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**Working Paper**

## The Institutional Presidency from a Comparative Perspective: Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s

GIGA Working Papers, No. 259

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

*Suggested Citation:* Inácio, Magna; Llanos, Mariana (2014) : The Institutional Presidency from a Comparative Perspective: Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s, GIGA Working Papers, No. 259, German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Hamburg

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GIGA Research Programme:  
Legitimacy and Efficiency of Political Systems

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The Institutional Presidency from a Comparative  
Perspective: Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s

Magna Inácio and Mariana Llanos

No 259

October 2014

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# The Institutional Presidency from a Comparative Perspective: Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the evolution of the institutional presidency – meaning the cluster of agencies that directly support the chief of the executive – in Argentina and Brazil since their redemocratization in the 1980s. It investigates what explains the changes that have come about regarding the size of the institutional presidency and the types of agency that form it. Following the specialized literature, we argue that the growth of the institutional presidency is connected to developments occurring in the larger political system – that is, to the political challenges that the various presidents of the two countries have faced. Presidents adjust the format and mandate of the different agencies under their authority so as to better manage their relations with the political environment. In particular, we argue that the type of government (coalition or single-party) has had consequences for the structure of the presidency or, in other words, that different cabinet structures pose different challenges to presidents. This factor has not played a significant role in presidency-related studies until now, which have hitherto mostly been based on the case of the United States. Our empirical references, the presidencies of Argentina and Brazil, and typical cases of coalitional as well as single-party presidentialism respectively all allow us to show the impact of the type of government on the number and type of presidential agencies.

**Keywords:** Argentina, Brazil, institutional presidency, presidential office, coalition presidentialism, comparative political institutions

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# **The Institutional Presidency from a Comparative Perspective: Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s**

**Magna Inácio and Mariana Llanos**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 State of the Art
- 3 Data and Methodology
- 4 Conclusion

## **1 Introduction**

Presidents are undoubtedly the most powerful political actors in Latin American democracies. They enjoy significant policy-making powers in multiple policy realms as means to influence the legislative agenda, to control the allocation of resources, to appoint and dismiss thousands of different government officials, and to directly respond to the demands of their electorate. But even the most influential presidents need the political support and technical assistance of trusted advisors, technical staff, and government agencies. Students of the United States' presidency have shown that presidents have incentives for creating and strengthening technical, administrative, and advisory presidential support bodies both to confront

critical junctures – the modern US presidency emerged in the wake of the Great Depression – and to help face the challenges that are posed in a system characterized by “separated institutions sharing powers.” At the same time, scholars have also documented the increasing centralization of authority around the person of the chief executive and the steady movement toward the institutional reinforcement of the political core executive as developments taking place in most advanced industrial countries in the last forty to fifty years (Peters et al. 2000).

In Latin America the distinction between the executive leadership and the institutional nature of the modern presidency has not been addressed yet, despite there having been a significant expansion of studies on presidentialism. In this paper we begin to shed light on this underresearched topic by focusing on the presidencies of Argentina and Brazil since their redemocratization in the 1980s. Our study of the presidency concentrates on the cluster of agencies that directly support the chief of the executive, which in the presidential studies literature is called the “core executive” (Peters et al. 2000) or the “institutional presidency” (Moe 1993, 1994).<sup>1</sup> These offices are part of the bureaucracy of the executive branch, but they are not located within the executive cabinet; their defining characteristic is that they operate under the direct authority of the president and are in charge of supporting the presidential leadership (Dickinson 2005). Following the specialized literature, we argue that the growth of the institutional presidency is connected to developments occurring in the larger political system – that is, to the governmental and political challenges that presidents face (Moe 1985; Ponder 2012). Presidents adjust the format and mandate of the different agencies under their authority so as to better manage their relations with the wider political environment.

We observe reverse developments having taken place after the democratic transitions both in Argentina and Brazil, where the institutional presidency has at times been expanded and at other times reduced – and we thus inquire into the causes of such evolutions. These movements have not only affected the size of the institutional presidency but also the types of agency that form it. Regarding size, we borrow from Terry Moe (1985, 1993, 1994), and call “centralization” any increase in the number of presidential agencies. For Moe, a centralizing movement indicates a shifting of the functions of the wider executive branch to the core executive instead, while, conversely, presidents “decentralize” when they take agencies away from their direct authority and place them under the authority of a cabinet minister instead. Regarding the type of agencies, making changes to those under the presidential umbrella can affect their substantive tasks in terms of the provision of core administrative, policy, or advisory support (Inácio 2012). In the following pages we analyze the creation, transfer, and/or dissolution of presidential agencies, we compare how the blueprint of the institutional presi-

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1 In this paper we make an indistinct use of the terms “institutional presidency” and “presidential office” to refer to the group of agencies located directly under the president’s authority. Later on we operationalize the term “Institutional Presidency” (IP), which we use to refer specifically to all agencies under the president’s authority excluding the decentralized ones. More details on this are given in Section 3.

gency looks in Argentina and Brazil over time, and we search for what the causes are of the differences found between the two cases.

We argue that the type of government – a factor that until now has not played a significant role in presidential studies, which are mostly based on the US case – poses various challenges to presidents and, thus, impacts differently on the structure of the presidency. Our empirical references, the presidencies of Brazil and Argentina, and typical cases of coalitional as well as single-party presidentialism respectively all allow us to test the impact of the aforementioned factor. In effect, we expect to find greater centralization under coalition presidentialism because presidents must share cabinet positions, negotiate, and manage relations with coalition partners. In single-party governments, meanwhile, presidents can more freely assert themselves over the whole executive structure, in other words centralization should be less necessary. Similarly, we expect the type of government to affect the types of agency that form the institutional presidency, with coalition presidents building a more complex and varied presidential institution.

