

# Introduction

*Con la democracia, se come.*

RAÚL ALFONSÍN, 1983

In late 1983, following a brutal military regime, Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Party was elected president of Argentina with 52 percent of the vote, in a free and competitive election. An experienced politician and human rights lawyer, Alfonsín faced the challenge of building democratic institutions while revitalizing an economic system in ruins. He was an inspirational orator who argued that the democratic political system provided both freedom and the best means to assure economic progress. “With democracy, people eat,” he promised.

By 1989, as the next presidential election took place, the country’s debt-ridden economy was in hyperinflation. People were eating less, not more. Food riots broke out in several cities and soup kitchens were set up around the country. Democracy was not providing very well for the population’s material needs, and yet the electoral process continued and was supported. Alfonsín’s party was thrown out of power, but the democratic regime was not.

The new president was Carlos Menem, a Peronist who had promised a *salario* (a huge wage increase), a sound economy, and a “productive revolution” premised on “our absolute priority that every Argentine has a dignified job” (Menem and Duhalde 1989, 19). Six years later, Menem had indeed resolved the inflation problem, but had not delivered the wages, which remained, on average, lower than they had been during the first five years of the Alfonsín administration. While food prices were now stable, jobs had become scarce. The productive revolution had increased productivity, but joblessness

reached levels unknown in modern Argentine history. Polls during the 1995 campaign showed 70 percent of the voters considered unemployment the principal issue for the campaign,<sup>1</sup> and yet Menem won reelection even as unemployment soared. Afterward, analysts widely attributed the win to Menem's defeat of inflation four years before.

Why would past achievements against inflation override the apparent failure to solve unemployment problems citizens considered critical in the present? Why would inflation be a decisive issue, but inequality, poverty, and low paychecks not be? To pose answers to these questions requires asking more general ones: What considerations do citizens use in judging their economic goals and the government's performance? How do they balance their economic expectations of government with their nonmaterial ones? If people did not expect democracy to feed them, what *did* they expect of it? To what extent did materialist concerns affect their evaluation of the regime? And when they did not, why not?

Answering those questions for the Argentine case, or similar questions for other societies undergoing rapid economic and political change, requires a finely tuned understanding of citizens' perceived interests, both political and economic. We need to know how those political and economic interests are interrelated, and how political and economic contexts affect the perception of interests. This book examines the material concerns of those who objectively have considerable material hardships—the less affluent members of society—and analyzes the relationship between those material concerns and their political views. I argue that to understand how people's material interests affect their political views, we first need to understand how they think about their material interests. Perceptions about material interests are shaped by objective material conditions, access to mechanisms for coping with those conditions, and expectations about what conditions and coping mechanisms are normal in their society and their lives. Only once we understand these perceptions about material conditions can we begin to understand how those conditions influence people's ideas about what they want from the political system.

### **Research Method**

This study uses inductive methods and qualitative data to examine the relationship between perceived material and political interests. This relationship is explored through interviews with people of low to modest means in Argentina. Argentina had experienced dramatic transformations in the years just before this research. Both the political and economic systems continued to evolve rapidly, providing a case in which politics *and* economics could be ex-

pected to be highly salient to nonelites. The country has a long history of populism and redistributive conflicts that incapacitated and then destroyed its democratic regimes. This history of materially based grassroots politics, combined with the dynamic policy and political environment of the early 1990s, provided an ideal situation for observing the interaction between material and political interests at the grassroots level.

The heart of the data is a set of lengthy informal interviews with forty-one people, primarily during the first half of 1992.<sup>2</sup> (In further fieldwork in 1995, I was able to follow up with about one-quarter of those originally interviewed.) In order to understand fully the living conditions of those interviewed and the political and economic contexts of their lives, I included in the fieldwork observations of meetings of grassroots organizations, church groups, political parties, a public employees' labor union, and neighborhood groups, as well as eighteen brief preliminary interviews in two lower-middle class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. In addition, I interviewed over seventy political elites during fieldwork in 1990 and again in 1991–1992 and 1995. These included scholars, social workers, journalists, community organizers, elected officials, neighborhood party leaders, and social policy makers, among others. These interviews provided essential political, social, and cultural background, and a comparative perspective through which to consider the views heard at the grassroots. The appendices provide substantial details on the interview methodology, background information about those interviewed, and discussion of the specific goals of a qualitative research design.

