Advocating for Electoral Reform in Argentina

María Page, Julia Pomares, Laura Zommer and Dolores Arrieta

Introduction

The Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC) is a non-partisan think tank founded in 2000 that seeks to improve the quality of public policies. Its evidence-informed, policy-oriented research projects are implemented in the fields of social development (health, social protection and education), economic development (fiscal policy, international integration and trade) and democracy and institutional strengthening (public management, transparency, political institutions, justice and human rights).

Since 2008, CIPPEC has been working on the promotion of a reform in voting procedures aimed at replacing the French ballot system – in use since the enactment of the universal suffrage in early twentieth century – with the Australian ballot: a single ballot containing all candidates and parties. By promoting this change, CIPPEC strives to achieve a more equal electoral competition. The initiative has gone through different phases since 2008, driven as much by the goal of electoral reform as by opportunities, achievements and failures. This chapter seeks to share, analyse and discuss CIPPEC´s experience in advocating for electoral reform in Argentina. Specifically, the chapter sheds light on the various challenges, risks and choices the project team faced as a consequence of being involved in different stages of the policymaking process, as well as the different literature encountered, and strategies and communication tools employed along the way. It also considers how, if any, different communication and research approaches could have improved CIPPEC's advocacy and impact.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical perspective from which we approach the case study. Section 3 provides a brief account of CIPPEC´s project, how it started and changed over time, who the participants were, and the context in which it was implemented. It also discusses the implications of engaging in evidence-based advocacy to promote electoral reform: a realm that is inherently political, because it involves the rules of political competition. By building on CIPPEC´s experience promoting electoral reform, Section 4 discusses the different

roles think tanks can play in the policy process when advocating for governance reforms, as well as the dilemmas, risks and choices. Section 5 presents and discusses the different communication strategies and tools the project team adopted during the project, as CIPPEC's role and engagement in the policy process changed over time. Finally, the last section presents some lessons learned on communicating complex ideas when the rules of the political game are at stake.

Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical approach to this study of research uptake and communication in Argentina. Three main issues are presented here. First, we delve into our working definition of research uptake – and the relationship between research and policy. Second, we get into the specific features of research uptake with regard to governance reforms. As it will be argued, the challenging nature of this policy field (the change in political rules) shapes the research–policy dialogue and might explain the lack of research uptake in governance policy, when compared with other policy sectors (e.g. health, education, etc). Third, we present current thinking on the role of research in different stages of the policy process. This is important since one of the main issues of this study is about the tensions inherent in getting involved in policy dialogue during several different stages of the policy process.

Defining research uptake: beyond evidence

First, in line with recent developments in the field (see Sanderson 2004), we assume that the role of research in the policy process is not well understood through the lens of the evidence-based policy (hereafter EBP) movement. The EBP literature has a normative inclination. This involves the implicit assumption that the diffusion and application of knowledge is devoid of biases, interests or normative choices: an assumption that obscures an understanding of the object of study and narrows the potential impact of this research in practice. That is why this study will refer to knowledge instead of evidence: because there is a risky tendency to think of evidence as value-free world (as having objective value).Instead, the more complex category of knowledge has suggestions of the value-laden world of politics (and of subjective values) (Simons 2004).

Conceiving of knowledge (and its production) as a non-linear process makes us also question the definition of power implied by the first wave of EBP analyses. Their strong emphasis on the instrumental role of research, and hence on the impact of research on actual decisions obscures the 'invisible' ways in which power is exerted. There is an increasing consensus about the different ways to use research; not only as instrumental to, but also in shaping, policy narratives (Weiss 1979; Keeley and Scoones 2000; Landry, Lamari, et al. 2003; Nutley, Walker et al. 2003). In our approach, scientific knowledge is only one of several rival forces shaping the policy process –the term evidence-inspired policymaking has been proposed to account better for this fact (Duncan 2005) – and it is a force that proactively seeks to make research a key building block of policy formulation.

