

# Bosses and Clients: Municipal Employment in the Buenos Aires of the Radicals, 1916–30\*

JOEL HOROWITZ

*Abstract.* The success of the Radical Party in Argentina under Hipólito Yrigoyen has frequently been attributed to the creation of an effective political machine. While the machine did exist, it cannot explain Yrigoyen's overwhelming popularity with many sectors. Such political organisations and client–patron relations flourished in many cities throughout the world. This article examines employment with the municipality of Buenos Aires, and concludes not only did governments both before and after Yrigoyen have similar policies but all major political parties shared in the spoils. However, they failed to reap similar political benefits. The roots of Yrigoyen's popularity lie elsewhere.

In the first decades of the twentieth century modern political parties emerged in several Latin American countries but few concrete studies have been made on how they mobilised support in urban areas. How did they appeal to voters and motivate them to cast their votes? This lacuna is particularly obvious in the case of Argentina's Unión Cívica Radical, the Radical Party, one of the region's first modern parties.

Clientelism and patronage are frequently used to explain the success of the Radical Party. However, aside from an article by David Rock some quarter century ago,<sup>1</sup> little real attention has been paid to this issue. What

Joel Horowitz is Professor of History, Saint Bonaventure University.

\* The research on which this article is based was made possible through grants from Saint Bonaventure University and a Research Fulbright Fellowship. The author would like to thank Tulio Halperín Donghi, Mariano Ben Plotkin, Torcuato Di Tella, and Thomas J. Schaeper for comments on earlier drafts of this work. Earlier versions were presented to PEHESA (Buenos Aires), the History Workshop of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, and the Faculty Research Colloquium at Saint Bonaventure University; the author would like to thank the participants.

<sup>1</sup> D. Rock, 'Machine Politics in Buenos Aires and the Argentine Radical Party, 1912–1930', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1972), pp. 233–56. See also D. Rock, *Politics in Argentina 1890–1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism* (Cambridge, 1975); G. Vidal, 'Los partidos políticos y el fenómeno clientelístico luego de la Ley Sáenz Peña: la Unión Cívica Radical de la Provincia de Córdoba, 1912–1930' in Fernando J. Devoto and Marcela P. Ferrari (eds.), *La construcción de las democracias rioplatenses: Proyectos institucionales y prácticas políticas, 1900–1930*, (Buenos Aires, 1994), pp. 189–217. I would like to thank the author for sending me a copy of this book. While not looking at the Radicals, see N. Folino, *Barceló, Ruggierito y el populismo oligárquico* (Buenos Aires, 1983) and L. de Privitellio, 'Sociedad urbana y actores

I propose to examine in this article is one aspect of political bossism, the distribution of jobs, concentrating on the municipality of Buenos Aires during the period of Radical hegemony. Compared to that of the national government the municipal payroll was more restricted but was still a relatively good source of jobs, especially for blue-collar workers, and because of the competitive nature of municipal politics the manner in which employment was obtained is sometimes visible.<sup>2</sup>

Although patronage played a significant role in acquiring political support, it cannot explain the Radicals' electoral success. Radicalism touched a cord in the hearts of a significant segment of the popular sector. The attachment of the party faithful to Hipólito Yrigoyen (president from 1916–22 and from 1928–30) is legendary and accurate. In 1916 the crowd detached the horses of Yrigoyen's carriage in order to pull it themselves, before he had the opportunity to become the centre of a giant web of patronage. Many of the popular classes remained loyal despite the slaughter of workers in 1919 in Buenos Aires and in 1921–2 in Patagonia. As Matthew Karush has demonstrated, the Radical Party in Rosario created a dynamic attachment to the organisation through the carefully crafted discourse of Ricardo Caballero.<sup>3</sup> Giving someone a job may produce support but it is unlikely to go beyond that. When they could, all parties participated in patronage politics though it was always considered less than legitimate.

The Anti-Personalist Radicals (anti-Yrigoyenist) under the presidency of Marcelo T. de Alvear (1922–8) pursued a patron policy similar to that of Yrigoyen and yet failed to win a wide electoral base in Buenos Aires. The giving of jobs could not outweigh the personal attachments to Yrigoyen that had already been formed. Yrigoyen's popularity was anchored partially on *obrerismo*, the vague but practical policy of attracting working class support through both symbolic and concrete actions, nationalism and the drive for an open political system. There also existed a perception that Yrigoyen's entourage represented a break with political

---

políticos en Buenos Aires: El 'partido' independiente en 1931', *Boletín del Instituto Ravignani*, Tercera Serie, 9, (1er semestre de 1994), pp. 75–96.

<sup>2</sup> The records of the Radical clubs, if they still exist, are unavailable or of little value for this type of discussion. Mar del Plata is one of the few places where records exist. E. Pastoriza and R. Rodríguez, 'El radicalismo perdedor. Las bases sociales de la UCR en el municipio de General Pueyrredón en la década de 1920', in *La construcción de las democracias rioplatenses*, pp. 247–68. Another, Berisso, whose records were generously lent me by Mirta Zaida Lobato, contains no information of this type.

<sup>3</sup> For the events of 1919 and 1921, see for example J. Godio, *La semana trágica: de enero de 1919* (Buenos Aires, 1985) and O. Bayer, *La Patagonia rebelde* (Mexico, 1980). M. Karush, 'Workers, Citizens and the Argentine Nation: Party Politics and the Working Class in Rosario, 1912–3' in this issue of *Journal of Latin American Studies*.

domination by the elite, allowing for the rise of the ‘self-made man’. Alvear and many of his key followers were perceived as being as much a part of the oligarchy as the Conservatives who had been displaced by the Radicals, though the class difference between Alvear’s cabinets and those during Yrigoyen’s first term was actually quite small.

The conundrum posed by the insufficiency of political patronage and the establishment of client–patron relationships to explain the popularity of Yrigoyen goes far beyond Buenos Aires and Argentina. Although urban-based political machines grew up in many parts of the world, can the types of relationships created by these systems engender long lasting admiration and loyalty that can survive adversity?

### *Client–patron relationships*

Client–patron relationships have loomed large in recent studies of Latin America. They help to explain hierarchical relationships in which a certain level of reciprocity exists. However, not all such relationships are the same. A patron in a traditional rural economy is endowed with a degree of deference and a wider control of economic resources than an urban political boss in a twentieth century city could have. In cities, alternative sources of power exist, as do other sources of jobs. In rural areas the patron uses his or her wealth as the base of their power, though the possibility of tapping state power exists. Urban political bosses are part of a larger entity, a political party, and they have a finite goal – electoral victory – from which wealth and power flow. Their strength comes from success in political mobilisation, the delivery of votes, and their power rests on access through their party to the state.<sup>4</sup>

Urban political machines developed in response to several kinds of inter-locking needs. The rise of political participation created a need among elites to find ways to mobilise voters of the lower middle and the working classes in non-threatening fashions.<sup>5</sup> They wanted to tie the

<sup>4</sup> For differentiating traditional clientelism from its more modern urban variety, see for example, E. Gellner, ‘Patrons and Clients’, in Ernest Gellner and John Waterburg (eds.), *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (London, 1977), p. 5; L. Graziano, ‘Patron–Client Relationships in Southern Italy’, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 1, no. 6 (March 1973), pp. 20–2; L. Graziano, *A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Clientelism*, (Western Societies Program, Occasional Paper no. 2; Ithaca: Center for International Studies, Cornell University, 1975), esp. pp. 23–31; A. Weingrod, ‘Patrons, Patronage and Political Parties’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (July 1968), pp. 380–1; W. A. Cornelius, Jr, ‘Contemporary Mexico: A Structural Analysis of Urban *Caciquismo*’ in Robert Kerr (ed.), *The Caciques* (Albuquerque, 1973), esp. p. 140. For a discussion of the centrality of patronage in Latin America, see R. Graham, *Patronage and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Stanford, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> N. Mouzelis, ‘On the Concept of Populism: Populist and Clientelist Modes of Incorporation in Semi Peripheral Politics’, *Politics and Society*, 14 (1985), p. 332.

voters to themselves and in that way achieve their own political success. The potential voter had desires as well. In societies in which steady, well paying jobs were in short supply and in which the government was a crucial and attractive source of employment, the political boss or patron was a good source of jobs. Some authors have argued that political client–patron relations take place only in peripheral or semi-peripheral states and not in industrialised countries. Clearly this is not the case, since the industrial Chicago of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* or of Mayor Richard J. Daley had political bosses and patron–client relationships.

Political bosses appeared where there was rapid urban growth, little stability and groups that felt excluded from society. They provided jobs. As Simon Sabiani, a political boss of Marseille, said: ‘I will hire my friends!’ The political patron also intervened with the faceless bureaucracy for those who lacked the ability or the confidence to do it themselves, getting someone released from jail for a minor infraction or intervening in some other way.<sup>6</sup>

Patronage became important in big city politics from Chicago, to New York, to Marseille in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As in Buenos Aires, public employment offered stability in a world where there was little. In addition, cities grew very fast and needed numerous workers to provide even minimally acceptable living conditions. Increasing attention was being paid to public health. In our worry about the pollution produced by the automobile, we tend to forget the mess left by its predecessor, the horse. During the summer, street cleaning was a necessity, not a luxury. Therefore, aside from political demands, there existed extremely practical needs. The opportunity for the exercise in patronage was created by the lack of effective civil service systems.