Qualitative methods and fieldwork are powerful means to discover unanticipated relationships and to reframe basic questions. As an example, I should say that I did not start out to write a book on interests. The initial research proposal presupposed that people would be either materialistic, opposing politics that failed to serve their material interests, or idealistic, ignoring their material interests. Only in the field—by listening, observing, questioning, and then by reformulating my listening, observation, and questions in light of new insights—did I gradually realize that the question was not whether people thought materialistically or idealistically. Rather, the questions are: How do people think about material problems in their lives? How do they think about politics? And how, if at all, do they connect those two things?

Grassroots-level fieldwork was an inextricable part of the process of fine-tuning questions as well as finding answers. The concepts emphasized in this book—coping, subsidiarity, identities, contexts—differ from the concepts emphasized in works based on studying electoral outcomes or opinion surveys. The concepts here are those that arose in citizens' own discourse rather than those that citizens chose under conditions structured by others, such as voting

or polling. The concepts derive directly from hearing how people explained their lives and their political views. Fieldwork, and in particular, qualitative interviewing, is not merely a method of data collection but a process of discovering what the right questions are. The frequent and lengthy excerpts from qualitative interviews, which appear throughout this book, are intended to enable readers to hear and understand the complexities of the interests of the governed.

### **Why Study Nonelites?**

The last twenty years have been a period of vast economic and political change in the world, with democracies emerging, or reemerging, throughout Latin America; in southern, eastern, and central Europe; and parts of Africa and Asia. The change in political regime often took place amidst significant economic turmoil caused by foreign debts, inflation, and stagnant production. Consequently, democratization was accompanied by dramatic economic changes. Concurrent with the establishment of electoral processes and political rights, economies shifted away from state-led development and inward-focused industrialization toward market economies based on export-oriented production and a diminished role for the state.

The democracy literature is replete with analysis of the relationships between these economic and political changes, but primarily at the national and elite levels.<sup>3</sup> Research has focused on the economy and elections at national levels, as well as on the political parties, domestic and international financial communities, and bureaucrats who affect the state's economic and social policies (Baloyra 1987; Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1989; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Nun and Portantiero 1987; O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Remmer 1991, 1996; Sabato and Cavarozzi 1984). Not coincidentally, the focus on elites and institutions complements the procedural conceptions of democracy generally employed in these works. Democracies are understood as legally instituted processes that protect citizens' civil and political rights while assuring free and fair competition for leadership (Dahl 1989; Schmitter and Karl 1991). Starting from that definition, researchers naturally focused on elites, since they were the ones who engaged in competition for leadership or who had the potential to undermine citizens' rights.

If democracies emerge and survive due to competitions and decisions among elites, then why research nonelites? In particular, why bother to understand the ideas of the politically weak, the economically less affluent, and the less-organized members of society?

The first reason for studying nonelites is that the political and electoral

rights inherent in democratic processes are founded on assumptions of equality of citizenship (O'Donnell 1998). That means that weak citizens in a democracy have a claim on the political system equal to the claims of more politically powerful citizens and institutions. Therefore, the study of common citizens' views about how politics affects them will reveal something about the quality of the democracy. If we take democratic processes seriously, including their foundations in universal citizenship, then we must take seriously the political ideas and reasoning of nonelite citizens. This is a normative concern, but also an empirical one. Empirically, paying attention to the views of nonelites expands the narrow academic purview of what is politically meaningful. As Daphne Patai puts it eloquently, "There are no pointless lives, and there are no pointless life stories. There are only life stories we have not (yet) bothered to consider" (1988, 1). Political life involves not merely the means to power, but the consequences of the pursuit and use of power. Therefore, if political science is to provide a complete account of political life, it should "bother to consider" the impact that political competitions and policy decisions have upon the governed. Recent literature has studied that impact in terms of the objective effects of policies and the accountability of the powerful to the electorate. Largely missing from the literature is research on how people who are not in positions of power perceive and evaluate the effects of policies and political practices.

A second reason for studying the views of nonelites is that, as James Scott (1985) recognized with his pioneering work on the "weapons of the weak," those who are excluded from the institutions of power are nevertheless not irrelevant to political life, at either the regime or government levels. Nonelites are not the necessary and sufficient actors to either sustain or bring down regimes (Remmer 1991, 615), but nonelites create numerous interaction effects. They influence political life as consumers, as their plight captures the attention of more powerful actors (such as journalists or the Catholic Church, who advocate for the poor), and as part of the public support upon which politicians stake their strategies and policy choices.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing these forms of influence compels us to understand more about consumers, voters, and potential supporters of policies and politicians. For example, we need to understand whether the poor and the working class in Argentina share in the criticisms made on their behalf by small parties of the left, intellectual critics, and the progressive wing of the Catholic Church hierarchy.