(Lack of) research uptake in governance policies

Based on this idea of research uptake, we turn to the specific role of research in governance policies. Compared to other policy domains, there are only embryonic studies of the ways governance policy is grounded in scientific research. More general knowledge about better governance also rarely affects policy making in this area (Faundez 2005), which might be a closely related fact. The 'governance' agenda (as promoted by several large international financial institutions) has a strong normative flavour: for example, the basic axiom that better governance fosters poverty reduction and economic growth is taken as an assumption in most development and policy circles, but is increasingly contested in the emerging empirical literature. The scientific weaknesses of a normative approach might undermine the strength of conclusions and, therefore, possibilities for research uptake. Significantly, governance reforms are of an inherently political nature – insofar as the rules of the political game are the main target of the reforms. As such, political interests play a key role in their design and implementation (Peters 1997), which proportionally downplays the role of research. In such a context, the need for producing systematic knowledge on the reform of governance policy is essential: indeed, it has been acknowledged in both academic and policy publications. This case study is one attempt to address this gap.

The largest body of work on research communication affecting governance policies is related to assessing the impact of the work of human rights organisations (Franklin 2008; Ron, Ramos, et al.2005). These studies, however, assume that communication strategies are irrelevant to the research uptake: they focus on the number of reports published (and whether there is an increase in the number of reports taken up by the media) but not on contents of the media strategy: for example, which media are targeted? What is the timing of the strategy? Finally, the work of Garcé and others (2006; Garcé 2007; Mendizabal and Sample 2009) on Latin American think tanks looks at the links between political parties and think tanks: a link that is key to understand the role of research in various governance policies. Garcé's paper shows that Uruguayan think tanks are few, unstable and not very influential. One of the explanations advanced is that their existence is part of the survival strategy of some political leaders and, as such, they depend on their political careers. Bearing in mind that, in the Uruguayan case, weakly institutionalised think tanks coexist with a highly institutionalised party system (albeit with ideologically heterogeneous factions), an interesting question to analyse is whether think tanks in developing countries proliferate in the absence (or presence) of a robust party system. From our case study, we hypothesise that the less entrenched party system in Argentina has given way to the more prominent role of think tanks. This helps to explain the significant presence of CIPPEC during the electoral policy debate at stake here.

Research uptake across stages of the policy process[1]

Research uptake is different at each moment of the policy process. First, knowledge actors (such as researchers and funders of research) appear to be successful in raising

1 This section builds on Jones, Pomares and Pellini with Datta (2009).

a problem for policy discussion through innovative thinking and systematic evidence (the agenda-setting stage). The role of knowledge brokers (or 'boundary workers' in Robert Hoppe´s definition) is particularly important at this stage because early interaction between knowledge producers and users facilitates trust (MacIennan and More 1999) and paves the way for better dissemination of research findings once research production is completed (Balthasar and Rieder 2000).

The second conceptual stage of the policy process, policy formulation is the definitional political moment in which elected politicians define the intended policy. This does not mean that knowledge at this point is not important but it competes with a range of factors with the potential to shape policy decisions (organised economic and political interests, among others). Moreover, at this stage 'public opinion' (the voices of ordinary citizens captured by surveys) may play a key role in shaping policy preferences. In governance issues that involve highly political interests (such as public administration reforms or decentralisation) this is the main phase of discussion, and often takes place behind closed doors. Knowledge actors outside of this loop might therefore find it difficult to attract attention from political actors.

In a further stage of the policy process, implementation, knowledge can be successful in shaping how policy is applied. At this stage, research is used to solve problems. In other words, when a problem has been identified and the outcomes of a policy have been formulated, scientific knowledge can shed light on the best strategy to deal with it.

Finally, although there is a growing role for research institutions in policy evaluation initiatives, knowledge is less influential at the evaluation stage than at other stages of the policy process. This aspect is less explored in the literature, although some clues about why this is the case can be drawn from the body of work we examined. Some authors point to the mismatched timeframes of researchers and policymakers as one of the key factors behind policymakers not endorsing policy evaluation (Spangaro 2007): research evaluation often takes more time than that available by policymakers.

Electoral reform in Argentina

In Argentina, electoral administration is decentralised into 24 constituent units (23 provinces and the City of Buenos Aires). Each district can decide its own electoral rules (including voting procedures). Since the beginning of universal suffrage in 1912, the French voting system has been employed at both national and provincial elections. The French system or the 'ballot and envelope' model has individual ballots for each party or candidate, with each voter submitting one vote into each ballot box (usually in an envelope). Each political party prints, distributes and supplies its own ballots on Election Day. This system used to work fairly effectively while there were two main parties of relatively equal size, territorial outreach and resources.[2] But after the 2001 socioeconomic and political crisis, extreme party fragmentation rendered this voting system archaic, ineffective and inequitable. There are now so many

2 These two parties were the Peronist Party and the Radical Party.

different ballots that it endangers the prospects for casting an informed vote. Ballot theft has proliferated and small parties find it difficult to guarantee their ballot is on the table. Therefore, bigger parties and incumbents enjoy an important advantage due to broader capabilities for printing, distributing and watching over their ballots.