The literature on presidentialism, and particularly those works focusing on coalition experiences in Latin America, sheds light on the “executive toolbox” that is available to the different heads of state for building legislative majorities (Raile, Pereira and Power 2010). Our analysis highlights a specific tool herein that previous studies on this region have not yet explored: the strategic redesign undertaken by the president of the bureaucratic structures of the presidential office. It suggests that presidents can use the making of structural changes in their office as a tool with which to manage their relations with the wider political environment in general, and with the cabinet in particular. These changes are resources that the presidential leadership can use to complement or substitute other tools, such as agenda-setting power or pork and ministerial nominations – which are those aspects usually highlighted by the aforementioned literature (Figueiredo and Limongi 1999; Amorim Neto 2000; Altman 2000; Martinez-Gallardo 2012).

The paper is organized as follows: The next section presents the theoretical background to our study of the institutional presidency, with emphasis on the existing theories about the growth of the US presidency and with references made to the main features of the Argentine and Brazilian political systems. Following on, Section 3 deals with the research question, data, methodology, and the results obtained from our empirical study. Section 4 then concludes by outlining our pending tasks as researchers, and by suggesting what the implications of our work are for the agenda of presidential studies on Latin America henceforth.

## 2 State of the Art

There are three prominent explanations given for the emergence and growth of the institutional presidency: increased government responsibilities, the reassertion of the presidential

leadership vis-à-vis the political environment (Congress and the general public), and the more astute management of cabinet politics.

The expansion of the governance capacity of the executive to deal with major social and economic challenges is one of the classical explanations given for the growth of the US institutional presidency. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, but becoming particularly marked in the early twentieth century, the role of government both in the US and elsewhere began a steady expansion, with increased responsibilities coming therewith. This had a profound effect on the size and political role of the executive branch, giving rise to the bureaucratic state. The enlargement of the executive branch gave greater prominence and power to the president, but also brought about many problems because presidents were now expected to manage both all of their old responsibilities and new challenges as well (Mezey 2013: 99–103). According to this line of analysis presidents developed incentives for creating and enlarging technical, administrative, and advisory presidential support bodies so as to confront critical challenges (national security threats, recessions, popular unrests) and to handle increasing responsibilities, such as was the case for President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression (Pelikan 2005: XV). Exponents of this thesis are, for instance, Ragsdale and Theis (1997), whose model demonstrates that the growth of the presidential institution matches more the increase in government responsibilities and presidential workload over the course of decades than it does individual presidential styles or the political conditions under which they work.

Rasgale and Theis (1997) maintain that the rudiments of the US presidential institution began in 1924 with the creation of the Bureau of the Budget, although most scholars consider 1939 to mark the completion of the institution's formal creation with the founding of the Executive Office of the President (EOP), the transfer of the Bureau of the Budget to the EOP, and the creation of the White House Office within the EOP. Interestingly, the establishment of the EOP was contemporaneous with the beginnings of a presidential organization in Argentina and Brazil. In Argentina these agencies grew considerably under the *de facto* presidency of General Ramirez (beginning in 1943), who not only created the General Secretariat of the Presidency (with the status of a ministry) but also the Secretariat of Labor and Social Security (Bonifacio and Salas 1985). The latter was renowned for serving as the launching pad for Colonel Juan Domingo Perón's presidential career. In the case of Brazil, the strengthening of the federal government took place in the 1930s and the presidential organization underwent a remarkable change during these years. In addition to the General Consultation Unit, Getulio Vargas's government created the Civil and Military Cabinets and the Administrative Department of Public Service (DASP) that turned the presidency into a more complex organization. Although the changes had been carried out within the restrictions of a dictatorship, this internal means of organization was still retained by the presidents of the democratic period up until 1964.



A second thesis posits that the predominant explanation for the expansion of the institutional presidency is the president's need to influence policymaking. The post-Franklin D. Roosevelt expansion is thus portrayed as an attempt to mitigate the role of Congress in the appointment, dismissal, and oversight of government officials and to reassert a strong administrative leadership (Howell 2003). Terry Moe's take on the "politicized presidency" (1985) shows how presidents respond to limited formal authority and increased expectations of presidential power by structuring and staffing the bureaucracy in a way that makes the different agencies responsive to presidential dictate. Similarly, Rudalevige (2002) and Rudalevige and Lewis (2005) have argued that centralization under presidential authority is a presidential strategy adopted to overcome hostile congressmen and bureaucracies in order to implement new policy agendas. There have been many other works focusing on the impact of the president's political constraints on the institutional presidency. Dickinson (2000) connected the growth of the White House staff to presidential bargaining with Congress and to what occurred in the electoral arena. Krause (2002) found that changes in EOP expenditures are primarily explained by the institutional rivalry between the president and Congress. Dickinson and Lebo (2007) determined that it is primarily only the White House's staff growth that is affected by presidents' evolving political relations, while the advent of "big government" more generally is a more appropriate explanation for the growth of the EOP as a whole.