The third reason to listen to how those without power understand and evaluate the conditions in which they live is that such understanding is the basis of future economic development. As Jorge Lawton (1995, 22–31) reminds us, the "people-centered" development called for by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) will only occur if the people "below" are full

participants in their own development. The only way to pursue development at the grassroots level is to take seriously the views of those at the grassroots.

A fourth reason to understand the views from the grassroots is that, while nonelites are relatively powerless compared to elites, the aggregate of their views *does* have political clout. In countries where voting is mandatory and turnout is high, such as Argentina, the lower classes have proportionately more electoral clout than they do in the United States, and politicians must seek their support actively. Understanding the methods by which individuals evaluate the political and economic conditions around them can help us understand the components of aggregated public opinion.

### Why Study Individuals?

On the issue of aggregating individual views, a few clarifications are needed. One way, beyond voting, in which nonelites have political clout is through social movements. There is a rich literature on these movements. Portions of that literature are discussed throughout this book when they speak to the question of how participation in movements affects citizens' opinion formation. The focus of my research, however, was deliberately on individuals' thinking, not on their collective activities. The individual, not the collective, is the citizen—the building block of a democratic society—and so starting from a concern with democratic citizenship, for reasons explained above, I am interested in the views of individuals. This premise is somewhat at odds with that of some leading scholars of social movements, who insist that the individual participants' attitudes do not matter: “We are convinced that movements are not aggregations of discontented *individuals*. . . . Collective action is a profoundly *collective* phenomenon” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988, 709). No doubt, collective movements involve organizational and social dynamics that make them *more* than the aggregation of dissatisfied individuals, but nevertheless, those movements must appeal to, as well as develop, the interests, reasoning, and identities of individuals, who are potential new participants and followers. This book examines those perceived interests, patterns of reasoning, and identities. Since one goal of the movements is to *change* citizens' perceived interests, patterns of reasoning, and identities, this book also pays attention to the sources of the individuals' thinking, their potential for developing collective identities, and, in chapter 3, to a potential obstacle to that goal.

In short, to assume that individual views have political relevance—both as motivators of various kinds of political activity, and as indicators of the quality of the democracy for its less privileged citizens—does not deny the separate

importance of collective action. Most political behavior (beyond the erratic and ill-conceived) reflects thinking: about one's interests, about how those interests might be achieved, about how political processes work, and what politicians' actions mean, etc. This thinking is the focus of the book. Without denying the importance of collective action as a fundamental phenomenon of grassroots politics, this book examines a different fundamental phenomenon, the views of the individual who may or may not be connected to any organized political activity, but who is affected by public policy and regime behavior.

An individual has the opportunity to respond to public policy and regime behavior in a variety of ways. As Dietz (1998, 14–19) has emphasized, these can be formal, such as voting or joining a political party, or informal, such as debating with neighbors, speaking out in the press, joining in neighborhood organizations or social movements, participating in demonstrations, or rioting. The individual may also respond by abstaining from any and all of the above. Some of these political responses involve collective action and others do not, but all have political ramifications. These responses differ, and *qua* behaviors need to be studied separately to understand the structural and contextual factors that determine the levels and kinds of public actions or inactions toward governments; however, by understanding how individuals think about their political interests, as I seek to do with this book, we have the building block for understanding the behavior that follows.

### **Advancing Democratic Theory**

The starting point for my study of nonelites was the rich literature on the poor of Latin America, which attempts to explain citizens' perspectives by identifying the ideologies, identities, rational choices, and socialization that shape attitudes and actions. Much of that literature was written before the democratic transitions period, at a time when very different political and economic ideas and structures prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Today, we need research that considers the views of citizens in the political and economic contexts of the "posttransitions" period.

Specifically, research on nonelites provides theoretical underpinnings for recent empirical observations. One of those observations has to do with the durability of posttransition democratic regimes in Latin America. Scholars widely expected that regime legitimation would suffer if the regime's economic performance were poor. During the regime consolidation phase, Karl (1990, 40) argued, democracies must "demonstrate that they are better than their predecessors at resolving fundamental social and economic problems" (also see Diamond 1992, 487). In a similar vein, Angell (1993, 566) warned that "in