The issue has been in and out of the public agenda since 2003 (specifically, it is 'in' shortly after elections and 'out' the rest of the time). Opposition parties and some NGOs like Poder Ciudadano have led the demand for keeping the issue on the table. Some have advocated for moving to electronic voting (tested in some provinces in 2003 for the first time), and others for the adoption of an 'Australian' (as it was named after its introduction in the United States in the 1860s) or single ballot. In the Australian ballot system, voters mark their choice (either with a cross or by writing the name of the candidate) on a single ballot listing all the options. In this system, the election authority is responsible for printing and disseminating ballots.

In the 2007 Argentinian national election, there were numerous accusations of ballot theft and a serious shortage of ballot monitoring by opposition parties. The election process that resulted in Cristina Fernandez being elected as President suffered several logistical problems, especially a lack of ballot papers for opposition parties in the main districts. According to allegations by opposition parties, the theft of their ballot papers affected their share of the vote. It is in this context that support for the adoption of the single ballot resurged, and CIPPEC joined in. Although we had never produced any evidence on the issue before, we published a policy brief and several opinion articles detailing the theoretical arguments for adopting the Australian system (Straface and Onisczczuk 2009).

Logistical problems at the national level were coupled with severe problems at the provincial level. These provinces did not adhere to a law that required simultaneity of ballots, and instead held elections prior to the October national race. This was the case in the large province of Córdoba, where the incumbent vice-governor won the governorship by a margin of 1%of the vote. After the preliminary tally of results was announced, the candidate in second place (Luis Juez) denounced the process as fraudulent and made several public appearances calling for the recount of every vote cast. In the end, the final tally confirmed the preliminary result, but it took more than a month for the final result to be accepted, and Córdoba's Supreme Court had to intervene to solve the case. This process eroded the legitimacy of the electoral process.[3]

At that time, too, there was a single, unifying argument put forward in support of switching the ballot system: the French ballot voting system leads to an unequal electoral competition because larger parties and incumbents find it easier than smaller parties to print, distribute and watch over their ballots. In spite of this argument, the national government continued to be reluctant to consider the change,

3 Only three months after Election Day, the elected governor set up an Experts' Committee aimed at 'formulating a proposal of political-electoral reform leading to its modernisation and strengthening.' One of the key recommendations of its final report was that voting procedures should change towards the implementation of the Australian ballot (Comisión Consultiva de Expertos 'Así no vamás').

and, over time, the issue disappeared from the public agenda.

By 2009, the future of CIPPEC´s Democratic Institutions programme, which had taken on the issue, was seriously compromised due to a comprehensive lack of funding. In prior years, obtaining funds from international cooperation donors to carry out applied research and advocacy on electoral policy issues had become increasingly difficult to secure for NGOs and think tanks in Argentina. Being a middle-income country that held free elections regularly since 1983, Argentina had become an unattractive candidate for cooperation funds, which usually support the strengthening of democracy initiatives. While there are issues that need to be addressed in order to grant equity and transparency in electoral competition and thus promote electoral competitiveness and turnover, we also celebrate that the country has succeeded to guarantee the legitimacy of electoral processes. In 2013, our evaluation still stands: political competitiveness has waned, party turnover is becoming rarer and there is still a lot of room for improvement. However, the basic definition of democracy is not under risk in Argentina. Our main argument here was (and still is): after thirty years of uninterrupted democracy, we should not settle for the achievement of free and fair elections. We should aim for equal electoral competition.

Meanwhile, most local organisations were also suffering from a general shortage of resources. Many civil society organisations had decreased in size, in part as a result of lack of funding. As a consequence, there were very few independent authoritative voices to address electoral reform issues. This was a void waiting to be filled.

At this opportune moment, CIPPEC staff found out about an initiative from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was meant to support democratic strengthening projects, which had never yet been granted in Argentina. We saw this as a chance to rebuild CIPPEC's electoral agenda. The apparent need for change in the voting system provided us with a good topic but, unfortunately, our Democratic Institutions programme[4] had just been closed down. CIPPEC's executive committee asked the Politics and Public Management programme (P&PM) to lead the design of the new project and develop a proposal. This project paved the way for the specialisation of the P&PM programme towards electoral issues.

