their leader to be a superhuman being and who staunchly believe in what he says and follow his orders without question. She also analyzes tools such as the use of rhetoric and invocations to a glorious past. Charismatic leaders use to elicit political fervor.

Willner presents another category apart from the classic charismatic leader: the quasi-charismatic leader. This type of leader caused similar phenomena among the electorate, although without fulfilling all the necessary conditions to be considered charismatic. In her view, there are several subtypes of "quasi-charismatic" leader. Nehru of India, who inherited Gandhi's charisma, exemplifies one type. John F. Kennedy was a case of "post-mortem charisma"; that is, he generated a charismatic following his assassination. De Gaulle, who was popularly considered an indispensable political leader in times of crisis, was a third type of quasi-charismatic leader.

Whereas Willner underscores personal leadership traits, Madsen and Snow give key importance to the existence of a crisis as the cause of the emergence of a

charismatic leader. According to their analysis, in noncrisis times people have a feeling of "self- efficacy," which can be defined as the personal conviction of being able to handle successfully the challenges posed by the social environment. When this feeling no longer exists or is weakened in the personal and social spheres by a crisis, people seek security in what the authors call "proxy-control." The charismatic leader, whom the people recognize as having extraordinary abilities to save them, exercises this "proxy-control."

The classic studies on charisma and the more recent work of Willner and Madsen and Snow help explain Menem's rise to the presidency. The *riojano* "caudillo" represents one of the most characteristic leaders in a political culture in which personalism and *caciquismo* surpass other types of authority; his style is also connected with one of the principal components of the Peronist movement, the charismatic element.

Although there are many interpretations of Peronism, ranging from the classic formulation of Gino Germani to the more recent studies of Torcuato Di Tella and the electoral analyses of Mora y Araujo and others, all of them pointed out that Peronism was basically a mass movement whose identity must be explained by a study of its social base. Although everyone agrees with this argument, very few studies have outlined its charismatic aspect.

Unlike the many who have concluded that Menem "de-Peronized" the party, I hypothesize that Menem's rise is intimately linked to one historical element of the Peronist party: its charismatic component. After Perón's death in 1974, the charismatic element was lost primarily because of the absence of charisma in his wife, his virtual heir. Although the "Renovadores" tried to reorganize the party without the deep imprint of personalism, the charismatic facet prevailed in the primaries of 1988 and in the presidential elections in 1989.

I am not arguing that Menem's rise in the national political arena can be explained only by charisma. I agree with other analysts who believe that much of the electorate decided to vote for Menem because of a very negative evaluation of the Radical government. But why did they choose Menem? The memories of the chaotic government of Isabel Perón and the counterproductive and aggressive Peronist campaign in the elections of 1983 could have made people fear the arrival of a Peronist government more than another Radical administration. The truth is that Menem won the 1989 elections mostly because his charismatic style appealed to the Argentine electorate. I think this element distinguished him from Angeloz, who lacked any trace of *caudillismo*. In addition, Menem's charisma identified him with the charismatic tradition of the Peronist party.

I shall now try to determine whether the rise of Carlos Menem to the presidency in 1989 can be laid at the feet of these phenomena. Taking Willner's assertion that the charismatic leader uses a special rhetoric as a starting point, I shall first analyze whether Menem was a case in point. At the same time I shall take Madsen and Snow's contention that a crisis plays a significant role in the growth

of charisma and try to determine whether the magnitude of the crisis of the late 1980s in Argentina actually laid the foundations for the emergence of a charismatic phenomenon. Finally, I shall use pre-election polls to find out whether Menem was seen as a charismatic leader by the Argentine people.

### **Menem's Rise in National Politics**

Before analyzing Menem's speeches, we must delve into the institutional and party channels that allowed him to win the nomination as presidential candidate of the Partido Justicialista in 1989. The victory of the Unión Cívica Radical in 1983 had been a hard blow for Peronism. In the wake of this defeat, the Peronists could have pursued two courses: they could have retreated in as orderly a manner as possible, maintaining the trade unionists' hegemony in the party's authority structure, and then have run the risk of suffering political disintegration; or they could have gone through a thorough process of self-criticism to change the party's image and political methods, and thereby have recovered the political initiative. A significant number of Peronist politicians, led by Antonio Cafiero and Carlos Saúl Menem, chose the latter and created a new wing known as the "Renovación Peronista."