What was reciprocal in all this? The patron (the boss) offers a job, intervention with the bureaucracy, or material help and in return the client gives his vote and general support. As William Foote Whyte explained about the North End of Boston, which he called Cornerville, ‘The Cornerville political organization can best be described as a system of reciprocal personal obligations.... Everyone recognises that when a politician does a favour for a constituent, the constituent becomes

<sup>6</sup> For the quote, P. Jankowski, *Communism and Collaboration: Simon Sabiani and Politics in Marseille, 1919–1944* (New Haven, 1989), p. 69. Graziano, ‘Patron-Client Relationships’, pp. 4–5; P. A. Allum, *Politics and Society in Post-War Naples* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 10, 209; Weingrod, ‘Patrons, Patronage’, p. 383; A. Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 132–7; S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, *Patrons, Clients and Friends. Interpersonal Structure of Trust in Society* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 191; U. Sinclair, *The Jungle* (first published 1906; New York, 1981); M. Royko, *Richard J. Daley of Chicago* (New York, 1971); J. M. Allswang, *Bosses, Machines and Urban Voters* (revised edition; Baltimore, 1986).

obligated to the politician.’ It is a reciprocal, if uneven relationship. As one of Whyte’s informants said: ‘A Republican governor will probably be elected this fall, and, in that case, if the Republicans in Cornerville make a good showing, the workers will get taken care of....’<sup>7</sup> The clientele provided votes and support in return for favours. Support could mean many things but probably included joining the party, attending at least some meetings and helping with election preparations. Although we do not have a great deal of direct evidence of this in Buenos Aires, such a type of obligation helps explain the extraordinary turnouts noted by David Rock in the internal elections inside the Radical Party in the 1920s. In 1927 60,000 people voted in internal elections in Buenos Aires, while the previous year some 171,000 voted in the municipal elections, and the Radicals won just 10,000 votes more than voted in the internal elections.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous people received jobs from the Radicals, and this relationship was, of course, hierarchical and asymmetrical, because the boss could give that job to someone else. However, the subaltern part of this relationship did not lack resources. Voting was secret and debts owed to the local *caudillo*, the ward heeler, did not necessarily translate into votes for a candidate. As a local party boss exclaimed in Montevideo: ‘I have obtained at least 50 pensions; I have gotten many people out of jail; I have obtained the installation of at least 30 telephones; and have helped at a minimum 30 or 40 people get jobs. But if they have all voted for us that I don’t know. As you know people are very ungrateful.’<sup>9</sup> This observation on reciprocity is not unique. Whyte heard a politician say to a rally: ‘Now they are going to show you plenty of finifs, sawbucks and doublesawbucks [\$5, \$10 and \$20]. I say to you don’t be chumps. Take their dough. You can use it. But then go in and vote for Fiumara.’ Whyte later observed someone, who had been paid to hand out literature by this opponent, telling his friends to vote for Fiumara.<sup>10</sup>

Buenos Aires political bosses operated in a competitive atmosphere in which there were numerous suitors for their clientele. The city’s citizens

<sup>7</sup> W. F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (4th ed.: Chicago, 1993), pp. 240, 86. Although the political culture that Whyte describes may seem far from that of Buenos Aires, I suspect that it was less far than one might suspect. Most of the people he observed were first generation Italian-Americans and therefore of a familial background not dissimilar to many in Buenos Aires. Also see, G. Vidal, ‘Los partidos políticos’, esp. pp. 190–1.

<sup>8</sup> Rock, ‘Machine Politics’, esp. p. 251; I. Bucich Escobar, *Buenos Aires ciudad* (Buenos Aires, 1936), pp. 217–8. Rock sees the large participation as a sign of deep involvement and the decentralisation of the party. I am not sure that this is true; the large number of participants might have been just fulfilling their clientelistic duties.

<sup>9</sup> G. Rama, *El club político* (Montevideo, 1971) as cited in F. Panizza, ‘El clientelismo en la teoría contemporánea’, *Cuadernos del CLAEH* (Montevideo), (Apr. 1988), p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, pp. 163, 169.

had options in finding help, in giving their loyalty, or in establishing a larger identity. Ethnic organisations – mutual aid societies and the like – proliferated. As Leandro Gutiérrez and Luis Alberto Romero have demonstrated, in the 1920s an array of neighbourhood institutions flourished and offered the resident aid and an identity. Fans or members of football clubs – such as River Plate or Boca Juniors – could claim an identity beyond that of their street or family.<sup>11</sup> A labour movement composed of competing ideologies enjoyed widespread loyalty, and this did not always exclude the political boss – many union leaders were syndicalists or anarchists and at the same time owed allegiance to a political party, such as the bakers' union leader who was an anarchist and a Conservative.<sup>12</sup> With the passage in 1912 of the Ley Sáenz Peña, voting for male citizens became obligatory and secret. The Radical Party, which had pushed to open the political system, rapidly became the dominant party in the capital, but it faced stiff competition from the Socialist Party and other political organisations. Bosses needed to continue to serve, and other factors might at times outweigh the services given.

### *The caudillo*

The local boss helped to find jobs and interceded with the bureaucracy or the police. He offered access to the cheap or free legal and medical service given by the Radical Party. The party also provided inexpensive food, the so-called 'pan radical'.<sup>13</sup> The bosses offered support in a society that provided little in the way of social services.<sup>14</sup> Their power came from connection to a political party that needed them to turn out voters. The party made sure that the bosses had the tools to do their work, and in

<sup>11</sup> The best book on the emergence of the Radical Party remains Rock, *Politics in Argentina*. For an example of the work done by L. Gutiérrez and L. A. Romero, see *Sectores populares, cultura política: Buenos Aires en la entreguerra* (Buenos Aires, 1995). See also, J. Suriano, 'Vivir y sobrevivir en la gran ciudad: Habitat popular en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires a comienzos del siglo', *Estudios Sociales*, vol. 4, no. 7 (2<sup>o</sup> semestre de 1994), pp. 62–3.

<sup>12</sup> O. Pianetto, 'The Labour Movement and the Historical Conjunction: Córdoba, 1917–1921,' in Jeremy Adelman (ed.), *Essays in Argentine Labour History, 1870–1930* (London, 1992), p. 157. Pianetto argues that this type of relationship based partly on clientelism slowed the progress of left-wing organisations.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, *La Epoca*, 19 June 1927, 5 May 1929; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, pp. 58–9; Rock, 'Machine Politics', pp. 251–3. Unless otherwise noted, all periodicals were published in Buenos Aires.

<sup>14</sup> It has generally been asserted that the boss system in the United States began to come to an end with the New Deal and the expansion of social services that could be obtained largely on merit. For an example of this, see contemporaneous observations of Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, pp. 196–200. However, machines and bosses lingered at least until the 1970s in places such as Chicago. Even faceless bureaucracies respond better to political pressure than they do to someone's rights.

return the boss expected his ‘clients’ to vote correctly and to help with the business of doing politics. The Radical bosses operated through the many formal and informal organisations that sprang up in Buenos Aires. Some of the neighbourhood associations that were supposedly politically neutral had ties to political parties, especially the Radicals, and some football clubs also had political links.<sup>15</sup> As in other countries, a few of the *candillos* had links to criminal organisations and undoubtedly financed some of their operations in this manner.<sup>16</sup>

Because Buenos Aires is the national capital, bosses had many opportunities for obtaining jobs for their clientele with the national government, but an examination of municipal employment is more manageable, and it was certainly important. The 1928 programme of the Socialist Party’s capital branch focused on municipal workers, and an editorial in *La Prensa* in 1930 commented on how the two branches of the city government competed for the favour of the municipal workers in their search for votes.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the United States, it is hard to find direct evidence that bosses had the ability to place clients with private industries, especially those regulated by the government, such as public utilities.<sup>18</sup> However, it probably did occur. Even foreigners shared the bounty of the government, despite being ineligible to vote. The mostly Spanish grocery store owners worked closely with the Radicals, presumably providing financial support in return for favours. In any case, even if foreigners could not vote, their sons did.<sup>19</sup>

While political organisations had delivered votes prior to the opening of the political system, the Radicals needed to create their own machine once they had their hands on the levers of power. Slightly over a month after assuming the presidency, Yrigoyen appointed as chief executive of Buenos Aires the president of the Radical Party’s organisation in the city and a special 22-person city council, the members of which were

<sup>15</sup> See L. Gutiérrez and L. A. Romero, ‘Ciudadanía política y ciudadanía social: Los sectores populares en Buenos Aires, 1912–1955’, *Índice*, no. 5, segunda época (Apr. 1992), p. 85; R. González, ‘Lo propio y lo ajeno. Actividades culturales y fomentismo en una asociación vecinal, Barrio Nazca (1925–1930)’ in Diego Armus (ed.), *Mundo urbano y cultura popular* (Buenos Aires, 1990), pp. 93–128; *La Internacional*, 22 Nov. 1924; *La Vanguardia*, 27 Apr. 1926; H. Sanguinetti, *Los socialistas independientes* (Buenos Aires, 1981), p. 36. In the United States political bosses used and developed out of clubs, see Royko, *Richard J. Daley* and Whyte, *Street Corner Society*.