The P&PM programme was led by Fernando Straface (at the time of writing, Executive Director of CIPPEC). The project, coordinated by María Page, was seen as an opportunity to open a new agenda on democratic good governance and to start working with international cooperation funding. Technical assistance projects to governments, in which governments hire CIPPEC for training planning units or helping them to develop monitoring and evaluation systems, usually keep the programme well-funded, so CIPPEC'S executive committee had little incentive to prioritise this programme when it came to international cooperation funding opportunities. The P&PM programme was created in 2008, so fairly new at

4 The Programme on Democratic Institutions had been led by María Inés Tula, a renowned expert in electoral institutions and put in place some successful initiatives (such as the change in electoral system in Santa Fe mentioned below) and had left the institution at that moment.

CIPPEC, and its work experience was more related to public management issues than to electoral affairs. So we started by recognising that, although we had a solid research team, we needed the input of an expert to frame the issue (and the project) effectively. We decided to look for a partner that could provide expertise in the electoral policy field and we approached the Di Tella University through Professor Ana María Mustapic, a highly recognised scholar who was a member of CIPPEC's Advisory Board. Thus we put together a team that combined expertise, seniority, public recognition and the research muscle to provide timely answers. The funding application was successful and a one-year project on Promoting the Single Ballot was launched in early 2009. This marks the beginning of CIPPEC's formal engagement with this issue: an engagement that continues today.

Sitting on every side of the desk: can think tanks be involved in different stages of the policy process about the same issue?

Of course, there were problems we had to override, decisions we had to make and dilemmas we had to face when trying to seize different opportunities, even at the cost of risking to fall, or effectively falling, into serious conflicts of interest. There were pros and cons, tensions, gains and losses, ones we evaluated beforehand as well as those we did not foresee. We can divide our involvement in the electoral reform into four stages:

1. *During 2009, we focused on raising awareness of the importance of changing the voting system (**agenda-setting stage**). Our success here derived from the way we framed the issue.*

2. *In late 2009, the National Congress decided to pass electoral legislation and our role turned towards lobbying legislators and opinion leaders about the benefits of adopting the single ballot (**policy-formulation stage**). We did not succeed in convincing incumbent legislators about changing national legislation.*

3. *A window of opportunity opened when the provincial Congress in Santa Fe (the third largest district in the country) adopted the single ballot and called CIPPEC for technical assistance (**implementation stage**).*

4. *In a second phase of the project, at the request of the Government of Santa Fe, CIPPEC conducted an evaluation of the single ballot system, which was used at the 2011 elections (**evaluation stage**).*

In all, CIPPEC were involved in several stages of the policy process, covering the whole life cycle of this reform. As such, our experience provides quite a unique perspective for the analysis of electoral reforms, and also for a broader understanding of the role of think tanks in general, and CIPPEC in particular.

Re-setting the agenda: same old issue; brand new perspective

The first challenge was raising awareness about the importance of a feature of electoral systems usually downplayed by public opinion leaders and the media (and also by academics!): namely, the consequences of the way we cast a ballot. Ana María Mustapic, Professor of Political Science at Di Tella University, and member of the Advisory Board of CIPPEC, played a key role in our success at this stage. She helped us to reshape our approach to the issue. We decided to adopt a political rights perspective, and to reframe our message in terms of citizens' rights. We are also convinced that this change of perspective was critical for obtaining the German Embassy Fund, since that initiative has a strong emphasis on political rights.

Once we settled on the message, we invested resources in producing new knowledge about the issue, even while we knew it wasn't on the public agenda at that moment. We conducted mock elections in several train stations and public spaces in Buenos Aires, where we asked people to test the single ballot, and to answer a question about usability and their confidence in the single ballot. In order to do so, we also turned to academia. A well-known professor and pollster at Di Tella University, Carlos Gervasoni, was in charge of training the people working on the mock polling stations and conducting the survey. Surprisingly, this research showed no concerns about the change in voting procedures, and that the single ballot was perceived as a more user-friendly voting method.

Later in 2009, when the government decided to discuss electoral reform, we had quantitative data to support our position. Thus, when the time came, our investment paid off in terms of legitimacy and we succeeded in being recognised as single ballot experts and champions by key stakeholders, as well as by specialised journalists.

Policy formulation: is there any chance of being heard when the rules of the game are at stake?