The renewal of the party included, among other things, the removal of the trade unionists from the party leadership and the democratization by means of free and direct internal elections to nominate candidates. Although the Renovación Peronista was created almost immediately after the 1983 electoral defeat, the opposition of the trade unionists and politicians who supported them delayed the Renovación's ultimate control of the party. Nevertheless, the September 1987 victories of gubernatorial candidates belonging to the Renovación consolidated this wing until its leaders, particularly those who sided with Cafiero, finally gained control of the party. In these elections Peronism won in almost all the provinces and Antonio Cafiero defeated one of the most promising young figures of the UCR, Juan Manuel Casella, for the governorship of the Province of Buenos Aires. Because this province is one of the most important electoral districts in Argentina, this victory launched Cafiero into the presidential race of 1989.

In his endeavors to become Peronism's presidential candidate, however, in July 1988 Cafiero had to confront Carlos Menem, who had also emerged as one of the leaders of the Renovación Peronista, in the primaries. Throughout the primaries, the differences between the candidates became more clearly marked. Cafiero wanted to change the Partido Justicialista into a modern party structured along the lines the UCR had adopted before the 1983 general elections. To that end, it was necessary to abandon at least part of Peronism's traditional political practices, in particular, the invocations to the ideas of Perón and "Evita," his wife, the street rallies, and anything that might remind the electorate of the party's populist traits. Menem thought that, because of their concern with solving bureaucratic problems in the party, the leadership of the Partido Justicialista, now dominated mainly by Cafiero's followers, had lost all contact with the grass roots. He felt that Peronism

should stick to its traditional doctrine and again seek the close relationship between its leaders and the people that had existed during Juan Perón's time.

Urging the Peronist grass roots to "overflow" the party machine (a phrase that urged Peronists to vote against party authorities who, for the most part, supported Cafiero), Menem had an excellent primary. With 54 percent of the vote, against Cafiero's 46 percent, he unexpectedly won the party's nomination for president. Menem's victory indicated to political analysts and the public that the revival of Peronist traditional political practices and shattered the arguments of those who had forecast the end of *caudillo* leadership in Argentina after the 1983 defeat.

Public opinion polls predicted that Menem would defeat UCR presidential candidate Eduardo Angeloz in the general elections. Menem won 47 percent of the vote, to Angeloz's 32 percent, and emerged victorious in twenty of the country's twenty-four electoral districts. Although it was generally assumed that a significant number of Menem's voters belonged to a fluctuating electorate that presumably had voted for the UCR in the previous general elections, Peronism was the dominant party in national politics again.

Given that oratory is one of the tools a charismatic leader uses to gain a following, I shall now analyze some excerpts of Menem's speeches during the 1988-1989 primary and presidential elections. Peronist political discourse has previously focused on Perón and his wife. What I shall try to do here is investigate the main topics Menem used to develop contacts with his followers and try to determine whether, as Willner claims, there were charismatic elements or overtones in them.

First, I shall briefly review the attributes that Willner ascribes to charismatic speech-making. Then I shall demonstrate that many of the elements Willner mentions can be found in Menem's oratory. Second, I shall analyze the contents of each excerpt. Two caveats about my methodology are in order. I have ignored the enunciation of the main points in Menem's political platform because they do not fit into the study of the charismatic speeches; and, apart from his continual references to the "*salario*" and the "*revolución productiva*," two key topics in his speeches that were never explained in great detail, Menem very seldom referred to his political platform during the campaign.

### **The Rhetoric of Carlos Menem's Electoral Campaign**

To analyze Menem's speeches as sources of his charisma, it is necessary to study in detail the political language used in his rallies. According to Willner, charismatic oratory is different from other types in that it does not produce ideas or messages but, rather, emotional stimuli through words or phrases with sentimental content. Some of the elements emphasized in her study are the use of metaphors, analogies, and figurative meaning in general, as well as the use of some rhythm, cadence, repetition, and alliteration.

Taking into account that a political speech is an appeal to a particular public

whom the speaker is trying to convert into the subject of his claim, we should determine to whom Menem's words were directed. In other words, the analysis of the contents and linguistic resources of a speaker who tries to attract people's attention through their emotions must be followed by a study of the direction of the message. Although this sort of study is not related specifically to charisma, it enhances the analysis of the speeches.

When classifying the contents of Menem's speeches according to their images and metaphors, we can distinguish four topics to be tackled during his presidency: (1) references to biblical narrations and religious themes; (2) invocations to Perón, his wife, Eva, and to Peronist doctrine; (3) references to the people as the main protagonist of Menem's political project; and (4) images of pacification and national unity in a divided Argentina.

Religious references were constant in his primary and presidential speeches. It is possible that they were rooted in a sincere religious attitude. His ancestors were Muslims and he comes from a traditional and very religious province of Argentina, which reinforces his mystic personality. Nonetheless, the highly religious nature of the Argentine people, especially the lower classes, who were traditionally loyal to Peronism and suffered from the economic crisis more deeply, may have led Menem to intensify the use of biblical quotations and metaphors:

to those who are *with their arms fallen*, to those who are hungry and crave justice, to those who have lost their horizon and are looking for a better future, to those who are lonely and wait, *there is a vacant place from which the future is built* and that place is waiting for all of us.