<sup>16</sup> Rock, ‘Machine Politics’, p. 249; Folino, *Barceló, Ruggierito*. The latter is a discussion of a conservative boss. <sup>17</sup> *La Prensa*, 29 Oct. 1928 and 17 July 1930.

<sup>18</sup> Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, p. 200; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Rock, *Politics in Argentina* and ‘Machine Politics’; *La Vanguardia*, 26 Dec. 1926. For a different alliance, M. Ternavasio, ‘Sistema político y organización municipal. Santa Fe y la crisis del régimen oligárquico’, *Anuario* (Escuela de Historia, Universidad de Rosario), segunda época, no. 13 (1988), p. 430.

important party functionaries in the wards.<sup>20</sup> A good example of a Personalist Radical caudillo was Pedro Bidegain from the sixth ward, San Carlos Sur, who sat on the city council from 1921 to 1923 and in the Chamber of Deputies from 1926 to 1930. We know more about him than most of his peers because he replied to attacks in writing. Bidegain was born, raised and married in the district. At age 16 he went to work for the Ferrocarril Oeste, becoming a fireman and was on his way to becoming an engineer when he quit to go into business. He had belonged to La Fraternidad, the union of engineers and firemen. Bidegain was apparently less successful as a businessman, but he claimed only to have held a public sector job in 1922. When he started working for the Radical Party is unclear, but there were charges that he had previously collaborated with the Socialists and the Conservatives. He certainly began his Radical career prior to Yrigoyen's presidency. An opponent in the sixth ward accused him of controlling the local party organisation by padding the membership with Socialists and by using public employees as party workers. A key power base for Bidegain was the important football club San Lorenzo de Almagro, the 1924 internal elections of which could be pictured as a contest between Personalist and Anti-Personalist Radicals, and in 1926 Bidegain used the club's membership lists in the campaign for his candidacy for the Chamber of Deputies. He was also able to capture its presidency.<sup>21</sup>

#### *The nature of the City*

In 1916 when the Radicals came to power, the city of Buenos Aires still remained what James Scobie called a commercial-bureaucratic city.<sup>22</sup> It was the site of the national government, the most important university, the nation's principal port, and much of the railroad network opened like a fan around it. In 1914 around one-third of the city's labour force was employed in industry, but many workers still left Buenos Aires to work in the high paying harvests on the pampas. As industrialisation intensified in the twenties and as farmers turned to increased mechanisation, this

<sup>20</sup> L. de Privitellio, Chapter Three of unfinished thesis, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 'Los legados de la ley orgánica de 1882. La crisis del municipio decimonónico', p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> R. J. Walter, 'Municipal Politics and Government in Buenos Aires, 1918–1930', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 2 (May 1974), p. 182; P. Bidegain, *Mi radicalismo* (Buenos Aires, 1929); *La Internacional*, 22 Nov. 1924; *La Vanguardia*, 27 Apr. 1926; *Crítica*, 24 Jan.–4 Feb. 1929; L. de Privitellio, 'Inventar el barrio: Boedo 1936–1942', *Cuadernos de Ciesal* (Rosario), vol. 2, no. 2 y 3 (1994), pp. 118–20.

<sup>22</sup> 'Buenos Aires as a Commercial-Bureaucratic City, 1880–1910: The Characteristics of a City's Orientation', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 77, no. 4 (1972), pp. 1035–73.

pattern changed, but factory work often remained temporary. Many immigrants went back to Europe. Workers moved from job to job. Sometimes they did this voluntarily; other times it occurred because of the wishes of employers.<sup>23</sup>

Stable and well paying jobs with the government were therefore extremely attractive for blue-collar workers. By the mid-1920s the wages of blue-collar municipal employees were markedly higher than in comparable employment in the private sector. Conditions for petty clerks and other unskilled white collar employees became better in the city administration than on the outside.

Buenos Aires grew quickly during the first half of the twentieth century. In 1909 it had a population of 1,231,797, expanding to 1,576,545 in 1915, 2,413,839 in 1936 and 2,978,029 in 1947.<sup>24</sup> The municipal work force also increased rapidly; this reflected real needs, as well as the demand for jobs for supporters. Moreover, the political system of the city made it an ideal site for patronage. The executive power, the *intendente* or mayor, was appointed by the president, served at his approval, and had wide powers. He set the budget and had the right to make all appointments to municipal posts. The modern structure of the city government was created in 1917 when a new law establishing an elected *concejo deliberante* (city council) gave it the power to approve budgets and even the *intendente's* salary. Just as importantly, the *concejo* could make the *intendente's* life difficult by slowing key measures.<sup>25</sup> The council played a crucial role because the balance of power in municipal politics, unlike almost

<sup>23</sup> M. Johns and F. Rocchi, 'The Industrial Capital and Urban Geography of a Primate City: Buenos Aires at the Turn of the Century', paper delivered at the American Historical Association Convention, 1991, pp. 3, 5–7; R. Cortés Conde, *El progreso argentino, 1880–1914* (Buenos Aires, 1979), pp. 191–274; F. Rocchi, 'La armonía de los opuestos: Industria, importaciones y la construcción urbana de Buenos Aires', *Entrepassados*, vol. 4, no. 7 (fines de 1994), p. 43; M. Z. Lobato, 'La ingeniería, la industria y la organización en la Argentina de las primeras décadas del siglo XX', paper delivered at the LASA Congress 1995; J. Horowitz, 'Occupational Community and the Creation of a Self-Styled Elite: Railroad Workers in Argentina', *The Americas*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1985), p. 67; C. E. Solberg, *The Prairies and the Pampas: Agrarian Policy in Canada and Argentina, 1880–1930* (Stanford, 1987), pp. 96, 107–8; M. I. Barbero and S. Felder, 'Los obreros italianos de la Pirelli, Argentina, (1920–1930)' in Fernando J. Devoto and Eduardo J. Míguez (eds.), *Asociacionismo, trabajo e identidad étnica: Los italianos en América Latina en una perspectiva comparada* (Buenos Aires, 1992), p. 193; M. Z. Lobato, 'Una visión del mundo del trabajo. Obreros inmigrantes en la industria frigorífica 1900–1930', in *Ibid.*, pp. 218–9.

<sup>24</sup> R. J. Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires: 1910–1942* (New York, 1993), appendix A1.

<sup>25</sup> J. Horowitz, *Argentine Unions and the Rise of Perón* (Berkeley, 1990), esp. pp. 44–5; L. de Privitello, 'El Concejo Deliberante y el fomentismo en el municipio porteño: Historia de una relación conflictiva (1917–1936)', PEHESA (Buenos Aires), Documento de Trabajo, Apr. 1996, esp. p. 11; Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth*; A. F. McDonald, *Government of the Argentine Republic* (New York, 1942), pp. 415–25.

anywhere else in Argentina, remained divided between several parties. At no time between 1918 and 1941, when acting President Ramón Castillo dissolved the *concejo*, did one party control the intendency and have a majority on the council, and only during a single two-year period did any party have a majority on the council.<sup>26</sup> Although the party which controlled the presidency and thus the intendency claimed for its followers the lion's portion of the spoils and the right to purge opponents when regimes changed, it also shared the jobs with opposing parties. The reasons why spoils were shared, unlike in machine run cities in the United States, lay in the political structure. In the United States the paramount goal of a political boss was to control the office of the municipal executive, an impossibility in Argentina, since the *intendente* was the president's man. Even dominance of the city council was difficult given the nature of the electoral system and the distribution of power. Division of the spoils ensured political co-operation.

The spoils system had two primary functions from the perspective of the political bosses. First, it provided the workers for maintaining the elaborate party machinery: neighbourhood clubs, distribution of propaganda, attendance at meetings and rallies, etc. Secondly, job recipients provided votes. This was particularly crucial in municipal elections, where the small number of votes necessary to elect a member of the city council meant that those rewarded by a spoils system potentially had a major voice. The law governing municipal elections obliged male citizens to vote, just as they were in national elections, but unlike in national elections, some foreigners could vote, although few bothered. Despite the potentially wider electorate, turnouts were lower in municipal elections than they were in elections for national deputies. In 1914 more foreign than native-born males lived in the capital, and registered Argentine citizens represented just over 13 per cent of the city's population.<sup>27</sup> The low voter turnout, the reduced pool of eligible voters, plus the large number of parties contesting municipal elections gave importance to small numbers of voters. In municipal elections, the total of valid votes was divided by the number of open seats. This quotient was divided into the votes received by each party to calculate the seats each would win. Sometimes a fraction of the quotient enabled a party to capture a seat. In 1920 the quotient was 7,444 votes, but a party that received only 5,601 won a seat on the council.<sup>28</sup> The city's *secretario de hacienda* in November

<sup>26</sup> Walter, 'Municipal Politics and Government', p. 180 and *Politics and Urban Growth*, p. 214; Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, p. 44. The Radicals had effective control of the council and of course the intendency in 1929. *La Nación*, 16, 26 Apr. 1929.