In late 2009, the national government launched a 'Political Dialogue' to discuss changes to electoral legislation. The main argument put forward by the government was that the party system was suffering from extreme fragmentation and there was a strong need for a change. Several meetings with a broad set of actors – ranging from election administration officers and legislators to think tanks, NGOs and academics – were held in order to debate the ambitious electoral reform now promoted by the national government. CIPPEC produced a policy brief that presented our main findings and aimed to advocate for the single ballot, within the context of the consultation process (Mustapic and Straface 2009).

By the end of 2009, a wide electoral reform bill was passed (Law 26,571) including substantial changes regarding the candidate selection mechanism, political financing and the voters' register, but completely omitted the voting procedures. Needless to say, we were very disappointed. Why, in spite of being recognised as credible champions on the subject by key actors, were our arguments taken into consideration

only by those who had a particular political gain in promoting the single ballot, and dismissed by others? How could we take advantage of the expedient political context and build a wider consensus on electoral equity and consistency of electoral rules?

During the legislative debates of the Law 26,571, several opposition parties raised the issue about the need to include the change in voting procedures in the reform package. They mentioned CIPPEC to legitimise their claims. Our arguments were taken up only by opposition parties, presumably because they were convinced that the single ballot would put them on more favourable ground for the electoral competition, and would increase their vote share. The incumbent party, on the other hand, insisted there was nothing wrong with the current voting procedures. When approached by the press, government officials argued that ballot theft was only anecdotal, and that the implementation of the single ballot was unfeasible as the number of parties was too large to fit it into a single ballot. In response, we produced a new policy brief that focused on ballot design and implementation issues, building on international experience and an analysis of key local actors' perceptions (including their fears and reservations about a change in the voting system) (Mustapic, Scherlis and Page 2010).

Opportunely, our research strategy coincided with the political strategy of the main (Peronist) provincial opposition party in Santa Fe. While, at the national level, the Peronist Party resisted electoral change, the incumbent Peronist senators of the province of Santa Fe decided to approve a change in the voting procedures by passing a bill (originally issued by the governing coalition, and led by Governor Binner from the Socialist Party) in the last legislative session of 2010.

Why did they do this? To understand this, it is necessary to explore the different types of ballot design in single ballot systems. One is a ballot in which all the different, simultaneous electoral competitions – the two relevant here are for the governorship and for the senate – are included on the same piece of paper. This design can also include an option to select the same party for all races. The other design incorporates a separate ballot for each race, with the option to select any of the running parties. The proposal presented by the coalition government was of the second type. It has been demonstrated by several authors (e.g. Rusk 1970) that using different ballots for different races increases split-ticket voting (voting for different parties in each different race).

The Peronist senators of Santa Fe presumably anticipated that adopting the single balloting system with each different competition included in a separate ballot–would enhance their electoral performance in the next provincial election. This could be because they did not have a strong candidate for governor of Santa Fe, and so they could not rely on riding the coattails of a popular candidate; split-ticket voting would be to their advantage.

Our analysis conducted after the election – comparing election results in Santa Fe and Córdoba – confirms that including all competitions on the same piece of paper

discourages split-ticket voting, and weakens 'coattail' effects: when one popular candidate in an election attracts votes for other members of the same political party (Leiras and Calvo 2011). This is because it focuses voters on the individual circumstances of different races, and encourages selections on the basis of general assumptions about parties. The previous French ballot and envelope system also included all competitions on the same piece of paper. Thus, the Peronist senators preferred to use a system that split the competitions over separate ballots – even if it was a single ballot – because it would better enable them to secure support for the seats for the Senate only rather than being undermined by their party's weak candidate for governor. Thus, unexpectedly, Santa Fe's Socialist government faced a puzzling dilemma: to implement the single ballot in record time (only three months were left before the beginning of the provincial electoral process) or to postpone the implementation by imposing a partial veto on a bill legitimately issued by the governing coalition. They decided to take the risk of implementing a new system.

From advocacy to implementation: challenges and pitfalls of crossing the line

It was Christmas Eve 2010 when the Executive Director of CIPPEC[5] received a call from the Governor of Santa Fe asking for CIPPEC's support in the implementation of the single ballot at the 2011 elections.[6] It was not an easy decision for CIPPEC, since the issue was politically sensitive and also because CIPPEC had never before worked in the implementation of an electoral reform in a large district. Also, it would be the first time that CIPPEC would provide technical assistance to a government on electoral issues. It was definitely a big risk that had the potential to go badly and damage the overall reputation of the organisation. However, the benefits were also tempting and potentially large: promoting one of CIPPEC's key reform proposals on the ground, as well as the opportunity to support the work of the only Socialist provincial government in Argentina. The latter would certainly contribute to our overall strategy of positioning CIPPEC as a player that works with the whole political spectrum, and not just with centre-right parties, as was a common public perception of the organisation since its founding in 2000. At the same time, how could CIPPEC decline the invitation from a governor to support a good cause (at least, through CIPPEC's lens)?