This excerpt comes from the speech given at the closing rally of the 1988 primary elections. Here Menem evokes a biblical passage, the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus promises rewards in the Kingdom of Heaven for the weak of the earth. Menem paraphrases the text to include "those who are with their arms fallen," that is, the many unemployed at that time. When speaking of a "place from which the future is built," he promises a new country under his presidency.

This is the time to run risks. The *courageous* must go forward! The *cool* must leave.

The labels "courageous" and "cool" remind us of a famous excerpt from the New Testament in which Jesus rejects those who accept his word but dare not act accordingly. In Menem's case, the "courageous" are those who will commit themselves to his project and the "cool" are those who will not make up their minds to carry it out.

A voice rises like a prayer, like a plea, like a moving scream: *Argentina, arise and walk.*



The phrase "Argentina, arise and walk" echoes a passage of the Gospel in which Jesus brings his friend Lazarus back to life. According to Menem, Argentina was as dead as Lazarus, but he, Menem, just like Jesus, would bring Argentina, his friend, back to life.

Religious terms and the invocations to God were a regular feature in Menem's oratory. Moreover, the motto of Menem's presidential campaign, "Follow me; I will not disappoint you," recalled Jesus' words when he was recruiting the apostles. In some cases, Menem even used a phrase of the pope's to refer to underdevelopment: "Peace has a name: development." On other occasions, Menem referred to faith and hope by saying that he was carrying both banners: "God's [banner], which is *Faith* and the people's, which is *Hope*."

These religious references demonstrate not only that Menem identified himself with the Argentine people, who are mostly Christian, but that he was also trying to convey the image of a preacher of the truth charged with the task of saving the homeland. Menem also appeared to be trying to present himself as the Messiah or Savior of the Argentine people.

Also noteworthy in Menem's speeches were references to the founder of the Peronist party, Juan Perón, to his wife, Eva, and to his own obligation as a bulwark of Peronist doctrine. His references to the Peronist past were made mostly during the primaries, to try to differentiate himself from Cafiero as Perón's genuine heir. These references also appear in speeches made on special occasions, such as his first address as president. In the first case, he addressed his remarks to party members whose votes had to be assured. In the second case, his speeches were also directed to the people to reinforce the idea that he was Perón's heir; he even made his first presidential speech from the same place (the balcony of the Casa Rosada) from which Perón spoke to the people.

Each Peronist militant must become a *guardian* of Peronism's destiny and turn his vote into another 17 October . . . we must fulfill *our leader's mandate*, which is to give his banner and testament to the people . . . *under the invocation of Perón and Evita* we must say now or never, the hour of Liberation and Social Justice has come.

Here Menem compares his victory in the primaries with another October 17 and suggests that Cafiero does not represent the true Peronism, which took to the streets to rescue their leader on that glorious day. It is also interesting to point out Menem's invocation of Perón and Evita, as though they were saints, and the idea that the Peronist grass roots must fulfill Perón's mandate. According to Menem, his own role as leader of the party would be to safeguard Peronist history and ensure that hereafter the people would preserve that legacy.

You are all summoned by Juan Domingo Perón, by Eva Perón and *those of us who are their heirs* . . . I invite you to work and mainly to *succeed, succeed,*

*succeed* . . . Argentina is ours. Destiny is ours! . . . May God bless you! I give you a big hug from my heart. Interestingly enough, here Menem identifies himself and the people as Perón's heirs. The verb "succeed" is also emphasized, such that the audience has no doubt about the final goal of the rally. Finally, his religious farewell reminds us of a priest at the end of a service and of any father with his children.

Also characteristic of Menem's oratory are his references to the Argentine people and his personal committal to their fate:

Our primaries are a question of *people*, and intuition will play a role in it. For this reason, on 26 June [the original date for these elections] the *people* will not make a mistake.

In this excerpt the repetition of the word "people" is intended to underline the principal focus of Menem's political proposal. Menem also resorts to an argument commonly used by populists to stress people's capacity to avoid mistakes when giving their verdict in the ballot box. On the other hand, Menem also implies that, since ordinary people never make mistakes, his victory is certain.

I do not want to speak to you out of vanity or arrogance, because nobody is free from making mistakes in politics, and I want to speak to you *as another companion*, not as a political schemer who sees party members as electoral booty that must be obtained at any cost.

*Companions, brothers and sisters of my country* and dear children, if there is a movement with mystique, it is Peronism . . . Peronism is a mystique, an emotion, a movement.