<sup>27</sup> See law 10.240 in *Anales de legislación argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 1954) II, pp. 1039–40; Walter, 'Municipal Politics', p. 181 and Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth*, pp. 8, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Law 10.240 and Bucich Escobar, *Buenos Aires*, pp. 213–220, esp. 216.

1928 directed the heads of the sections under his authority to remind their subordinates of their duty to vote in the upcoming elections. The memo stated that employees were to present their voting books (*libretas*) to their supervisors to prove that they had voted; the supervisors were to submit to the Secretary the names and the reasons why employees had not voted. It may have been difficult to control how municipal workers voted, however they could be coerced into voting.<sup>29</sup>

Usually coercion was not necessary, since municipal workers had a large stake in the outcome. The city council not only set wages and established working conditions but also acted as a sounding board for worker complaints. Councillors spent inordinate amounts of time discussing these issues, and the workers and their families undoubtedly voted. Certainly one reason for the relative success in municipal elections of the Communist Party splinter led by José Penelón was his constant attention to issues dear to municipal workers.<sup>30</sup> The good treatment of municipal workers after the establishment of the popularly elected city council was due in large measure to the nature of appointments, to patronage. If a boss gets jobs for his clients, it pays to treat them well. The governing force in the city, the Radical Party, had a critical stake in such treatment, but so did other parties. They too had supporters in the work force and a say in the conditions, because of the competitive nature of politics and the *intendente's* need to work with the council.

#### *The hiring of municipal workers*

In an interview in the 1970s, Francisco Pérez Leirós – who dominated the Unión Obrera Municipal (UOM), the Socialist-controlled municipal workers union during the 1920s and 1930s – claimed that for a labourer to get a job with the city he needed a recommendation from someone in office and that posts were even sold. He is correct, but the situation was more complex. The large number of Socialists and even Communists who worked for the municipality indicates that recommendations came not only from the party controlling the executive branch. While a member of the Chamber of Deputies in 1942 and 1943, Pérez Leirós received numerous requests for employment, and he must have been able to place some of them.<sup>31</sup> Although the Socialists frequently protested the use of

<sup>29</sup> *La Prensa*, 1 Dec. 1928. In Philadelphia in 1970 I witnessed a local political leader pressing city employees to vote.

<sup>30</sup> See any of the session papers of the *concejo* while Penelón was on the council, Concejo Deliberante de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Actas del H. Concejo Deliberante*.

<sup>31</sup> F. Pérez Leirós, Instituto Di Tella Oral History Program, p. 29; Box 2, período previo al peronismo, Pérez Leirós Collection, Fundación Simón Rodríguez, pedidos de

patronage and called for strict adherence to regulations, they benefitted from the existing system. For example, in 1924 a Socialist council member questioned the large number of workers in the Dirección de Paseos, which had 217 supernumerary employees, but an opposing councillor retorted that 30 were Socialist militants.<sup>32</sup>

Municipal posts were sold. In 1925 *La Vanguardia*, the Socialist Party paper, claimed that a Radical Party boss was overheard complaining to the *intendente's* private secretary about the delay in hiring a worker and stating that those who had paid had gotten their posts immediately. According to the article, this was confirmed when the *secretario de hacienda* received a letter accusing a man named Roulet of offering posts as labourers for sale and of working through the *intendente's* secretary. After a fist fight between Roulet and his accuser the charges were proved, at least to the satisfaction of the paper. Similar accusations were later made against the national administration.<sup>33</sup>

Such sales undoubtedly occurred, but much more common was the gaining of municipal posts through political connections. Men and women received jobs as political rewards and sometimes lost them when political fortunes reversed. The UOM regularly objected to the connections needed to get a job. It complained when a group of labourers and masons who worked for the city as supernumeraries were fired on 17 March 1927, claiming that this could not have been for lack of funds since replacements were hired directly afterwards, but because the fired workers lacked patrons.<sup>34</sup>

We can see the system of municipal patronage at work in the Alvear administration's attempt to build a municipal union loyal to the Anti-Personalists that would steal support from the Socialists. This was part of a larger effort to build a base among workers distinct from that of Yrigoyen. Alvear's administration intervened massively to help the two railroad unions, the Unión Ferroviaria and La Fraternidad, improve conditions for their members and tried unsuccessfully to create a new union on the waterfront of Buenos Aires.<sup>35</sup> However, the government won little support, workers remaining loyal to Yrigoyen or to more traditional advocates of working class interests.

---

empleos, 1942–43. For a discussion of the role of Pérez Leirós in the union and the importance of alternative political factions, see Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*.

<sup>32</sup> Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 21 June 1923, pp. 944–5.

<sup>33</sup> Reprinted in *El Obrero Municipal*, Nov. 1925. See also, *La Nación*, 28 Mar., 4–8 Apr. 1930.

<sup>34</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Oct. 1922 and Apr. 1927.

<sup>35</sup> P. Goodwin, *Los ferrocarriles británicos y la UCR, 1916–1930* (Buenos Aires, 1974); Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, pp. 59, 64–67; *La Internacional*, 1926–27; *Bandera Proletaria*, 1926–27; Ministerio del Interior, *Crónica Informativa*, Aug. 1927, pp. 84–95.

Several key syndicalist leaders received positions with the city and they formed their own union immediately after attempts to win influence in the UOM failed.<sup>36</sup> The Radicals had worked with an Asociación de Empleados Municipales in the early 1920s with little impact.<sup>37</sup> Alvear's attempt had more success since the union that his supporters created survived until the 1940s.

The first evidence that the Anti-Personalist Radicals (Alvearistas) were appointing prominent anarcho-syndicalist labour leaders to the municipal workforce surfaced at a meeting of the UOM in February 1926 in which the debate centred around whether the union ought to withdraw from the syndicalist-dominated confederation, the Unión Sindical Argentina (USA), and join a new Socialist-controlled confederation. Several new UOM members who played a prominent role during the debate turned out to be new to the municipal workforce and to have held important posts in the labour movement. Accounts varied as to what exactly happened at the meeting, but the Socialists retained control and new union was created in mid-1927; eventually becoming the Asociación Trabajadores de la Comuna (ATC).

In 1924 and 1925 a series of prominent anarcho-syndicalist union leaders received jobs from the city, many of whom were said by the Socialists to have dubious reputations. The Socialists were, in turn, attacked for wanting to purge Radicals from the union. A number of the anarcho-syndicalist leaders had ties to organisations in the waterfront neighbourhood of La Boca, where the Alvearistas were making a major attempt to wrest influence from the Personalists and the Socialists, and where maritime and naval construction workers had suffered a major defeat in 1924. The Socialists charged that the syndicalists had made agreements with Radical *caudillos* to establish a new 'apolitical' union in return for jobs with the city. The Socialists also leveled accusations that the syndicalist leaders did not work on a regular basis. According to the UOM, in 1930 the ATC's secretary general had worked for the city for three years but half of that time had been spent on medical disability.<sup>38</sup>

Although the issue was clouded by ideological struggles, the charges that surface show how the patronage system worked. They also permit us to know who these leaders were and why they needed jobs with the city.

<sup>36</sup> This is parallel to the attempt made in the late 1930s to create a separate and presumably more malleable union among the railroaders. This effort was spearheaded by the then president of Argentina, Roberto M. Ortiz who had been a cabinet minister of Alvear. See, Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, pp. 140–4.

<sup>37</sup> See for example, *La Época*, 5–8 Mar., 1 Nov., 1922.

<sup>38</sup> See for example, *El Obrero Municipal*, Oct. 1925, Mar., Apr., Oct. 1926, May, July 1927, 1 June 1930; *Bandera Proletaria*, 13 Feb. 1926; *La Vanguardia*, 8 May 1927; *La Internacional*, 4 Dec. 1926; *La Acción*, 23 Apr. and 17 June 1927.