In Latin America, presidents count on a wide array of powers to improve governability. These strong constitutional prerogatives suggest the prevalence there of the president's own preferences and leadership style in the construction of the presidential institution. They also suggest that the Latin American presidency has a great ability to adapt (Huntington 1968) to changes in the political environment. First, Argentine and Brazilian presidents can resort to the use of important constitutional resources to negotiate the policy agenda with Congress, such as issuing decrees with the force of law behind them as well as total or partial vetoes (Shugart and Carey 1992). Second, while US presidents share authority with Congress over the appointment of cabinet members and other important government staff, most Latin American presidents only appoint such individuals by the signing of an ordinary decree: the organization of the executive and the appointment strategy is the presidential calculus (Amorim Neto 2006). Equally, they do not need congressional authorization to remove government officials from their job. Third, the US Congress also participates in the design and oversight of the most important executive agencies and all important social programs and government agencies require some sort of congressional approval. Although Congress must still approve major structural changes in the executive, the Latin American situation is looser. These features make us expect ebbs and flows in the agencies comprising the presidency in these countries, rather than a process of institutionalization. However, the Argentine and Brazilian presidents also preside over a system characterized by federalism, a symmetrical bicameral system, a judiciary with review powers, and multiparty systems that impede the

reaching of sufficient support for the president in the assembly – a far-reaching system of constraints that should induce the construction of some permanent bases of institutional support for the president within the executive architecture.

Finally, the literature has thus far been silent on the impact of the type of executive cabinet, a point on which Argentina and Brazil – as well as many other Latin American countries besides – differ. But there are good reasons to expect that single-party and multiparty cabinets demand different management skills from presidents, and that the political composition of cabinets affects the structure of the institutional presidency. In Brazil, an electoral system of proportional representation with an open list and no effective national threshold for representation in the federal Congress generates a highly fragmented electoral and legislative party system (Ames 2001), as a consequence of which all Brazilian democratic presidents have been minority presidents – no party since 1990 has controlled more than 20 percent of the seats in either the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies. In Argentina, Peronist presidents (1989–1999; 2001–the present) ruling during most of the democratic era have managed majorities and near-majorities in both chambers, although certainly not for the entire duration of their terms. To manage their minority status, Brazilian presidents have been running coalition governments since the return to democratic rule, except during President Collor's tenure (1990–1992). In Argentina, there have been technocrats, independents, and other party members participating as individuals in the cabinet, but a government coalition has only ruled for two years (1999–2001) since 1983. After the 2001 crisis that caused President De la Rúa's resignation, two successive presidents were elected by Congress to finish his term (Adolfo Rodríguez Saá and Eduardo Duhalde), the latter with the support of a broad multiparty parliamentary – and then also cabinet – coalition.

Thus, an important difference between Argentina and Brazil seems to be the distance between the preferences of the president and those of his cabinet. Brazilian presidents appoint ministers from different parties to comply with coalition agreements and cannot easily dismiss them without putting the coalition itself in danger. When cabinet positions are distributed to fulfil coalition agreements, the president's ministers are not his personal trustees – and he or she has incentives to grow the bureaucratic structure under their direct authority so as to coordinate and solve distributional conflicts among cabinet members. In contrast, Argentine presidents do not normally adhere to coalition pacts and can more freely exercise their appointment and dismissal prerogatives. Certainly, the distance between preferences may still be large concerning the presidential relations with other institutions such as Congress and the bureaucracies, but it should not be so pronounced as to affect the daily functioning of the cabinet.

In short, the centralization of agencies and personnel under direct presidential authority is a typical mechanism with which presidents the world over have responded to developments occurring in the wider political system (Ponder 2012). The growth of the institutional presidency has been connected to the need to confront critical contextual challenges and in-

creasing government responsibilities, political and institutional uncertainties, as well as cabinet management tasks. In the following empirical sections we attempt to estimate the relative weight of these different factors for the specific cases of Argentina and Brazil.

### 3 Data and Methodology

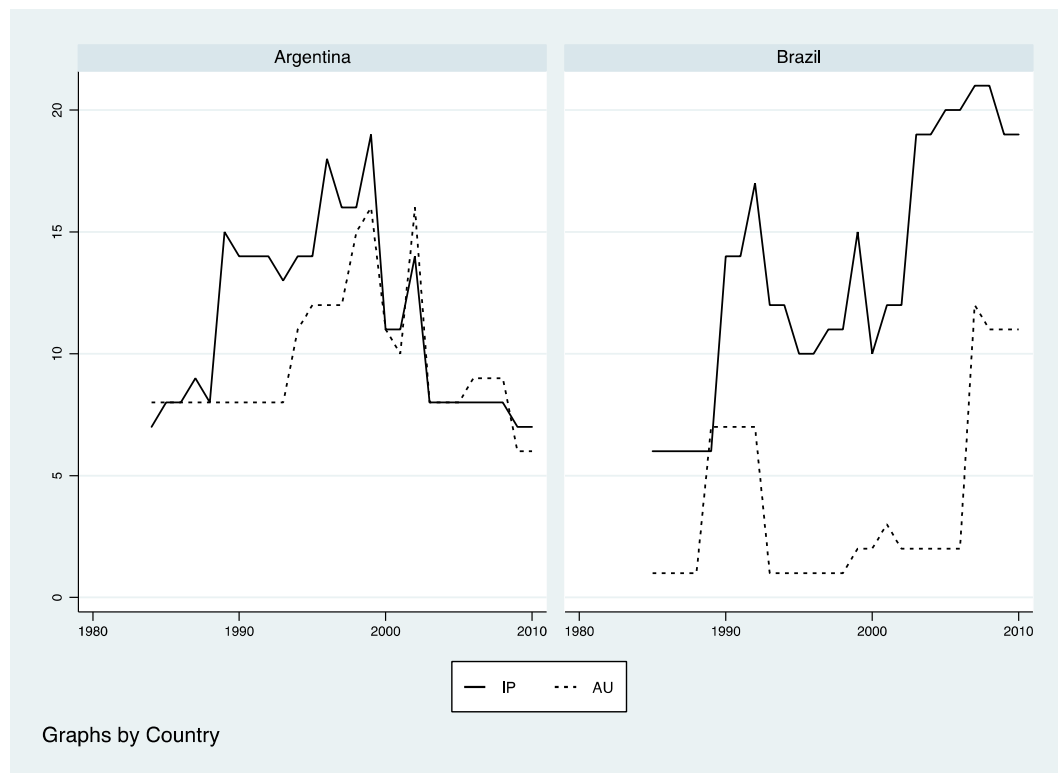
Contradictory trends of centralization and decentralization occurring over time have been intrinsic to the development of the modern presidency in Latin America and beyond. Some agencies survive several different administrations and become stable components of the presidency; others, instead, are soon abolished or are – more often – moved to other areas of the executive branch. Therefore, every year agencies of different types and ages coexist under the president's authority (Rasgale and Theis 1997). Graph 1 depicts the total number of agencies under presidential authority in Argentina and Brazil per year from 1984 until 2010.<sup>2</sup> There are two lines for each country in this graph: the dotted one indicates the decentralized (*autárquicas*) units (AU), that is those structurally subordinated to the president but with budgetary and administrative autonomy; the continuous line, meanwhile, shows the units belonging to what in the legal structures of these countries is called the “central administration” – which we, as noted, refer to as the “Institutional Presidency” (IP). In effect, for the purpose of this study we operationalize the institutional presidency (henceforth, IP) as the group of agencies directly located under the presidential authority excluding the decentralized ones.