Latin America, given the poverty and worsening income inequalities associated with the military regimes, it is important that the newly restored democracies demonstrate real concern with the needs of the poor, otherwise the long-term legitimisation (*sic*) of democracy will suffer." Haggard and Kaufman (1995, 334, 325) argued that over the long term, a democracy will not be able to maintain support from elites or masses without growth, which "can reduce the frustrations and conflicts resulting from inequality or other social cleavages, and thus can mute the tendency to political alienation and destabilizing social violence." Przeworski (1991, 189) wrote that "the durability of the new democracies will depend . . . to a large extent on their economic performance." Contrary to these expectations, democratic regimes have managed to survive poor economic performances across Latin America.<sup>6</sup>

One way of explaining these democratic survivals is to emphasize the importance of elite support for democracy. Remmer (1991, 793–94) argued that in the 1980s, an elite consensus in favor of democracy (and in favor of economic change) prevented the emergence of viable antiregime alternatives in Latin America, even in the face of poor economic performances. Others have pointed out that organized labor—the most likely political opposition to the austerity policies favored by other elites—did not pose a serious threat either to the elite consensus or to democracy itself (Geddes 1995, 204–6). Following years of military repression, labor was both politically weak and leery of any nondemocratic "solutions" to their concerns. The "elite support" argument makes sense. Given that intralite conflicts led to the breakdowns of democracy in the 1970s (Linz 1978), policy consensus among elites would have facilitated democratic stability in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet elite behavior is not the full story. Mass publics have also supported democracy. For example, a 1996 survey found that even while Latin Americans have not been particularly pleased with the quality of the democracy in practice, most preferred democracy to any alternatives.<sup>7</sup> In even greater numbers, survey respondents expressed willingness to defend democracy against alternatives. Lagos (1997, 134–35) offers two possible explanations for the preference for democracy being smaller than the willingness to defend it. One is that the survey question about defending democracy was misinterpreted as asking about willingness to defend the country. Another is that those who prefer some other regime may nevertheless be "benefitting from the current situation in their country and therefore, even if not altogether satisfied, might well be willing to defend it." Part of my reason for writing this book was to dig more deeply into this relationship between satisfaction with a regime, benefits from the regime, and support for the regime. In particular, I explore the extent to which dissatisfactions with the regime are rooted in economic conditions



and I explain the thinking of citizens who support democracy even though they are not satisfied with its practices and appear not to have benefitted economically under its tutelage.

A second way to explain the survival of democracy during hard times is to question the underlying assumption that a regime—that is, a system for governing—would be judged by citizens on the basis of its economic performance (Tironi 1989). After examining electoral outcomes during periods of economic crisis, Remmer (1991) questioned the notion that newer democracies were uniquely fragile and concluded that they did not have to prove themselves by economic performance to any greater degree than long-established democracies. Linz and Stepan (1989, 55–56; 1996, 76–81 and 439–44) argued that citizens could distinguish government effectiveness from regime effectiveness. Because democracy allows citizens to hold an incumbent *government* responsible for its economic performance, they tend not, at least in the medium run, to reject an otherwise valued democratic *regime*, on the basis of poor economic conditions.

These explanations beg many questions about how citizens understand and evaluate regimes. How, precisely, do citizens balance their materialist goals with other expectations of government? If citizens do not expect democracies to provide them with better material lives, then what *do* they expect of them? Through the in-depth study of grassroots political thinking, this book answers these kinds of questions and so provides an underpinning for the explanations of democracy's survival that have been offered by scholars of elite-level behavior.

The second empirical finding that calls for more theoretical underpinning occurs at the level of government, rather than regime. The finding is that neoliberal economic policies did not engender as much grassroots opposition (either in the form of support for opposition parties or in public protests and demonstrations) as had been expected. Governments who made clear that their priorities were to satisfy foreign investors and creditors, while they restrained organized labor, eliminated consumer subsidies, laid off public employees, raised sales and services taxes, or ignored growing inequality nevertheless won support among the popular sectors. Summarizing the political economy literature, Geddes (1995) concluded that democratic governments can get away with imposing painful economic policies because they have faced relatively weak opposition from citizens hurt by the policies. Indeed, neoliberals such as Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori and Argentine President Menem received substantial and reiterated support from poorer and lower middle-class citizens, despite implementing policies at odds with the ones on which they had first campaigned.

How can we explain the weak opposition? Part of the explanation is that

national economic policies affect the popular sectors in diverse ways, making concerted opposition less likely. Nelson (1992) described these differential impacts at a macroeconomic level. In chapters 3 and 4 of this book, I explore them at the microlevel of households.