We decided to get involved and take on these substantial risks because of two main reasons. First, we knew that the experience would give us access to new and very

useful information regarding the implementation of a key political change. Second, we wanted to support the one and only government that was keen to implement the reform we had promoted for so long (even though the reform had taken the Government of Santa Fe completely by surprise).

5 In early 2010, Fernando Straface became Executive Director of CIPPEC. In October 2010, Julia Pomares joined CIPPEC as the Director of the Politics and Public Management programme.

6 According to the Electoral Law 12,367, Mandatory Open Primary Elections were held on 14 August, 2011.

We knew it was risky and we felt very exposed, but we also felt that getting involved in the implementation when we had actively worked to identify the issue, proposed a reform to address it, and promoted change was very different from being hired to implement any other random policy. In a way, we felt legitimised by our previous work.
The decision to get involved in the implementation of the reform brought about a new challenge. In addition to communicating complex ideas related to the reform itself, we would now have to communicate our role in the process. Would our independence and equanimity come under question? What could we do to prevent that risk? Did we foresee all the implications of working with a government?

The decision to provide technical assistance to the implementation of the first experience of using single ballot in Argentina was internally discussed, and there were no strong detractors amongst the directors who are part of CIPPEC's Executive Committee. The fact that the initiative was to be undertaken by the Socialist Government of Santa Fe (recognised as a trustworthy administrator) probably gave confidence to many. Progress was made in the full knowledge that there were unprecedented risks, and hard work ahead, and little time to do it in.

During the implementation process, CIPPEC did not create formal spaces to analyse or discuss what the organisation was doing, or risking in terms of reputation. However, several informal talks between the Executive Director, the Director of the P&PM programme and the Director of Communications were held. With the wisdom of hindsight, we acknowledge that this might not have been an open enough discussion, because a number of conflicts could have arisen and we were not fully prepared to deal with a crisis caused by political actors opposing the single ballot or the local or national media.

However, in the circumstances, the key to the project's success was that CIPPEC's legitimacy in Santa Fe was not questioned by any of the relevant political actors or the media. In the social imagination, CIPPEC had no affinity with socialism, and this turned out to be an assurance both for the government and for our organisation. In addition, the research on the provincial electoral system CIPPEC had undertaken in the 2004 electoral campaign, along with the candidates from the main political parties, as well as journalists and academics from Santa Fe who built public consensus around the abandonment of the provincial electoral system gave confidence to all the actors involved. In short, CIPPEC had been working in Santa Fe for almost a decade and had proved its ability to converse with various stakeholders; the previous years of research and advocacy for the single ballot assured others of CIPPEC's technical reliability.

At this stage, CIPPEC sought to further strengthen the government's position by producing several outreach materials, which were reviewed and approved by the provincial Electoral Tribunal: a handbook for voters, a handbook for poll workers and a short educational video on how to cast a ballot using the new voting procedure. We also conducted face-to-face training for 2,043 poll workers in the capital of the

province (Santa Fe city) and the largest city (Rosario), as well as in several small cities throughout the province.

The education effort was successful, and the election went ahead under the new system. Soon after the election, a small dispute over the election result arose. A small party claimed a seat, using as supporting evidence a couple of quotes from the CIPPEC voters handbook and pointing at a contradiction between this and electoral laws. The response from the provincial government came quickly. It surprised us, and threw the risks and potential pitfalls of working with government into sharp relief. The provincial government issued a press release saying that seats are allocated based exclusively on electoral legislation and that the contents of the handbook were the sole responsibility of CIPPEC and not the government.

We were unprepared for this moment of political tension, and worried it would have negative implications for the single ballot but, fortunately for CIPPEC, good news came soon afterwards. The accusing political party's lawyers were referring to the provincial electoral law quoted in the handbook, and the alleged contradiction related to a contradiction between two different provincial laws, and not to a mistake in CIPPEC's interpretation. Since there were no solid foundations for the claim, the dispute ended soon afterwards.