The lines of the IP for both countries show a smaller and more compact structure at the beginning of the democratic period. Afterward, there is considerable annual variation – but as part of a more general country-specific tendency. The Argentine line moves up and down, while in Brazil there is a clear upward tendency. This happens also with the lines corresponding to the AU, which are comparatively fewer for the Brazilian presidency but also on the increase at the end of the period studied. It is clear that during the first half of the democratic period Argentine presidents tended to “centralize” agencies under their direct authority while in the last years they reversed this tendency, undertaking instead a process of decentralization. As we have seen, Moe's concept of centralization does not refer to types of agency. It just tells us whether a unit is placed under the president's authority or that of a cabinet minister.

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2 To count these for Argentina we relied on information concerning the national budget. According to this approach, a unit was considered to be such when it had a budget allocation. However, we also needed to resort to secondary sources because detailed budgets have only been available since 1993. Therefore, the graph includes information obtained from other authors as well (Coutinho 2008; Bonifacio and Salas 1985), particularly for the 1980s. For Brazil, we considered the legal provisions that distinguish the units of the presidency as direct administration (CA) and subordinated agencies, such as foundations and public companies.

**Graph 1: Number of Institutional Presidency Units and Decentralized Units of the Presidency in Argentina and Brazil, 1984–2010**



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The oscillations that Graph 1 illustrates have given way to different physiognomies for the two IPs throughout the years. In the following, we are first interested in exploring what factors have affected the size of the IP in the two countries and, second, in what types of agency constitute the IP. This is because, as our theoretical framework indicates, changes in the political environment should not only alter the size of the IP but also its internal features as well. In order to address these two questions we have conducted a two-step analysis: First, we estimated the effects of a set of political and contextual variables on the size of the IP by means of a regression model that is presented hereafter. Second, we undertook an exploratory qualitative analysis of the type of units composing the IP.

### 3.1 *The Size of the Presidencies*

In this section we are interested in the number of organizational units belonging to the institutional presidency of a given country for each year, which is our dependent variable (prunits in Table 1). The database contains 53 records of the number of IP units per annum: there are 27 entries for Argentina and 26 for Brazil respectively. This database includes six Argentine presidents (Alfonsín, Menem, De la Rúa, Duhalde, and Kirchner) and four Brazilian ones (Sarney, Collor, Cardoso, and Lula). In the following, we present the independent variables that we expect to have had an impact on the size of the institutional presidency.

These are related to the three general dimensions that were referred to in Section 2: president–cabinet relations (or type of government); president–congress relations (or the extent of political support); and, the president vis-à-vis the public’s support. We also included a variable that captures institutional changes during the period studied. Our assumption about the behavior of these variables is that the number of IP units will increase – or the institutional presidency will grow – in response to the constraints of a political environment that can be a potentially challenging one for the presidential leadership. To account for the dimension of type of government, we gathered information on the composition of the government. As explained previously, we expect coalition governments – and, particularly, a high number of parties in the cabinet – to have a positive impact on the size of the institutional presidency. In other words, political fragmentation within the cabinet, and its consequent spurring of demands for coordination efforts, should encourage the creation of support units under the authority of the chief of the executive. In order to better understand the impact of the internal dynamics of the government upon the size of the presidency, we considered the number of parties in the cabinet (cabpart in Table 1) – based on a count of the number of coalition parties that were part of the ministerial portfolio.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – Dependent and Explanatory Variables**

Variables	Obs	Mean	Std Dev.	Min	Max
Prunits (dep. variable)	53	12,3208	4,5942	6	21
cabpart	53	2,8868	2,5545	1	9
popularity	53	41,4068	20,4088	7	82
Reform	50	.5472	.1007	.3	.66
Dummies					
resignation	53	.0943	.2951	0	1
seats_dum	53	.5472	.5025	0	1

Source: Authors’ own elaboration.