A further explanation for weak opposition is that the popular sectors benefit more from neoliberalism (particularly from monetary stabilization plans) than its critics had anticipated (Rodrik 1994, 79–80). Nelson (1992) suggested that popular sectors want policy competence and will support governments that inspire confidence in a better economic future for them, even if those sectors have seen little improvement in the present. Weyland (1998b) used prospect theory to fine tune this explanation. He argued that citizens will “swallow the bitter pill” of neoliberal reform, when conditions are so bad that continuing with the status quo is more painful than taking the austerity “pill.” These explanations focus on the contextual factors and elite behaviors that individuals at the mass level consider in determining their position toward their government.

Initial research at the mass level has also focused on the national context in which citizens evaluate their economic positions. Stokes (1996) pointed to psychological expectations, such as optimism or pessimism about future economic conditions, which are rooted in the public’s reading of economic and political contexts. In a study of the 1993 Polish elections, Denise Powers and James Cox (1997) found that historical context explained why citizens did not prefer the communists, whose platform appealed to their personal economic concerns.

All of this literature highlights certain elite-created contexts in which citizens would evaluate elite-created economic policies. I too find elite-created contexts essential to understanding responses at the grassroots. So I examine a comprehensive spectrum of contextual factors that affect how people interpret their political interests. Yet I also show that contexts are only part of an explanation for citizens’ views, because individual members of society are not simply objects reacting to elite-created circumstances. First of all, people bring to those contexts objective material conditions. Their capacity to cope with material hardships without help from the state will depend upon the type of hardships faced and the resources and assets available, both through their own household and through their local community. Secondly, social and partisan identities will affect how people interpret national contexts. Thirdly, people have differing ways of interpreting the world around them—that is, they read contexts in different ways. These different interpretations fall into identifiable patterns. In sum, by examining contexts in conjunction with individual-level factors, I am able to show *why* people respond to contextual circumstances as

they do. The result is a comprehensive explanation of how nonelites with economic concerns respond to what political elites are offering.

### **Organization of the Book**

The first two chapters provide the theoretical and empirical background needed to understand the substantive research examined in later chapters. Chapter 1 gives a more detailed introduction to the arguments of the book. It begins with findings from two in-depth interviews from the fieldwork, which illustrate contrasting ways that people with severe material needs might think about politics. In both cases, a politically-active citizen ignores the relationship between national policies and his own difficult living conditions. The interviews serve to illustrate the central question for the book—what causes people to perceive or not perceive a relationship between government actions and their own lives (what I call the micro-macro linkage)? The rest of the chapter stakes out my position within the diverse literatures that attempt to theorize micro-macro linkages and their absence. I set forth an argument for the subjective conceptualization of interests and for analyzing material interests prior to political interests.

Chapter 2 provides a brief economic and political history. It demonstrates that the economic hardships faced by Argentines in the 1990s had developed over a long period of time—an empirical point that later in the book will become important theoretically. For readers unfamiliar with recent Argentine affairs, this chapter also introduces the players, conditions, and contexts to which reference is made later.

The next three chapters develop the argument about material interests. In these chapters, I dissect the experience of economic hardship in the lives and conversations of those interviewed, in order to explore how people understand their material concerns and how those concerns are taken into account (or not) as they think about the larger world of politics. Chapter 3 is a case study of a particular type of material hardship—deficient housing. It shows the complexities of housing interests, the political and nonpolitical measures that people take to try to improve their shelter, and the reasons why an objective material hardship, such as deficient housing, does not tend to be perceived as a political interest. Chapter 4 builds on findings from the housing case in order to analyze the nature of material interests more generally. I argue that people perceive their material interests not in terms of needs or quantities of possessions, but in terms of eliminating the stress, the exclusion, the constraints on opportunities, and the constraints on choice, which result from their particular material conditions. Chapter 5 outlines a three-part typology

of individuals' responses to the material conditions that constrain them. It then describes the measures that people take to cope with their material constraints, analyzes the political implications of a perceived "capacity to cope," and discusses the contextual factors that shape perceived coping capacity.

Chapters 6 and 7 are about political interests. Chapter 6 discusses perceived interests in terms of the government and its policies. It shows Argentines defining their political interests with the help of partisan and class identities and in the context of historical, economic, and political experiences. These identities and contexts shape their expectations and judgments about the past, present, and future. Chapter 7 explores how people think about their interests as they consider the democratic regime. It explains the extent to which, and the reasons why, democracy is valued in Argentina. Chapter 8 puts the findings of the earlier chapters into a comprehensive framework for understanding grassroots political thinking. It then examines the usefulness of this framework for explaining observations beyond the set of interviews and finds that the explanation holds up over time in Argentina, as well as in other cases of Latin America and Eastern Europe.