Many belonged to unions that had collapsed. (All the charges may not, of course, be true). The most interesting case is that of José R. Luz (there was disagreement over what exactly his name was and why he used different variations of it). Luz received a job with the city in July 1925, and he joined the UOM in January 1926, eight days before the controversial meeting mentioned above, in which he played a prominent role. According to his own account, he had worked for 18 years for various unions of anarcho-syndicalist tendency, many of them based in La Boca, including the maritime workers' union and the ship builders' union. In 1923 he was expelled from the Unión Obrera Local of Buenos Aires, the regional federation of unions, for accepting money from the organisation for days he did not work. He claimed a misunderstanding had caused him to take the money, but his opponents were less charitable.<sup>39</sup>

Another leader, Américo Biondi, had been active in the ship builders' federation, joining the union in 1906. He was apparently close to the Radical leader of La Boca and to Alberto Barceló, the Conservative boss of the nearby industrial suburb of Avellaneda. Biondi supported the anti-political position of his union and argued against it petitioning the government to pardon a union leader imprisoned for defying a government ban on publishing anarchist materials. However, with the help of the bosses of La Boca he convinced Yrigoyen to sign a pardon. Biondi campaigned inside the union against the pension law of 1923 which would have established pensions for many workers but which was opposed by much of urban labour, especially because of the role of the state. However, he was seen in the working class neighbourhood of Maciel campaigning for the law, and on 6 June 1924 Biondi joined the municipal administration as a pension law inspector with a salary of 250 pesos. He was laid off in December, undoubtedly because the unpopular law was never fully implemented, but the following month he received another municipal job paying 220 pesos a month.<sup>40</sup>

Alejandro Protti had been a key player in both the shipbuilders' union and the maritime workers' union. He had attended national labour confederation conventions, sat on the central committee of the syndicalist USA confederation and had been secretary of the Unión Obrera Local. He received his city job through a recommendation of a political boss who was a personal friend. By 1928 he was a foreman at the trash incinerator, when twelve workers accused him of using his post to help the ATC.

<sup>39</sup> *Bandera Proletaria*, 21 Sept. 1929; *El Obrero Municipal*, Sept.–Oct. 1926, Mar., May 1927; *La Vanguardia*, 8 May 1927.

<sup>40</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Mar.–July 1927. See also E. J. Bilsky, *La Semana Trágica* (Buenos Aires, 1984), pp. 102–3; J. Horowitz, 'Union and Employer Resistance to a Government Sponsored Welfare Program: Argentina, 1923–24', paper delivered at the Southern Labor Studies Conference, 1995.

However, Protti could not become a citizen since the police several times refused to grant him a certificate of good conduct because of his role in distributing anti-military propaganda.<sup>41</sup>

Other people who held key posts in the ATC had been appointed to city jobs at the same time. Sebastián Ferrer had been active in the anarchist union federation FORA V, and then was the secretary general of the USA, before joining the municipal workforce and the ATC. Pedro Milesi had attended the last congress of the syndicalist FORA IX confederation and been secretary general of the metal workers' union. He left the latter after a dispute over money. Milesi had ties to anarcho-syndicalism but had joined the Communist Party and had quickly been expelled as a police agent. Angel López had sat on the central committee of the USA. Manuel Monzón had been active in a railroad workers' organisation in Entre Ríos and been a key figure in a provincial labour confederation that had collapsed during a strike.<sup>42</sup> Others who received appointments had similar backgrounds, and it taxes credulity that both the *caudillos* who made the recommendations and those who actually made the appointments did not know what they were doing.

In the end, the ATC bet on the wrong horse; the Personalist Radicals swept back into power in 1928, putting the union in an awkward position. According to the UOM, the ATC sought an accommodation with the victors.<sup>43</sup> What is unusual about this incident is less the use of municipal employment to reward allies than the challenge to the Socialist-dominated UOM that caused that organisation to publicise the nature of the appointments.

In the normal course of events, the nature of municipal appointments is best seen during changes in regimes. Followers are rewarded, and when hostile changes take place, political enemies are punished or at least lose their jobs in order that the faithful might be rewarded. In a city council debate of 1923, a Socialist councillor accused Yrigoyen of placing people

<sup>41</sup> *La Confederación*, Dec 1927; *El Obrero Municipal*, July 1927, 16 June, 16 Aug., 1 Nov. 1928; S. Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino*, vol. III, (Buenos Aires, 1970), pp. 132, 150, 173; Policía Federal Argentina, Archivo General, Orden Social, *Extractos y diligencia*, 26 July 1928–26 June 1929, no. 3073, p. 18, *Copiadores de notas*, 26 June 1929–7 Oct. 1930, no. 1230, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, July, Aug., Dec. 1927; *Bandera Proletaria*, 6, 20 Dec. 1924; *Libertad!*, 23 June 1928; Marotta, *El movimiento sindical*, III, pp. 52, 68, 132, 144, 150, 173, 185; A. Cabona, 'Un homenaje y una reivindicación' in *Vida, obra, trascendencia de Sebastián Marotta* (Buenos Aires, 1971), p. 153. Partido Comunista de la Argentina, *Esbozo de historia del Partido Comunista de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1947), p. 52. I would like to thank Torcuato Di Tella for providing me information on Milesi. For leaders of ATC see for example, *Bandera Proletaria*, 2 Mar. 1929, 15 Mar. 1930.

<sup>43</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, 16 Nov. 1928, 1 Apr., 16 Oct., 16 Dec. 1929, 16 Jan. 1930. If the ATC had remained tied to the Anti-Personalists, they almost undoubtedly would have fared better after the change in government in September 1930.

in all types of posts because of their support for local Radical committees, with most appointments coming during January and February 1922, just prior to the April presidential elections. He accused the municipal *secretario de hacienda* of preparing his own candidacy for the Chamber of Deputies by dispensing jobs and thus obtaining the support of the party convention.<sup>44</sup>

The change in administration in 1928 from Alvear to Yrigoyen produced a major purge of personnel at both municipal and national levels. Six months into Yrigoyen's second term, the 'respectable' press began a campaign against Yrigoyenist dismissals. *La Nación* claimed that some ten thousand had been purged from the bureaucracy, of whom 500 were municipal employees. At least at the municipal level this is an underestimate, since figures from the municipal personnel office emerged during a 1932 city council debate on firings to show that during Yrigoyen's shortened second term 926 firings took place and 1,951 employees retired; many of them under coercion. The economic depression was not a factor, as 6,828 people were simultaneously named to municipal jobs, an increase of 3,951 employees. A similar pattern occurred during the military government that seized power in September 1930: 1,670 were fired and there were 2,455 retirements, while 4,204 new appointees were hired. Gregorio Beschinsky, an Independent Socialist councillor, claimed that two classes of people lost their jobs between 1928 and 1930: those fired because their positions were needed for someone else and those fired for political vengeance. During these two purges, the primary sufferers were those too closely identified with the wrong side. In the debate over those fired during the military government of 1930–1, the Independent Socialists, who had been a prime target, argued that those fired during the previous purge should also be reinstated. The Socialists, on the other hand, argued that 1928–30 was a period of ordinary *criolla* politics, but that 1930–1 was different. They had not been touched by the earlier purge, when many anti-Yrigoyenist Radicals or Independent Socialists could be targeted. By contrast the Socialists had been affected by the actions of the military regime, though according to Socialist councillor José Marotta, the majority purged were Yrigoyenist Radicals.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 21 June 1923, p. 947. A Radical denied the latter charge.

<sup>45</sup> *La Prensa*, 1 Dec. 1928; *La Nación*, 25–27 Mar., 21 Apr. 1929; *La Epoca*, 26 Mar., 2 Apr., 1929; Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 4 Mar. 1932, pp. 58–98, esp. 62–5, 28 June 1932, pp. 2213–32, esp. 2218. Other figures for the military period were also given, Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 27 Sept. 1932, p. 3066.

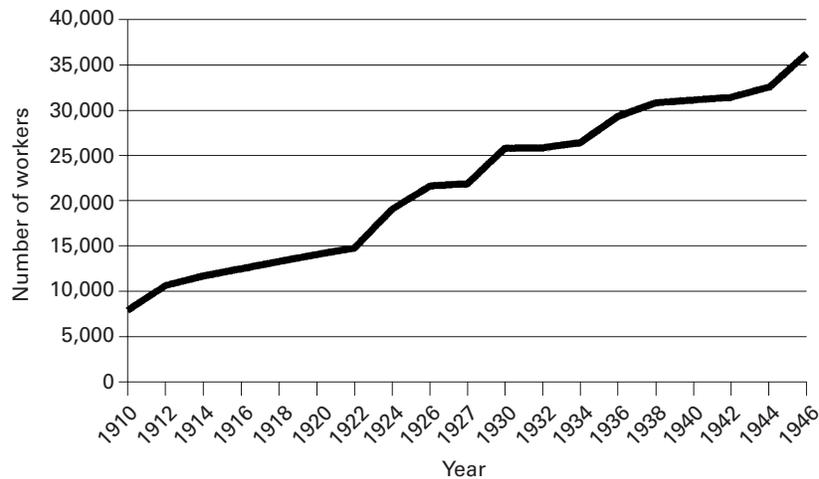


Fig. 1. *Number of municipal employees, 1910–46.*

See sources Appendix 1. I have made the increase between 1914 and 1920 consistent, because I lack the data for these years.