Interbranch conflicts are one incentive for the expansion of the institutional presidency. In the US presidency-related literature, the logic underlying this reasoning is the shared power that both branches have to authorize structural changes and appointments in the executive branch – which in the case of a divided government scenario would give more power to the congressional opposition. To be able to implement his or her policy agenda in a restrictive political environment, the president may seek to centralize agencies under their direct control – thus enlarging the size of the institutional presidency. Congressional bodies in Latin America have less power over the executive branch than the US one does, but their approval is still required for major structural changes to be made. We included a variable that addresses the political support for the government in the legislative arena. We gathered information on the proportion of legislative seats controlled by all governing parties in the lower house and built a dummy variable indicating whether the president is supported by

a majority (more than 50 percent of seats) or not (*seats\_dum*, the last line in Table 1). The majority status was observed in 33.3 percent and 76.9 percent of cases in Argentina and Brazil respectively. We expect a majority status to have a negative impact on the size of the institutional presidency.<sup>3</sup>

Besides these two main political explanatory variables, we include a set of political and economic control variables that aim to measure the power of presidents (presidential leverage) in more general terms. First we considered the president's approval rating (popularity), measured as a percentage of positive survey responses ("great" or "good") in polls about the performance of the president. The variable presents the yearly average for such positive approval ratings, and should have a negative impact on the presidency's growth: a president doing well would not need to expand their support structures. Second, as presidential resignation is not an uncommon event in our data – there were five occurrences thereof across 11 presidential terms – we thus include a dummy variable (*resignation*) indicating whether the president assumed their position in the wake of a previous incumbent's resignation. Caretakers will not have incentives to introduce major changes, because they will try to avoid making disruptive decisions in a context of inherited conflict. Finally, alongside the political control variables, we intended to capture the impact of economic reforms on the expansion of the institutional presidency by means of the Structural Reform Index (SRI). The SRI is an average of partial indices regarding five policies areas: privatization, financial and trade liberalization, labor regulation, and tax reforms. The closer the measure is to one, the greater the degree of general market reform occurring in that country at that time. We expect the reform variable based on the SRI to have a positive effect on the size of the institutional presidency, because of the coordination efforts that are required to lead these types of reform.

We fitted population-averaged panel data models by using generalized estimating equations (GEE) with a Poisson error and link log. Below we report the estimated relative risks (IRR), standard errors, and levels of statistical significance (Table 2). In the final count, we worked with 50 observations because of restricted data availability regarding the reform variable (which did not cover the years 1984, 1985, and 2010).

Our measure for president-cabinet relations – the number of parties in the cabinet (*cabpart*) – behaves as expected: as the number of parties in the cabinet increases, so does the size of the institutional presidency. In other words, the size of the IP increases by 7 percent for each party taking a seat in the cabinet ( $p < 0.01$ ). These results support our hypotheses

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3 Certainly, this variable is not able to grasp the different compositions of those majorities – particularly the heterogeneous political nature of the large Brazilian ones. Alternatively, we created a second variable that only included the seats of the presidential party. The presidential party represents, on average, 46 percent of the deputies in Argentina while the presidents in Brazil have been supported by an average of 19.7 percent thereof. However, this variable is strongly correlated to *seats\_dum* and *cabpart* and we did not include it in the regression model.

**Table 2: Estimated Regression Coefficients and Standard Errors (GEE – Poisson)**

Explanatory variables	Relative risks (IRR)
Majority status (dummy)	.8215884* (0.084)
Cabpart	1.075624*** (0.021)
Popularity	.9981615 (0.002)
Reform	3.213858** 1.644
Resignation	.9194901 (0.163)
N	50
Deviance	45.80

Note: The dependent variable is the number of organizational units within the CA in a given year. Standard errors are given in parentheses. Coefficient estimates from the GEE regression model with poisson error and link log. Significance levels: \* : 10% \*\* : 5% \*\*\* : 1%.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

about the impact of the type of cabinet on the size of the presidency. The second dimension considered was president–congress relations, which was measured by the majority status of the government in the lower chamber. Holding a legislative majority decreases the size of the presidency by 17 percent, in line with our hypothesis – this effect is statistically significant ( $p < 0.10$ ).

Regarding the contextual variables, presidential popularity represented a negative effect – as we hypothesized. It suggests that a popular president has less incentives to invest time and resources in enlarging the presidency, and that he or she probably does not need a large structure of support backing them. Also, after a presidential resignation the successor centralizes less power and keeps a smaller IP than presidents assuming the position after regular elections do. However, the effect of both variables is not statistically significant. The relative risks posed by economic reforms show us that these types of challenge exert pressure on the presidency. An increase of one point in the SRI increases the size of the institutional presidency by 221 percent ( $p < 5$ ). Figure 1 summarizes the expectations and the actual direction of the effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variable, and the annual number of IP units.

In sum, presidents strategically respond to these different challenges by increasing the size of their offices. Particularly, the presidency grows with the increase in the number of parties inside the cabinet – a feature associated with coalition presidentialism. This shows that presidents need to enlarge their organizational support when their governmental team is internally fragmented. However, it also suggest that more parties in the cabinet implies less

**Figure 1: Expected and Actual Sign of Estimated Coefficients**

Explanatory Variables	Expected sign	Actual sign	Sig level
Partcab	+	+	***
Majority status	-	-	*
Resignation	-	-	
Popularity	-	-	
SRI	+	+	**

Significance levels: \* : 10% \*\* : 5% \*\*\* : 1%.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

resources for presidential patronage and that the presidential offices may be fulfilling this patronage function instead. This is something that needs to be explored more carefully henceforth. In addition, it is interesting to note that presidents have invested in enlarging their organization in order to implement economic structural reforms. This type of reform deepens the tensions within the government because it impacts on the supporters of the cabinet's parties. Our findings suggest that coalition governments pursuing structural reforms have more incentives to centralize functions and resources within the presidency. In the next section, we explore the types of agency that presidents have brought under their authority in Argentina and Brazil since the 1980s.