He uses the word "companions" to address party members and those who sympathize with Peronism. The undecided are called "brothers and sisters" to try to make them participate in a common project designed by him. At the same time, he defines Peronism more as a religion that is followed through faith than as a political doctrine.

We have achieved victory working *from below like fire* and making microphones listen *the most marvelous music*, which is the voice of the people. In this paragraph two metaphors are used. The work of the people in the campaign is compared to a fire that warms from below, such that the unattainable victory for the pro-Cafiero party authorities went for the grass roots who worked unflinchingly and with passion, like fire. Menem also compares the voice of the people, their songs at the rallies, to "marvelous music." He takes this metaphor from Perón's last speech in 1974 to flatter the voters and to demonstrate that he represents Perón's legacy.

Menem recognizes that he needs people's support and does not promise immediate

miracles or "magic solutions." Yet, he does not mix with his followers and reveals himself as their guide and savior:

*We* are going to walk up to the government's house holding the hands of the forgotten, of those who suffer, of those who are needy, of the poorest. *We* are going to say yes to Justice, yes to the future . . . *I am coming* without constraints, with clean and free hands to work for the country, and my only prior compromise is a deep *passion* to lift our homeland from the state of decadence in which it stands. At the beginning of this paragraph Menem uses the first person plural to state that he will govern with the people and then changes to first person singular. Finally, he will work for the country with no compromises other than his "passion" for it. In other words, at the beginning of his speech Menem mixes with the people, then he detaches himself and announces that he will save the homeland.

Other phrases of the Peronist candidate's speeches also warrant analysis. Some of them, like the invocations to national unity and to pacification, and the assertion that there exist two Argentinas, a concept that will be explained below, were the leitmotiv of Menem's presidential campaign. These invocations to peace and unity as indispensable for a common life in the country were made at this stage because Menem needed to keep the votes of the Peronist electorate, which were almost guaranteed, and win the independent vote. The first point he proposed was "national unity" as a means of overcoming the division of Argentina "into two countries":

The time has come for each Argentinean to offer his hand to his brother, to build a chain stronger than discord, resentment, pain, grudge, death, the past. The time has come for a gesture of *pacification*.

Menem reiterated the conciliatory tone of these words in his inaugural speech before Congress:

The Argentine people voted for *national unity*. That is why our government is a government of *national unity* . . . Thank God the country where discretionary law prevailed no longer exists. The *official* and the *submerged* countries no longer exist. The days of the *visible country* and the *real country* are over. I have just seen these two Argentinas. I am coming to fight for the reconciliation of these two homelands . . . I want to be the president of a united Argentina that will progress despite its discrepancies . . . The country of *everybody against everybody* is over. The country of *everybody together with everybody* is dawning.

The idea of "pacification" relates to the electoral promise of taking the necessary measures to overcome the old confrontation between civilians and the military, and between the guerrilla groups and the security forces. The concept of "national unity" in turn is linked to the existence of two Argentinas. According to Menem, the "visible" and "official" country was that of the capital city as the center of

business and finance. The "real" country was the poor, the castaways, and the interior provinces, which did not wield any political power at all.

Menem's intention, then, was to achieve the necessary unity to prevent the partition of Argentina. Hence his role would be that of a king or *caudillo* at the beginning of the national state who would stay away from internal differences to unify people under a common project.

As we can see, Menem's speeches fall within what Willner calls "charismatic language." We find metaphors, figurative meanings, and linguistic elements such as the repetition of sounds to stress the importance of certain words. Eduardo Angeloz, the UCR's candidate, used precise and clear language comparable to that of a technician trying to inform, not move, people. Angeloz's style was that of a modern politician more used to speaking before the mass media than in rallies.

With these arguments and rhetoric, Carlos Menem defeated the Radicals in the presidential election of 14 May 1989. We must still answer the following questions, however: Why was Menem's oratory more convincing than Angeloz's? Why did Menem's style during the electoral campaign emphasize feeling over reason, idealism over pragmatism? Certainly, the analysis of his speeches is insufficient to elucidate what happened during the election. Thus, following the explanation offered by Madsen and Snow, I shall now analyze whether ordinary people's ordeal in Argentina at the time may have influenced their decision to vote for a candidate who did not accompany his promises of "an Argentina worth living in" with logical explanations of how he intended to achieve that goal. **The Recognition of Menem's Charismatic Leadership**

The last months of the Alfonsín government were plagued by social, political, and economic problems. Since various authors have already described these dramatic events in detail, I shall mention briefly only the military crisis, the energy shortages, and the collapse of the economy.