### *The municipal workers*

The unique relationship between the city and the national government limited the scope and size of the city's workforce. The national government controlled the schools, the police, and the waterworks, but whilst some three-quarters of the labour force was blue-collar, Buenos Aires had a wide range of employees. In 1926 the city employed 416 doctors, 91 veterinarians, 55 midwives, 35 engineers, and 13 architects, as well as jewellers, tailors, dressmakers and clerks as well as manual labourers. The UOM complained that the number of blue collar jobs did not expand sufficiently to meet the city's growing needs, particularly for street cleaning, despite the overall increase in the quantity of employees. Workers were frequently mis-classified and appointed to respectable white collar jobs but were paid as labourers.<sup>46</sup>

With one major exception, the ethnic composition of the municipal workforce resembled the larger population. According to the census of municipal workers taken in June 1926, 42 per cent of the workforce was Argentine, 20 per cent Spanish and 17.8 Italian. The only large anomaly, which points to the importance of a spoils system, was the 13.2 per cent of municipal workers who were naturalised citizens and could therefore vote in national elections. In 1914 just 2.3 per cent of the city's population

<sup>46</sup> *Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Censo de personal administrativo y obreros de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1928), pp. 22–3; Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 24 Feb. 1929, p. 207; *El Obrero Municipal*, 1 Aug. 1924, 1 Dec. 1929. The official classifications only at times reflected reality. See for example, Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 22 June 1923, p. 980.

was naturalised, while in 1947 the figure stood at 9.5 per cent.<sup>47</sup> The presence of large number of foreigners in the workforce presents an intriguing analytical problem. The worker hired may not be the one being rewarded for political loyalty; the worker might be a relative or friend of the person being rewarded. In addition, the non-citizen could provide services to the organisation at least as important as one or two extra votes. In any case, many foreign-born municipal employees were eligible to vote in municipal elections and may have done so. As we have seen, some jobs could be bought and therefore whether the person voted or not did not matter.

Despite myths to the contrary, employment mania and the spoils system did not begin nor end with the Radicals. As early as 1910, *La Nación* criticised the conservative government for engaging in ‘Empleomanía’. There were too many employees and costs were too high.<sup>48</sup> The sharp increase in municipal workers began before the Radicals came to power in 1916. In 1906 the city employed 5,353 workers and by 1914 there were 11,732 workers (see Appendix 1 and Fig. 1). The Yrigoyen years did not see a comparable rise, although the number of employees rose to almost 15,000. A real surge came under the Alvear government, with number of employees reaching almost 22,000. This clearly does not fit the traditional image of Alvear as being averse to such tactics.<sup>49</sup> The pace of increase continued during the second term of Yrigoyen, reaching almost 26,000 workers in 1930. Despite the common view that the Radicals were more given to the use of patronage than were the neo-conservatives, the patterns of hiring during the 1930s did not differ from the earlier period. From 1932 to 1943 the number of municipal workers rose some 23 per cent and stood at 31,846 in the latter year. The growth continued at an even faster pace during the military regime of 1943–6, increasing 14 per cent to 36,352 employees. Clearly, the Radicals were part of a larger political culture, and it would be difficult to attribute their relative success to a trait that they shared with all other governments.

Was the rapid increase in city employees just a response to the growing needs of a developing urban area? Buenos Aires, after all, had the reputation of being a clean and well tended city, at least in its central areas.<sup>50</sup> As previously indicated, the city’s population almost doubled between 1909 and 1936, while the number of municipal employees almost quadrupled. How did these numbers compare with cities elsewhere? In

<sup>47</sup> Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Censo de personal*, p. 31; G. Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición* (5th ed.; Buenos Aires, 1974), p. 281.

<sup>48</sup> R. Sidicaro, *La política mirada desde arriba: Las ideas del diario, La Nación, 1909–1989* (Buenos Aires, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, pp. 221–32.

<sup>50</sup> J. Bryce, *South America: Observations and Impressions* (New York, 1912), pp. 316–21.

1926 Buenos Aires had 1,121 employees per hundred thousand inhabitants whilst in 1925 New York had 1,122, Chicago 1,192 and Los Angeles 1,765. However, the comparisons are not exact, since the numbers for Chicago include all municipal employees (including teachers, police and firemen), while those for New York and Los Angeles exclude teachers, but include police and fire personnel, none of whom are included in the Buenos Aires municipal budget.<sup>51</sup> In 1927 there were 6,746 subaltern members of the Buenos Aires police force, or 342 for every 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> So the number of municipal employees in Buenos Aires was really much higher than in New York or Chicago. If one could include in such calculations other excluded groups, the ratio for Buenos Aires would be much greater than for comparable cities. The comparison with Chicago is particularly interesting, because Chicago had and has a reputation for being machine run and dominated by patronage, but Buenos Aires easily surpassed it in terms of the number of jobs available. On the other hand in the United States, many jobs would be hidden in the county and state systems, which had no parallel for Buenos Aires.

Still, in Buenos Aires the dominant party had access to an extremely wide range of jobs by virtue of being in the national capital with an increasingly centralised government structure. In 1928 for example, 1,012 firemen protected the city. Public school teachers were also national employees, and their number in the capital grew from 3,229 in 1908, to 5,222 in 1917, 7,644 in 1922 and to 14,434 in 1929 – an increase that was twice as fast as the rise in the number of students from 97,584 in 1908 to 232,377 in 1929, when the student-teacher ratio was 16:1.<sup>53</sup> Although the opportunities for patronage increased markedly this was not a totally artificial workforce. In addition, the government expanded its scope; the state railroad lines increased their mileage and YPF (the state oil company) dramatically expanded its production.<sup>54</sup> While much hiring was in the provinces or territories, employment in the capital increased sharply as the total national budget rose 97 per cent between 1914 and 1929.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Censo de personal*, p. 19; *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Aug. 1930, p. 43; L. White, *Trends in Public Administration* (New York, 1933), pp. 244–5.

<sup>52</sup> A. E. Rodríguez, *Historia de la policía federal argentina*, vol. VII (Buenos Aires, 1978), p. 170; *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Aug. 1930, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> Policía de Buenos Aires, *Memoria, antecedentes y datos estadísticos correspondiente al año 1928* (Buenos Aires, 1928), p. 41; D. Barrancos, *Anarquismo, educación y costumbres en la Argentina de principios de siglo* (Buenos Aires, 1990), p. 315.

<sup>54</sup> Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Dirección General de Ferrocarriles, *Estadística de los ferrocarriles en explotación, año 1935* (Buenos Aires, 1938), p. vi; R. M. Ortiz, *Historia económica de la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1974), p. 583; Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales, *Desarrollo de la industria petrolífera fiscal, 1907–1923* (Buenos Aires, 1932).

<sup>55</sup> Cámara de Diputados, *Diarios de sesiones*, vol. IV (1929), 15–16 Jan. 1930, p. 12A.

*Working conditions for municipal employees*

Perhaps the best evidence of the existence of a patronage system was the effort to improve municipal working conditions, especially salaries. It makes little sense to give supporters jobs and then treat them badly. As pointed out above, a political boss has no guarantee that his 'client' will stay loyal, especially because of the secret ballot. Some of the improvements occurred due to the efforts of the UOM, but that organisation's leverage remained limited. After the initial strikes that won it credibility, the union refrained from calling stoppages and depended on support from the Socialists on the City Council together with the trouble it could cause the municipal executive by publicising bad treatment of employees. The sharpest threat posed by the UOM, though, was its potential to expand the base of the Socialist Party. We have seen the UOM was enough of a problem that the Alvear government tried to displace it with a rival union.

During the last years of Conservative rule, despite the flurry in hiring of municipal workers, working conditions and wages were extraordinarily bad. In 1909, 46 per cent earned 60 pesos per month or less. The lack of attention to patronage is indicated by the large number of Spaniards who filled unskilled jobs. It is not that the Conservatives were above such activities, as they amply demonstrated in Buenos Aires Province, but since votes could be obtained by other means (frequently direct purchase) and the amount of political mobilisation was limited, there was little need to reward blue collar workers.<sup>56</sup>

The Unión Obrera Municipal was founded in January 1916 with close ties to the Socialist Party. Initially this did not pose a problem, as the Conservatives attempted to use the Socialists to block the rising Radical political influence in the capital. However, the municipal workers' conditions remained miserable: the 65 or 70 pesos per month that unskilled workers received was reduced by five per cent because of problems with the budget and was paid late. Suspensions and fines levied outside of regulations occurred frequently. Foremen often abused workers,

<sup>56</sup> Municipalidad de la Capital, Dirección General de Estadística Municipal, *Annuario estadístico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1910 y 1911* (Buenos Aires, 1913), p. 445; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, p. 133; Folino, *Barceló, Ruggierito*; A. M. Mustapic, *El Partido Conservador de la Provincia de Buenos Aires ante la intervención federal y competencia democrática: 1917–1928* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, Documento de Trabajo, 95, 1987). For the nature of politics prior to 1912, see for example L. de Privitellio, 'Los legados de la ley orgánica de 1882'; P. Alonso, *Voting in Buenos Aires before 1912* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, working paper 21, 1995); H. Sabato, 'Citizenship, Political Participation and the Formation of the Public Sphere in Buenos Aires, 1850–1880', *Past and Present*, no. 136 (Aug. 1992).

forcing them to pay bribes, and the rising cost of living further intensified tensions, leading to a series of strikes that occurred in 1916. The union was strongest among the sanitation workers, who were at the lowest end of the workforce, but were also able to make the most immediate impact. By leaving the city festooned in garbage, a third strike forced major concessions from the municipality: the abolition of fines; the eight hour day; the firing of an oppressive foreman; the rehiring of those fired during the earlier strikes.