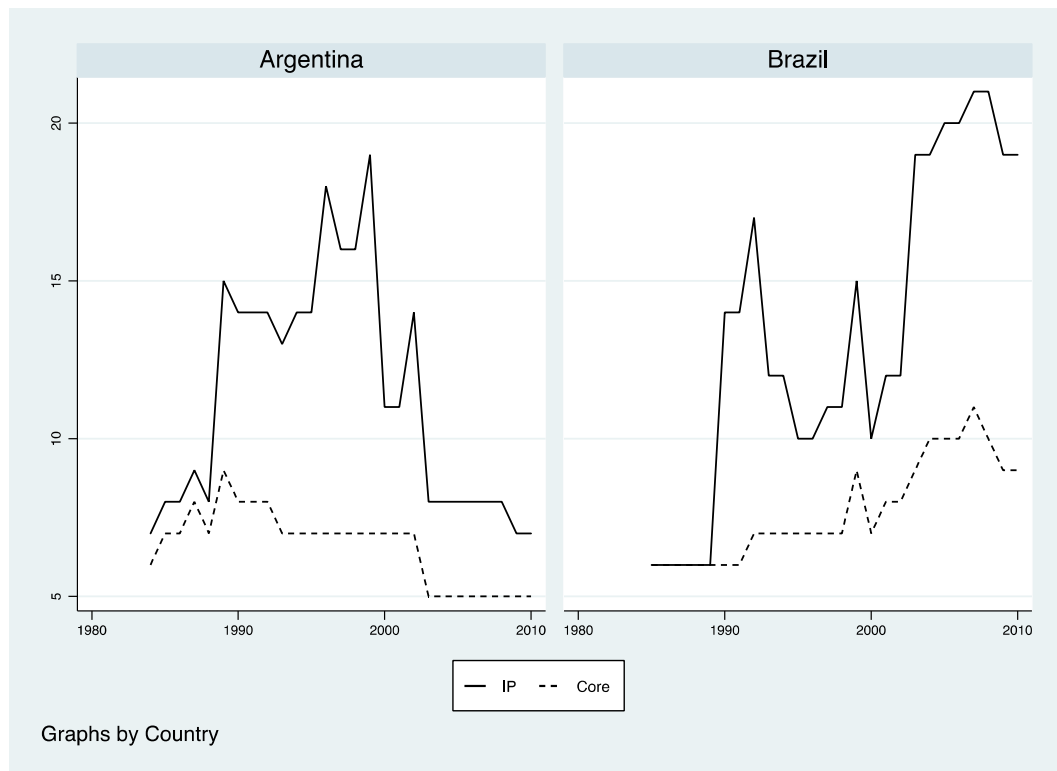
### 3.2 *The Weight of the Core Units*

In the last thirty years or so the presidencies of Argentina and Brazil have changed not only in size but also in their functions. Following Inácio (2012), we classify the IP units as core, advisory, and policy ones. The units in charge of managing the daily tasks of the presidency – namely those supporting administrative, legal, and institutional tasks – constitute the center or the core of the presidency. The presidential advisory system, which is gradually integrated with new councils and consultative bodies (technical chambers), addresses policy formulation and strategic agendas. The policy units are responsible for formulating and implementing specific policies (Inácio 2012: 9). This functional classification of the presidential units allows us to compare the physiognomy of the two presidencies studied here and to tentatively explore whether the type of government not only impacts on the size but also the type of units that presidents bring under their direct authority.

In the 1980s, the IP was basically constituted by core units in both countries (see Graph 2 below, which counts the total number of core units and the number of IP units in general). After that decade, the number of core units in Argentina remained stable while the size of the whole IP increased up until the end of the 1990s. The structure of the institutional presidency has followed a different pathway in Brazil. The IP was essentially formed by a small number of core units in the beginning, which afterward grew together with the other types of unit that were created by the Collor and Lula governments. Therefore, the downward and upward movements in practice mean that there were substantive changes to the internal organization