In the military sphere, the uprisings of the fundamentalist wings of the army, the last one of which took place in December 1988, were followed by an attack on a military garrison by the Movimiento Todos por la Patria (MTP), a radical Marxist group, in January 1989. The episode shocked the government, the armed forces, and the public because it reminded them of the previous decade's violence. And because of a drought and the lack of adequate investment in the energy industry, during the summer there was a grave energy crisis that severely hit the productive apparatus and consumers in general.

The economic collapse that began in February 1989 and peaked in May was even worse for the Alfonsín government. The problems began when the so-called Spring Plan launched in August 1988 to stabilize the value of the U.S. dollar and control inflation foundered in February 1989. By July 1989, the dollar had been devalued 3,600 percent, the monthly rate of inflation had reached almost 200 percent, the Central Bank's foreign reserves had fallen to a little over US\$100

million, real industrial wages had fallen, and unemployment and underemployment had increased by 27 percent. Also during these months, mobs looted many shops and supermarkets; there were serious clashes between the shop owners, the security forces, and the mobs; and the government had to impose a state of siege.

Some contemporary accounts claim that key vested interests, such as agrarian corporations and some industrialists who felt threatened by the current economic policy, were largely responsible for Argentina's economic collapse. What is important for our purposes is that the hopelessness and discredit of the Radical government increased to such an extent that President Alfonsín was finally forced to advance to 8 July the transfer of power originally scheduled for December.

Knowing that the crisis made ordinary people insecure, Menem exploited the economic chaos and widespread frustration to attract more votes. In the last weeks of his campaign he maintained that Argentina was going through one of the worst periods of its history and that skyrocketing inflation, political instability, the recession, and growing social marginalization were the most important problems. To those members of the government and the press who warned that widespread fear would follow a Peronist victory, he replied that in fact the Argentineans feared "Radical hunger", a popular phrase that emphasized the severe economic crisis and the government's impotence to cope with it during last months in power.

Nevertheless, in his inaugural address Menem revealed a conciliatory attitude toward the opposition. He compared Argentina to a country that was dying and added that death would be the country's destiny if the Argentineans did not unite to save it. He also claimed that all Argentineans had contributed to their country's failure.

In sum, at that time Argentina was fractionated to such an extent that the situation probably generated deep anxiety. Using Weber's theory about the relationship between crisis and charisma, Madsen and Snow consider extreme political difficulties to be the main cause of the charismatic phenomenon. Do all deep crises, then, lead to the emergence of a charismatic leader who fulfills the role of a savior?

There are some historical examples of the great influence of crisis on the emergence of charismatic leaders. This appears to have been the case in the emergence of Franklin Roosevelt during the crisis of the 1930s, of Hitler after the recession and hyperinflation in Germany, and of Mussolini during the 1920s, though not of Castro, Gandhi, and Sukarno. But, it must be remembered that similar chaotic moments in recent Argentine history were not followed by the rise of charismatic leaders. A grave political and economic crisis finally led to a military coup in March 1976, yet none of the members of the military junta that came to power at that time had any of the personal traits generally attributed to charismatic leaders.

It appears, therefore, that, though important, a crisis is not an indispensable prerequisite for the rise of a charismatic phenomenon. The missing element is the emergence of a politician capable of winning people's confidence with encouraging promises. In Menem's case, the chaotic situation in Argentina melded with a personal style that convinced people of his ability and determination to solve the current difficulties without offering logical explanations or rational recipes for doing so.

In conclusion, Argentina went through one of its deepest crisis on the eve of the 1989 elections. It seems that the problems created appropriate conditions for the emergence of a *caudillo* who was seen as tea savior of the country.

It is appropriate to analyze Menem's charisma from the viewpoint of public opinion. Thus I shall focus on three key topics: (1) Did the electorate recognize the hypothetical charisma of the Peronist candidate? (2) In what way did this personal characteristic influence voting intentions? and (3) Was Menem's charisma a distinctive element in his contest against Angeloz?.

With the development of public opinion polls, survey research is one of the most reliable methods for answering these questions. As there is no public repository of polls in the country, I consulted those published in newspapers and magazines before the election. While recognizing the complexity of the term "charisma" and the difficulty of capturing it by poll, I came on some interesting findings.

First, the word was widely known and was voluntarily chosen by the interviewers to define Menem's personality. There were people who did not use the word *charismatic* to characterize the Peronist candidate, but they used other words related to it like *caudillo* and *popular*.