Cooperation ended when the Radicals came to power, for which they blamed the Socialists, while the UOM blamed the new government. In all probability, the cause lay with the Radicals who were motivated by the desire to replace existing workers with their clientele and to weaken a growing Socialist beachhead (the union had some 6,000 dues paying members by the end of 1916). The *intendente* provoked a strike in 1917 by refusing to deal with union delegations, by paying salaries late, and by firing and suspending union delegates. The ensuing strike was effective but met with mass arrests and simulated executions. The extent of the violence caused the Spanish consul to intervene and plead for his co-nationals, a highly unusual step. The *intendente* refused to deal with the UOM and only a general strike threat by the FORA IX, the national syndicalist union confederation that had been working well with Yrigoyen, forced a face saving gesture. Although the city promised to respect the gains made in past strikes, it only agreed to let back to work those who had not been replaced. Between five and seven thousand workers lost their jobs. Later, the Socialists charged that the FORA IX sold out the municipal workers to save a simultaneous maritime strike. The city did place some of the workers in public works projects at low salaries and promised to reincorporate the others. The union continued to charge that only those who had the recommendations of Radical congressmen or presidents of local Radical committees got their jobs back. Ultimately, union pressure and other factors restored many to their jobs.<sup>57</sup> The Radicals did get an opportunity to place many of their own in municipal employment, but it remains unclear whether their primary motivation was that or a desire to hurt the Socialists.

In the wake of the 1917 defeat, the union practically disappeared, registering just 197 dues payers in 1918. However, in the following years it called a series of partial strikes with the municipal executive intervening

<sup>57</sup> Box 2, período previo al peronismo, Pérez Leirós collection, Fundación Simón Rodríguez, Unión Obreros Municipales, 'Huelgas año 1916'; *El Obrero Municipal*, Jan., Mar., Aug. 1917, Mar. 1920, Jan. 1923, Aug. 1927, 16 Oct. 1928, 16 Aug. 1930; *La Confederación*, July 1926; M. Casaretto, *Historia del movimiento obrero argentino*, vol. I (Buenos Aires, 1946), pp. 179–81; Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, pp. 131–4; Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth*, p. 46; D. Varone, *La memoria obrera* (Buenos Aires, 1989), pp. 30–1.

in several cases to solve the issues in the workers' favour. In several incidents, it was the same *intendente* who had broken the earlier strike. The UOM became an accepted part of the municipal structure. As early as 1919 three members of the city council's budget committee attended a union meeting accompanied by a representative of the *intendente*. The executive branch of the municipality began cordially to receive delegations from the union and at times acceded to its wishes. Although the reason for the change in attitude cannot be identified, it may have been pressure emanating from the newly created elected city council, combined with the increased tensions resulting from the violent labour upheaval of January 1919, the 'Semana Trágica'. In addition, by 1919 a considerable number of municipal workers were clients of the Radicals and concessions improved their conditions. The union recovered, having over two thousand dues paying members in 1922.<sup>58</sup>

The next few years saw major improvements in the municipal workers' conditions. Although the UOM claimed credit, politics played a larger role. Both major parties in the capital had a stake in improving the municipal workers' conditions – the Radicals because so many workers were party clients, and the Socialists because of ideology and the UOM's close ties to that party. Even minor parties, such as the Communists, played a role in bettering working conditions. José Penelón, a key leader, served two terms on the council and was the municipal workers' most vociferous protector.

Some improvements came in response to national legislation, but others were local initiatives. Workers began to receive Sundays or an equivalent day off; they also became eligible for paid vacations and a 44 hour week. The retirement plan for municipal workers was placed on a more regular footing and widened to include blue collar workers. Some categories of employees did not receive these benefits, and the union and some on the city council continually complained.<sup>59</sup>

The biggest changes were in salaries and other monetary reimbursements, which occurred with the establishment of a city council elected by a wide electorate. In the sanitation division, a *peón* made 60 pesos a month in 1919, 80 in 1920, 88 in 1921 and 100 pesos in 1922. In 1924 a minimum

<sup>58</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Jan., Sept., Dec. 1919, Jan., Mar. 1920, Jan./Feb., July, Aug. 1921, Feb., July, Oct., Nov. 1922, Jan. 1926, 1 Jan., 1 July 1930; *Bandera Proletaria*, 7 Nov. 1922; Concejo Deliberantes, *Actas*, 14 Oct. 1924, pp. 1353–4. For the ways in which the city council could apply pressure, see Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, pp. 44–5. This discusses the 1930s, but the methods were the same.

<sup>59</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Apr. 1924, July 1925, Dec. 1927, 1 Apr. 1929, 15 Apr. 1930; *La Confederación*, July 1926; Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 23 Apr. 1929, pp. 274–80; Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, Departamento Ejecutivo, *Memoria del Departamento Ejecutivo de la Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Año 1935* (Buenos Aires, 1936), pp. 191–2.

Table 1. *The monthly salaries of Municipal Workers in 1924 according to the Budget*

Number of pesos per month	Number of workers	Total % workers
2,000–350	1,080	5.6
340–220	1,412	7.4
215–190	2,510	13.1
180–165	4,175	21.9
160	7,909	41.4
150–25	2,011	10.5
Totals	19,097	100

Calculated from: *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Apr./June 1924, p. 92.

wage of 160 pesos a month was established, and remained constant until 1930, when it was raised to 165 pesos. The average municipal employee in 1914 earned 118.69 pesos per month and in 1924 earned 185.96.<sup>60</sup>

After the establishment of a minimum salary, the scale for city workers was much higher than for the average wage earner in the city of Buenos Aires. In 1924 the overwhelming percentage of city workers, over 63 per cent, earned from 160 to 180 pesos (see Table 1). In 1925, 85 per cent of blue collar workers were paid within that range. According to Adolfo Dorfman, in 1924 the average salary in Buenos Aires stood at 118.30 pesos, well below the minimum of 160 in the municipality. Dorfman's figure might be too low, but a 1928 study by the Departamento Nacional del Trabajo suggests that it is more or less accurate. That study examined the budgets of 1,198 workers' families, finding that their monthly expenses were 169.65 pesos per month whilst they earned 170.03 per month. The typical family of four had two wage earners.<sup>61</sup> It is, then, clear that municipal workers, particularly those holding non-skilled jobs such as street sweepers, did much better than their counterparts employed elsewhere. In the years after 1924 a still higher percentage of municipal workers moved over the municipal minimum.<sup>62</sup>

Many workers earned money in addition to their wages. From 1923 the city began paying a 15 per cent bonus to those white collar employees who

<sup>60</sup> Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 24 May 1921, pp. 850–63, 22 Feb. 1922, pp. 113–32, esp. 131; 27 Dec. 1923, pp. 3159–60; *El Obrero Municipal*, May 1923; Jan. 1924; Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, *Presupuesto general de gastos y cálculo de recursos para el ejercicio 1920–1930* (Buenos Aires, 1920–1930), *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Apr./June 1933, p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Jan. 1926; A. Dorfman, *La evolución industrial argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1942) p. 241 as cited in G. Di Tella and M. Zymelman, *Las etapas del desarrollo económico argentino* (Buenos Aires, 1967), p. 369; *Crónica mensual del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, Nov. 1923, p. 1171, June 1929, pp. 2796–801.

<sup>62</sup> See for example, Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Censo de personal*, pp. 19–20.

earned relatively low salaries and had at least ten years of seniority. Later, white collar employees with more seniority received a 20 per cent bonus. In 1926 blue collar workers, earning under 250 pesos a month and having more than ten years of service, were given a ten per cent bonus.<sup>63</sup> When this programme started, the overwhelming majority of those eligible were not Radical appointees. Starting in 1929, those who made under 300 pesos a month and had worked ten years received five pesos a month for every child under 15. In 1929 the bonuses represented 4.4 per cent of the total amount of salaries.<sup>64</sup>

The municipal budget soared between 1910 and the end of the Radical control of the city. Municipal expenditures stood at some 37,400,000 in 1916, the year Yrigoyen took office, though they had been higher before World War I. In 1922, the next presidential election year, the budget was 68,600,000 pesos but the increase had not been steady. By 1928 the budget had risen to some 87,700,000 pesos and by 1930 to 99,000,000.<sup>65</sup> The budget increased faster than the population, and during World War I the cost of living rose precipitously, peaking in 1920, but it then fell. So inflation cannot account for the rapid expansion of the budget.<sup>66</sup> The increase occurred because of growing political demands. A significant portion was due to the surge in the number of municipal workers and in the size of wages and improvements in working conditions, but also to the generally activist and expansive city government.<sup>67</sup> In the years between 1910 and 1930, the total budget nearly tripled, but the outlay for pay increased almost 5.5 times.

When the increase in population is taken into account, the trends in the budget and itemised expenditures becomes much clearer.<sup>68</sup> In the years directly after 1910 wages represented around 30 per cent of spending (see Appendix 2). Although more was spent on wages on the eve of the opening of the political system, the percentage only shifts during World War I. The economic crisis and the decline in tax revenue produced budget cuts and wage reductions, but wages declined less than other portions of the budget, increasing the percentage spent on them. The city could eliminate capital expenses more easily than reduce pay or the size of the workforce, though the former was done. The Radical Party's taking

<sup>63</sup> See Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, *Presupuesto*, 1920–1930; *El Obrero Municipal*, 1920–30.