**Graph 2: Number of Core Units and PI Units of the Presidencies of Argentina and Brazil, 1984–2010**



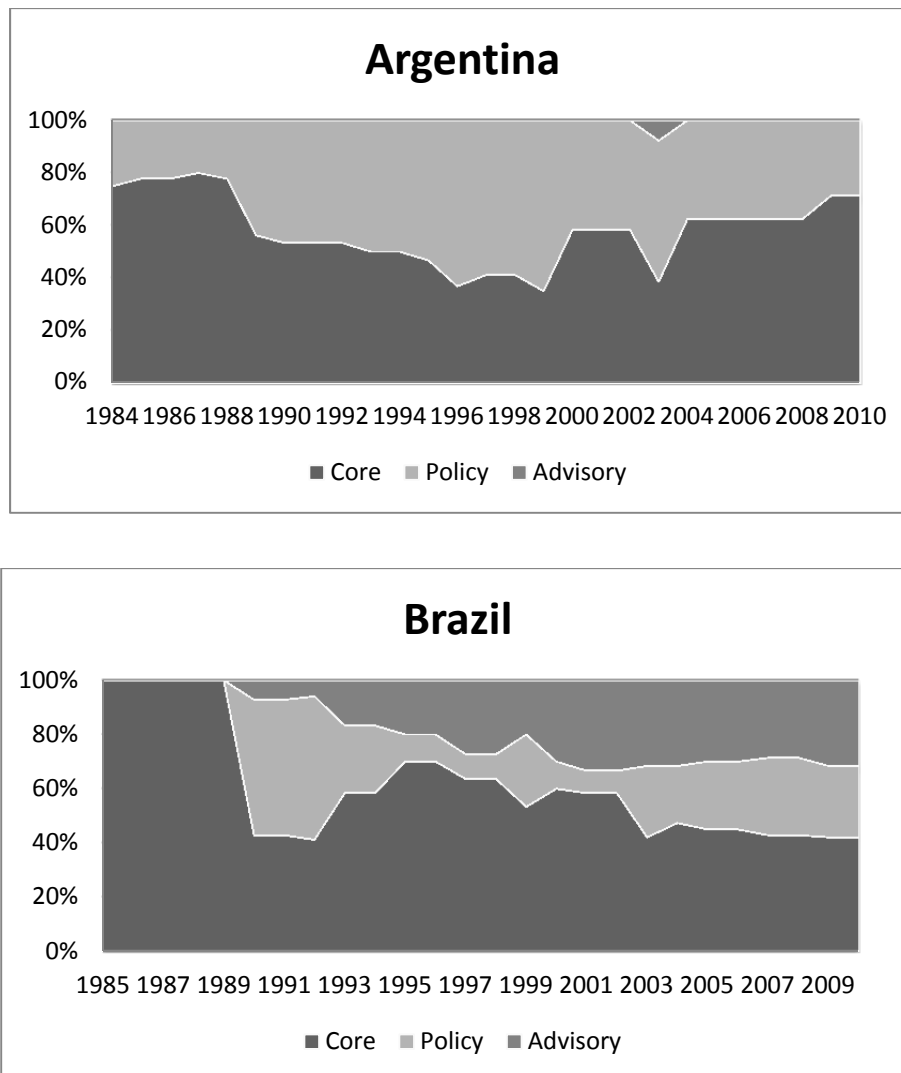
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

of the presidency. These trends involved the creation, reform, transfer, and/or dissolution of units responsible for strengthening the presidential capacities to monitor and formulate policy, as well as increases in the presidency's informational resources.

Graph 3 depicts the percentage of each type of unit out of the total of IP units for the whole time period studied, across both countries. The Argentine presidency was internally less diversified, with the units oscillating only between core and policy ones. We can see in this graph that the process of unit centralization taking place in this country in the 1990s mostly concerned policy issues. The new policy units did not necessarily cover crucial areas, but rather ones that mattered to the president: drugs, tourism, culture, science and technology, and social development. Many of them were abolished or reassigned to ministries during the following decade. The lack of advisory units is remarkable, although the core units contribute to these tasks in practice. The Brazilian picture is more diverse. The monolithic presidency of the 1980s has since been substituted by an internally differentiated and specialized institution. While the expansion of policy units has been attributed to specific junctures,<sup>4</sup> the creation of advisory bodies inside the presidency has in fact been a continuous process. The

4 This happened during the first year of Collor's and Lula's mandates. Collor carried this expansion out alongside the simultaneous abolition of several ministries, thereby centralizing functions and tasks within the presidency. Under the Lula government, meanwhile, the centralization of policies within the presidency occurred at the same time as the government increased the number of ministries (Inácio 2006, 2012). In particular Lula

**Graph 3: Percentage of Core, Policy, and Advisory Units of the Presidencies in Argentina and Brazil**



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

strengthening of the core units, by means of investment in organization and personnel, has coincided with the improvement of the informational conditions available for making presidential decisions. These advisory bodies are now in charge of providing specialized subsidies in priority areas.

Regarding the core units in Argentina, they have in essence included the General Secretariat of the Presidency, the presidential unit, the legal and technical unit, the communication and press unit, and the Secretariat of Intelligence (Alessandro 2010: 25; Coutinho 2008) – all units with a long-standing presence within the presidency. The General Secretariat endorses all the legal decisions of the presidency, while the legal area (Legal and Technical Secretariat) provides legal advice to the president, the chief of cabinet, and to the ministers that require

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centralized policy formulation and implementation in new areas, such as human rights, the promotion of racial equality, and women's rights.

it; it also analyzes the constitutionality of all legal decisions taken and, in general, centralizes all activities related to the legal decisions arrived at by the president. The three general, legal, and intelligence secretaries have the status of ministers. A similar structure, one with close functions, can be identified within the Brazilian presidency as well: the General Secretariat of the Presidency, the Office of Military Affairs, the Office of the Chief of Staff (Casa Civil), the Armed Forces General Staff, the General Consultation of the Republic, and the Armed Forces High Command Secretariat for Social Communication formed the initial core units in the 1990s. Following the redesign of the presidency in 1999, which culminated in the transfer of military functions to a new ministry, this core has since experienced a gradual process of rationalization in its structures, alongside the creation of specialized units supporting presidential actions in strategic affairs, institutional publicity, and internal oversight.