Table 1. Reasons for Supporting Menem or Angeloz

	%		%
<b>Reason for Supporting Menem</b>		<b>Reason for Supporting Angeloz</b>	
People support him/he is popular, a "caudillo"	68	It is the kind of proposal that appeals to the middle class	39
Because of the errors of Radicalism	36	People support him	15
Because it is the majority	13	He is firmer/more honest	11
He is firmer/more honest	2	Through the electoral college the Unión de Centro Democrático (UCD) will support him	10

	Because it is a majority	5
	Because of his proposals	3
Other	4 Other	14
Don't know/no answer	1 Don't know/no answer	4

Source: *Somos* (Buenos Aires), September, 7, 1988, p. 9.

According to table 1, 68 percent of the interviewees who affirmed that they would vote for Menem claimed they would do so because he was "popular" and a "caudillo"; only 36 percent would cast a vote for him because of Radicalism's mistakes. Conversely, 39 percent of those who would vote for Angeloz would base their vote on the fact that his platform attracted the middle class. Other polls showed that among the 66 percent of people who supported Menem, 33 percent affirmed that charisma was his principal quality. Angeloz's personality, force, enthusiasm, and ability to work were the qualities most admired by interviewees.

Table 2. Public Image of Angeloz and Menem

Public Image	Angeloz (%)	Menem (%)
He is intelligent and able.	66	54
He guarantees democracy.	65	54
He is capable of being president.	55	49
He made a good governor in his province.	45	34
He is strong.	45	57
He is humble.	43	65

He has a modern platform.	38	36
He has charisma.	41	54
He is close to the people.	30	71
He can be the leader the country needs.	25	37

*Source:* Edgardo Catterberg and María Braun "Las elecciones presidenciales argentinas del 14 de mayo de 1989," p. 369.

According to table 2, Angeloz was praised because of his intellectual qualities (66 percent), of his defense of democracy (65 percent) and his ability to fulfill the duties of president (55 percent). Menem was seen mostly as closer to people (71 percent), as humble (65 percent), as strong (57 percent), and as charismatic (54 percent).

Public opinion, then, considered Menem to be a charismatic leader and a *caudillo*, and much of the Peronist electorate based its decision to vote for him on these characteristics. Menem was perceived as different from Angeloz in that, although he was seen as intelligent and politically able, he was mostly considered to be a "popular" leader. In other words, people recognized Angeloz more for his intellect and Menem mostly for his emotion.

## **Conclusions**

Charismatic leadership is closely related to rationality in politics. Rationalism, which prevailed in the nineteenth century and derived from the theory of rational choice, all human behavior, political included, has to be considered basically rational. Early-twentieth-century sociologists, however, affirmed that magic and irrationality were essential components of political activity, an opinion that is still held by many academics. I have assumed that there are certain attitudes that, innocently or not, lead to illogical behavior as a result of inflamed and emotional rhetoric and certain politicians' passionate appeal to people.

Charismatic authority is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Argentine political culture and, especially, of the Peronist movement. Therefore, the ascent of Carlos Saúl Menem from the governorship of one of the poorest provinces in the declining Northwest to the presidency is connected not only to traditional paternalism and *caudillismo* but also to Peronism's latent charisma.



Can the Peronist candidate be considered a true charismatic leader? Beyond a doubt, during his rise to the presidency Menem appeared charismatic to ordinary people. His personal style, his references to the Peronist past, his rhetoric, and his close relationship with the people were identified with the traits of a charismatic leader. Yet, following Willner's typology, given that Menem's links with his followers were not as important as the intimate relationship built by Perón in the 1940s, perhaps we should consider Menem a quasi-charismatic leader. That is, he is a leader who lacks extraordinary qualities but who possesses other qualities that are inherent to those having charisma.

Because he had carried out significant social welfare and income distribution reforms before reaching the presidency, Perón already enjoyed great personal prestige among those who had benefited from his largesse or who sympathized with his policies. Menem, despite his imprisonment and the political persecution he suffered during the 1976-1983 military regime, was only a picturesque *caudillo* from La Rioja who, when Perón died, vowed to become president someday. Although his charismatic style and the massive numbers who attended his rallies during his campaigns must be recognized, his emergence in Argentine national politics during the 1980s is not comparable to Perón's during the 1940s. In addition, Menem's case is quite different from Perón's in that the latter's charismatic relationship with his followers grew while he was in office, whereas during Menem's first year as president public rallies in support of his policies became more infrequent and Menem gradually distanced himself both ideologically and physically from at least part of the party and electorate that helped him rise to power.

We cannot conclude that Menem is a proper quasi-charismatic heir of Perón because, in the first place, his relationship with Perón was always good but rather detached. Second, although in some speeches Menem invoked the figures of Perón and Evita, his political proposals did not coincide completely with Perón's. We could, then, consider Menem as the creator of a new charisma or a quasi-charisma with its own identity.