<sup>64</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, 19 Jan. 1929; Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 30 Dec. 1929, pp. 3096–7; *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Aug. 1930, p. 50.

<sup>65</sup> *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Apr./June 1933, p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> A. Dorfman, *Historia de la industria argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1970), p. 267.

<sup>67</sup> See Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth* for the nature of growth.

<sup>68</sup> For a roughly parallel discussion at the national level, see A. Montequín, 'Sector público y sistema tributario argentino, 1914–1932', *Ciclos*, vol. 5, no. 9 (2do semestre de 1995), pp. 133–65.

control of the city did not have an immediate impact. It is only in 1919–21, in the midst of labour upheaval, the establishment of the popularly elected city council, the emergence of the UOM, and a post-war economic recovery, that per capita spending regained pre-war levels. The surge comes in both the general budget and pay. This confirms Rock's observation of a turn to political patronage in this era. However, the timing may be due less to a decided change in strategy than to a shift in budgeting realities. The initial years of the Alvear administration saw some budget restraint (though the percentages spent on pay were much higher than during the first years of the Yrigoyen administration). Especially as the presidential election of 1928 approached, the proportion spent on city employees rose and continued to do so under Yrigoyen, despite the onset of the depression. There can be no doubt that keeping employees happy became more important over time, as their percentage of the overall budget increased from just over 30 per cent to over 60 per cent in 1927 (these figures do not include the bonuses based on seniority and on the number of children). Not only had the number of workers increased, but so had the salaries, because of the need to reward those hired for political reasons. The municipal government now spent its money on employees rather than other things.

### *Conclusion*

All political parties in Buenos Aires turned to patronage in the hope of securing votes and workers for their organisations. Even the Socialists participated, despite their scornful references to 'la política criolla' and one wonders whether they might have been even more willing to practice it, if they had had the opportunity. Despite the self-flagellations that occurred about giving supporters' jobs, it remains a common occurrence in big cities from Marseille to Chicago as an obvious way of rewarding friends and securing continued support. A promise of a job can secure campaign workers, and granting that job cements that relationship not only for the recipient but frequently for the larger family as well.<sup>69</sup>

In Buenos Aires, where secure jobs were relatively scarce, a municipal post offered security and excellent pay. The granting of jobs provided cadres for the intense electoral work of the Radical Party. It allowed party structures to exist in every part of the city. The local political boss became a key broker and was often elected to office. The impact on Buenos Aires of this type of political system was substantial. The workforce increased

<sup>69</sup> I wrote part of this during the US presidential campaign of 1996. Many of the volunteers who do the mind-numbing work that makes a political campaign function are at least partially motivated by the hope of securing a job.

greatly, in all probability out of proportion to the needs of the city. Because employees were clients, they were treated relatively well, consuming ever greater portions of the city's budget. This hindered investment in other areas. None of this should be surprising, since it parallels developments elsewhere. Yet the failure to examine its extent and importance hinders our understanding of how the newly democratic political system worked. We do not yet fully understand how politicians turned out voters and created political machines. Patronage continued to play a large role, embraced by almost all political actors, sharply limiting the possibility of creating an efficient civil service.

At the same time the growth of a patronage system does not explain the popularity of Yrigoyen and his party. City employees might have to attend rallies and meetings; they might have to vote, but the way they voted could not be controlled. The Anti-Personalists under the Alvear administration failed to build widespread political support despite ample use of patronage. Similarly the weakness of the ties created by patronage can explain partially the Radical Party's stunning reversal in the congressional election in the capital in 1930. Although they eked out a second place finish, their percentage of the vote had declined drastically since 1928.<sup>70</sup> Loyalty that had been secured by jobs and similar services was outweighed by the problems created by the depression and by the Radical administration itself. The giving of a job does not create a permanent loyalty, since it is not based on ideology or belief but rather on the self-interest of both parties, and self-interests change.

The use of political patronage to secure votes and to create and maintain political machines was not begun by the Radical Party. It became deeply ingrained in the political culture, as Conservatives, Neo-Conservatives and the military all used it. Nor is political patronage sufficient to explain the popularity of the Radical Party and especially of Yrigoyen. Others used patronage but failed to mobilise popular support, whether Alvear or the Neo-Conservatives in the 1930s. The appeal of Yrigoyen to vast sectors of the popular and middle classes cannot be so easily explained. We will have to look elsewhere for the hold that Yrigoyen developed on many.

The key work on the Radical Party, that of David Rock, will now have to be re-examined since it depends on the explanatory power of the political machine, and political machines, although powerful devices to mobilise voters, cannot explain political devotion either in Argentina or elsewhere. Yrigoyen was overwhelmingly re-elected not because he had given out jobs six years before and his followers knew that more jobs would be given out. He had created a bond with many voters because of

<sup>70</sup> R. J. Walter, *The Socialist Party in Argentina 1890–1930* (Austin, 1977), pp. 222–3.

his policy of *obrerismo*, his nationalism, his longstanding drive to open up the political system and because of the faithful's personal belief in him. His appeal is difficult to appreciate some seventy years later, but it existed and outweighed the strength of his machine. Client-patron relationships cannot explain his popularity.

Appendix 1. *Number of municipal employees of the City of Buenos Aires*

Year	Number of employees	Increase in employees
1906	5,353	
1907	5,699	346
1908	7,140	1,441
1909	7,366	226
1910	7,885	519
1911	10,264	2,379
1912	10,615 <sup>1</sup>	351
1913	11,539	924
1914	11,732 <sup>2</sup>	193
1915	—	—
1916	—	—
1917	—	—
1918	—	—
1919	—	—
1920	14,097 <sup>3</sup>	2,265
1921	—	—
1922	14,801 <sup>4</sup>	704
1923	—	—
1924	19,097 <sup>5</sup>	4,296
1925	—	—
1926	21,638 <sup>6</sup>	2,541
1927	21,886 <sup>7</sup>	248
1928	—	—
1929	—	—
1930	25,837	3,951
1931	—	—
1932	25,926 <sup>8</sup>	89
1933	25,931 <sup>9</sup>	5
1934	26,502	571
1935	26,587	85
1936	29,445	2,858
1937	30,060	615
1938	30,906	846
1939	30,996	90
1940	31,210	214
1941	31,447 <sup>10</sup>	237
1942	31,540 <sup>11</sup>	93
1943	31,846	306
1944	32,607	761
1945	35,892 <sup>12</sup>	3,285
1946	36,352 <sup>13</sup>	460

<sup>1</sup> Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Annuario estadístico 1912* (Buenos Aires, 1913), p. 297.

<sup>2</sup> Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Annuario estadístico 1914* (Buenos Aires, 1915), p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, *Presupuesto 1920* (Buenos Aires, 1920).

<sup>4</sup> Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 24 Feb. 1922, p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Apr./June 1933, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Municipalidad de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, *Censo de personal*, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *El Obrero Municipal*, Nov. 1927. <sup>8</sup> Concejo Deliberante, *Actas*, 11 Mar. 1932, pp. 62–63.

<sup>9</sup> *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Apr./June 1933, p. 92. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan.–Mar. 1941, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan.–Mar., 1942, p. 111. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, July–Sept. 1945, p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr.–June 1946, p. 181.

Appendix 2. *Budgets per inhabitant of the Municipality of Buenos Aires, 1910–30*

Year	(A) Budget per capita (pesos)	(B) Salaries per capita (pesos)	B/A (%)
1910	29.0	9.0	31.0
1911	30.5	10.4	30.1
1912	35.3	11.2	31.7
1913	36.4	11.6	31.9
1914	35.9	12.3	34.3
1915	27.6	10.9	39.5
1916	26.2	11.1	42.4
1917	27.1	10.7	39.5
1918	24.3	11.5	42.5
1919	27.4	13.7	50.0
1920	32.8	16.0	48.8
1921	40.3	18.0	44.7
1922	41.9	21.5	51.3
1923	40.3	24.0	59.5
1924	40.4	23.3	57.7
1925	42.0	23.5	55.9
1926	44.6	26.1	58.5
1927	43.9	26.6	61.9
1928	45.0	26.0	57.7
1929	46.1	26.9	58.3
1930	50.6	28.9	57.1

*Sources:* Calculated from *Revista de Estadística Municipal*, Aug. 1930, p. 50, Apr.–June, 1933, pp. 88, 90; Municipalidad de Buenos Aires, *Anuario estadístico de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1915–23* (Buenos Aires, 1925), p. 50.

N.B. There are four years in which the data given in the *Revista*, Aug. 1930 and the *Anuario* differ. I have used the *Anuario*. The other set of figures would not have made a major difference in conclusions. All the data needs to be taken with some degree of caution, though the trends are accurate. The figures for population are from a contemporary source and therefore are inaccurate, but were what contemporary decision makers used.