However, one important difference between the two countries concerns the relative weight of the core units dealing with the functions of coordination and management of the government in each. In Argentina, a couple of coordinating and management (media, civil society) subunits can today be identified within the institutional presidency; however, the important function of political management is not under the president's authority (Llanos and Mejía Acosta 2012). In charge of this instead is the Department of the Chief of Cabinet (Jefatura de Gabinete de Ministros), who is a figure with the status of a minister – having been decreed in the constitutional reform of 1994. The chief of cabinet (ChC)'s functions mainly concern interministerial coordination, congressional liaison, and the fiscal relationship between nation and provinces (<[www.jgm.gov.ar](http://www.jgm.gov.ar)>), one reason why the ChC has sometimes been referred to as the “coordinator minister.” Although according to the constitution political responsibility for the general administration of the country is reserved for the president (Article 99), it also establishes that the ChC is in charge of the general administration, the execution of the budget, as well as of other responsibilities that the president could theoretically delegate. The ChC and the different ministers are appointed and removed by the president, but the ChC is politically responsible before Congress and can be removed by a vote of censure cast by an absolute majority of both chambers (Art. 101).<sup>5</sup>

During the last ten years the Jefatura has undergone a complex process of institutional differentiation and is today composed of six secretariats covering notable activities of political management, such as those of Public Communication, Cabinet and Administrative Coordination, National Integration, and Parliamentary Relations. The original idea that the constitutional reformers had with the incorporation of the chief of cabinet was indeed the decentralization of the presidential authority through the creation of a figure holding parliamentary responsibility. In practice, the ChC has become a crucial presidential agent – particularly for activities related to political management. However, different from Brazil, this agency is located outside the institutional presidency and all the coordinating agents that belong to it

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5 All ministers, in fact, are capable of being impeached; such an eventuality has never happened in Argentine history though.

are directly subordinated to the ChC, not to the president. This institutional design presupposes that there is a perfect understanding between the president and his chief of cabinet.

By contrast, Brazilian presidents directly head all core units – which gives them more discretion and flexibility to define how and through which specific unit(s) they will manage the cabinet. Abolished under the single-party government of Collor, the role of the Casa Civil (the Office of the Chief of Staff) was later reintroduced and, since the mid-1990s, has become a major gatekeeper in agenda-setting processes within the executive. It has assumed a central position in the selection and review of bill proposals drawn up by the different ministers (and their parties). Similarly, it has enlarged its evaluation and coordination functions vis-à-vis governing policies as well as its control over any political nominations requested by ministers (Inácio 2012; Praça and Hoepers 2011). Different arrangements have been in place for the political coordination of the cabinet, but they have always been inside the boundaries of the presidential office and enacted through its core units. Centralized within the General Secretariat under Cardoso's government, this function migrated – and was expanded – to the Casa Civil. Afterward, under Lula's government, it was channeled to a new and specialized unit: the Secretariat for Institutional Relations. With cabinet management being the president's business, the centrality of the core units is a resilient trait across coalition governments. Furthermore, despite the expansion of policy and advisory units, the core units have maintained their own relative weight within the country's institutional presidency.

The evolution of IP units commented on above reveals important trade-offs between presidential priorities concerning the role of the institutional presidency. It is remarkable that single-party governments, as in Argentina and in Brazil,<sup>6</sup> have expanded the presidency by centralizing the management of ordinary policies that could have been led by ministries. Under coalition governments, presidents seem more selective in their decisions about what should be centralized. Because their decisions affect the rewards that coalition members receive, coalition presidents are more careful to add new policy units that might help reduce the scope of the various ministerial portfolios.

In short, the size of the institutional presidency does not reveal the whole story behind the differences between the presidencies of Argentina and Brazil. The focus on size and internal complexity does, however, provide us with a more comprehensive impression of the organizational basis underlying presidential power in these two countries.

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6 The Collor presidency, the sole episode of single-party government in Brazil during the period studied, enacted a deep centralization initiative by abolishing ministries and centralizing their functions into the hands of new IP units, alongside the creation of secretariats for implementing new policies. Under President Lula's government – the most centralized presidency in terms of governing coalitions – innovative policy units for dealing with new issues were created, but only for those left relatively uncovered by the jurisdictions of the various ministries.

#### 4 Conclusion

The main purpose of this study – an assessment of the impact of the type of government on the institution of the presidency – constitutes both a hitherto unexplored area of research vis-à-vis Latin America and an interesting agenda for the presidential literature in future. Although we still need to refine some of our independent variables – such as formulating a better measurement for legislative support, and an additional one for the type of presidential agenda being pursued – our analysis provides important evidence indicating that the type of government matters for the variations in the architecture of the two presidencies of Argentina and Brazil, regarding both their size and functions.

It has been shown in the previous pages that the development of the successful Brazilian coalition presidentialism was accompanied by a compact but highly functional institutional presidency there. To confirm whether such institutional features of the presidency are a condition of success in these regimes we would need to replicate the study beyond the two cases discussed here. For this, Latin America is a rich laboratory of both successful cases, such as Chile and Uruguay, and unsuccessful ones, such as Ecuador. However, we also need to explore in more general terms the effects of determinate forms of presidential organization on government effectiveness: in Argentina two enduring single-party governments in the 1990s and in the 2000s were accompanied by different presidential organizations and yet both were successful (as represented by a president being reelected in each case). It seems that the interaction between presidential agencies and the presidential leadership needs to be considered important as well.

One of the advantages of the study that we have proposed here is that the information on presidential agencies allows for the systematic comparative treatment of the different cases. Other complementary studies may choose to follow, for instance, approaches based on analyses of the profile of the agents heading these agencies (their professional qualifications, political origin, and closeness to the president) as well as comparisons of the size of the presidency in terms of employees and budget. However one limit to conducting such analysis is the availability of relevant information across countries and years, a problem that we experienced while undertaking this research. A more serious additional obstacle for comparative studies is the different level of institutionalization that we find in the respective presidencies of the Latin American region. It is foreseeable that, in some cases, the important functions that we described in this paper are in the hands of individuals, and not of agencies. This problem should not, though, discourage further investigations, but rather direct the focus toward the important topic of presidential institutionalization.

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