It is important to note that although Menem neither had Perón's charisma nor was chosen as his heir, he personified one of the features of the complex identity of Peronism. The Peronists' deeply paternalistic and mythical underpinnings distinguished them from other parties and made them stand out over the organizational wing in the movement. In the 1983 campaign the new Peronist leaders, mostly trade unionists and conservative politicians, tried to bring in the *caudillo* element, but their aggressiveness and in-fighting frustrated their endeavor. Later, after the very short period during which the Renovación tried to organize Justicialismo as a modern party with greater emphasis on organizational aspects, the charismatic factor prevailed over the institutional party.

No doubt Menem's emergence was influenced by the situation of the country at that time. The gravity of the crisis of early 1989 in Argentina appears to

demonstrate Madsen and Snow's hypothesis about the causal relationship between social instability and the emergence of a charismatic phenomenon. Menem's ascent took place at a time of intense social and political chaos in which worrisome economic indicators joined dramatic moments of social disorder. In view of the tarnishing of the armed forces' image, a military coup was unthinkable, such that only a politician could begin the process of reconstruction in Argentina. In other words, there was a favorable environment for the emergence of a charismatic power led by a *caudillo* capable of persuading the people that democracy was still viable.

Unquestionably, Menem more than Angeloz personified that *caudillo*, or savior. His conciliatory and hopeful tone, his metaphor-filled and idealistic rhetoric, was a breath of fresh air for the worried Argentineans. Public opinion polls recognized Menem's charisma and related characteristics. His charisma seemed to be related to his triumph at the polls.

In sum, Menem's ascent to the presidency may be considered as that of a pseudo- or quasi-charismatic leader. His political triumph must be ascribed to his particular political style and to a grave historical turning point that fostered the arrival of a credible leader who could promise peace and encourage faith and hope in a country that called for political leadership.

Menem's rise to national political power in Argentina demonstrates that the transition to democracy in Latin America that began in the 1980s took different shapes. In Argentina and Perú, for example, constitutional governments labeled as "progressive," like those of Alfonsín and Alan García, were followed by more "conservative" but not entirely "populist" ones that applied neoliberal prescriptions to solve economic problems. As Cavarozzi noted, they were new leaders who did not find support in the traditional party apparatus and who had a personalistic style that would minimize the action of political parties in the management of public affairs. Not only Menem but also Fujimori in Peru and Collor de Mello in Brazil fall into this category.

In the last two decades Argentina has witnessed the emergence of two kinds of platforms: the "rational," "modern," and "progressive" platform of Alfonsín; and the "emotional" and "romantic" platform of Menem. This paper's analysis of Menem's ascent and a pending study of his term in office are necessary contributions to our knowledge of the diverse characteristics of the transition to and consolidation of democracy in Latin America.

### Notes

1. For an analysis of the generation that followed Alfonsín during his rise to power, see Leuco and Díaz, *Los herederos de Alfonsín*.
2. For an analysis of the Alfonsín campaign, see Borrini, *Cómo se hace un*

*presidente.*

3. For a summary of opinions expressed in the Italian, Spanish, and American press, see *Tiempo Argentino* (Buenos Aires), 2 November 1983, pp. 8-9. For the interpretation of two prestigious reporters of the time, Raúl Burzaco and Jorge Lozano, see *Tiempo Argentino*, 6 November 1983, p. 9, and 9 November 1983, p. 4. For the viewpoint of two academics, Natalio Botana and Carlos Floria, see *La Nación* (Buenos Aires), 1 November 1983, p. 7, and 3 November 1983, p. 9. For the opinion of a newspaper that traditionally opposed Peronism, see *La Nación*, 1 November 1983, p. 6.

4. See *El Cronista Comercial* (Buenos Aires), 15 May 1989, p. 2, and 19 May 1989, p. 10, and *El Despertador* (Buenos Aires), July 1989, pp. 14, 21. The latter was a Peronist magazine aligned with the followers of Antonio Cafiero, the Peronist governor of the Province of Buenos Aires.

5. Among journalistic works the following deserve mention: Leuco and Díaz, *El heredero de Perón*; Cerruti and Ciangolini, *El octavo círculo*; Giussani, *Menem, su lógica secreta*; Cerruti, *El Jefe*; Dahia and Haimovichi, *Menem y su entorno*. Among academic works, see Cavarozzi y Braun, "Argentine Parties under Alfonsín"; and Cavarozzi and Landi: "Political Parties under Alfonsín and Menem"; Manzetti *Institutions, Parties and Coalitions in Argentine Politics*; Cavarozzi, "Politics."

6. For a discussion of the concept of rationality in sociological works, see Benn and Mortimer, *Rationality and the Social Sciences*. For a sociological analysis with an anthropological orientation, see Wilson *Rationality*; and Hollis and Luke *s Rationality and Relativism*.

7. Weber, *Economía y sociedad*, pp. 93-204.

8. *Ibid.*, p.195

9. Willner *The Spellbinders*, p. 8.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

11. Madsen and Snow, *The Charismatic Bond*, p. 14.

12. See Calvert and Calvert, *Argentina*, p.80.

13. For an analysis of the interpretations of Peronism, see de Ipola "Ruptura y continuidad"; and Plotkin, "Perón y el peronismo."

14. *Ibid.*, p.128.

15. Among the authors who have studied the charismatic component of Peronism, see, apart from the work of Madsen and Snow, Butler "Charisma, Migration and

Elite Coalescence"; Merckx, "Charisma in Latin American Politics."

16. This political trend within Justicialismo will be analyzed in the next section.

17. This is the thesis of Edgardo Catterberg and María Braun, among others. See "Las elecciones presidenciales argentinas de 14 de mayo de 1989."

18. See *El Cronista Comercial*, 2 May 1988, p. 8.

19. For various analyses of Menem's surprising victory, see *Clarín* (Buenos Aires), 14 July 1988, pp. 14-15; *El Cronista Comercial*, 11 July 1988, p. 3; and *La Nación*, 15 July 1988, pp. 1, 20.

20. For the analysis of several polls, see *Gente* (Buenos Aires), year 23, no. 1239, 20 April 1989, pp. 68-71; and Fraga, *Claves de la campaña electoral 1989*, pp. 55-68.

21. For a study of Perón's oratory, see Sigal and Verón, "Perón." For an analysis of Eva Perón's speeches, see Navarro, "Evita's Charismatic Leadership."

22. The *salario* was the promise to produce a dramatic improvement in popular wages. The productive revolution vowed to encourage productive investment in industry and agriculture to promote growth.

23. Willner, *The Spellbinders*, p. 152.

24. For an analysis of political discourse as an appeal, see de Ipola, *Ideología*; Verón et al., *El discurso político*.

25. According to pollsters, almost 80 percent of Argentineans considered themselves Catholics, 62 percent considered themselves religious, and 84 percent believed in God. See Carballo de Cilley, *Qué piensan los argentinos*, pp. 109-135.

< BR > 26. *El Cronista Comercial*, 7 July 1988, p. 5, emphasis added.

27. Leuco and Díaz *El heredero*, p. 42, emphasis added.

28. Pavón Pereyra, *Yo, Carlos Menem*, p. 300, emphasis added.

29. *La Nación*, 13 March 1989, p. 4, emphasis added.

30. *La Nación*, 12 May 1989, p. 14.

31. See Willner, *The Spellbinders*, p. 155.

32. *Discurso del Presidente...*

33. *Clarín*, 7 July 1988, p. 2, emphasis added.

34. Leuco and Díaz *El heredero*, p. 43, emphasis added.

35. *El Cronista Comercial*, 20 May 1988, p. 7, emphasis added.
36. *El Cronista Comercial*, 7 July 1988, p. 5, emphasis added.
37. *La Nación*, 10 July 1988, p. 22, emphasis added.
38. According to Verón, these are the supporters to whom the encouraging words are directed.
39. According to Verón, these are the undecideds, those who have to be convinced by the campaign.
40. *La Nación*, 10 July 1988, p. 1, emphasis added.
41. *La Nación*, 12 May 1989, p. 14, emphasis added.
42. *Página 12* (Buenos Aires), 9 July 1989, special supplement, emphasis added.
43. Quoted in Pavón Pereyra, *Yo, Carlos Menem*, p. 300.
44. *El Periodista* (Buenos Aires), no 235, 24-30 March 1989, pp. 20-23.
45. For an analysis of the end of the Alfonsín government and the beginning of the Menem government, see Morales Solá, *Asalto a la ilusión*; Borón et al., *El Menemato*; and Majul, *Por qué cayó Alfonsín*.
46. See Borón et al., *El Menemato*, p. 15, and Smith, "Democracy, Distributional Conflicts and Macroeconomic Policymaking in Argentina, 1983-89," pp. 27-29.
47. For an analysis of the responsibility ascribed to these economic groups in the economic crisis of the first semester of 1989, see Nun and Lattuada, *El gobierno de Alfonsín y las corporaciones agrarias*; and Majul, *Porqué*.
48. *La Nación*, 16 April 1989, p. 11.
49. *Clarín*, 6 May 1989, p. 15.
50. *Clarín*, 9 July 1989, p. 9.
51. Willner, *The Spellbinders*, pp. 42-53.
52. *Somos* (Buenos Aires), 26 October 1988, p. 6.
53. Cavarozzi, "Politics," p. 146.

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