Providing internal evaluation: coping with actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest

In late 2011, after successfully disseminating the outreach materials, the government of Santa Fe asked us for a second phase of technical assistance in which we would design and administer a survey on the day of the election to assess the perceptions of voters about the new voting procedure. This idea was brought to the table by CIPPEC and was backed up by a survey already conducted by the organisation in the province of Salta, where electronic voting had been implemented for the first time in April 2011. We were keen to produce systematic data about voters' perspectives on the single ballot. We were also eager to compare the results of both surveys. But was it appropriate for CIPPEC to participate in both the implementation and the evaluation of the initiative?

The decision to take part in the evaluation, despite having also participated in the implementation, while not ideal, was influenced by our agenda, and our need to generate information to recommend improvements for this or other districts. Also, being part of the evaluation guaranteed us the access to the data. The conflict of interest was obvious, and it was always made clear and explicit. We think this issue was more problematic for the researchers involved than for any other actors, because no one questioned nor doubted CIPPECs' credibility during the earlier intervention. It was assumed that, during the evaluation, researchers and technical advisors would be able to expose and criticise their own recommendations if they had made mistakes.

Communicating complex ideas across the policy process: different roles, strategies and tools

So, how did our communications strategy and tools work in practice?

CIPPEC's initial policy brief, mainly addressed to journalists and politicians, did not achieve its goal to install the issue as a political priority, as per our agenda-setting objectives. However, it did give researchers the opportunity to meet key players, and to begin building links and trust both with journalists and legislators.

In order to avoid becoming implicated in the political game, CIPPEC had to rethink its strategy. At the suggestion of Ana María Mustapic (member of the CIPPEC Advisory Board, and a specialist in electoral systems) CIPPEC changed its communication strategy on the single ballot. Our central argument no longer focused on the problems for parties, and focused instead on problems for the voters, who had no guarantee they would find their preferred electoral choice on election day. This change of approach in the argument was essential in positioning CIPPEC as an organisation working to defend political rights, and helped us to distance us from the other players of the political game.

On the basis of this new strategy, we worked on new policy briefs and several press articles and 'op-eds were published in national newspapers. Furthermore, CIPPEC began to organise workshops for political journalists to explain the benefits of the single ballot. During these meetings, the researchers explained the key aspects of the issue and answered questions. This experience turned out very well. The researchers met the same journalists once or twice a year for several years and managed to gather a group of journalists from various media outlets that were continuously aware of the project's progress and CIPPEC's strategies. Also, we should bear in mind that, over the same period (2009–2012), political polarisation increased, and journalists saw these workshops as one of the new and few spaces for a diverse exchange of views.

During the implementation stage, the strategy aimed to reach voters directly. We devised two main objectives of our campaign. First, we sought to inform those who would be using the system (voters in Santa Fe and in Córdoba, which decided to implement the single ballot immediately after Santa Fe). Second, we also sought to inform the rest of the electorate across the country, in order to generate wider interest and incentives to promote the reform. In order to reach a wider audience, CIPPEC produced a short video that explained how the single ballot worked and its benefits. The video was uploaded to the websites of the most read newspaper and most viewed news channel in Argentina (Clarín and TN, respectively).

The strategy proved to be effective in shedding light on the issue within the political agenda and in the media. However, CIPPEC failed to influence the ruling party to implement the initiative at the national level. When, in 2011, two months before the national election, opposition parties promoted the implementation of the single ballot at the national level, CIPPEC warned that electoral reforms of this type

required consensus among all political actors and shouldn't be the result of short-term electoral tactics. Our main argument was that election years were not the most appropriate time to discuss changes in the electoral system.

CIPPEC's communication strategy varied during the different stages of the project. In the first instance the strategy tried to position the organisation as an independent and technically capable institution, working to install the single ballot issue on the public agenda as an instrument to improve the voting system. After working with the Government of Santa Fe, CIPPEC sought to maximise the visibility of our work to make them more transparent, even at the risk of compromising our reputation in the event of any major crises during the project.

CIPPEC has two further objectives that will produce communications challenges. First, we want to convince the national ruling party that the adoption of the single ballot will benefit all voters and the political system itself. Second, we want to convince the public that the single ballot design is essential for the correct expression of electoral preferences. Given the fortuitous circumstances of the provincial reform, in order to do this, CIPPEC will need to seek new tools that communicate the unifying argument in an accessible way to legislators, journalists and voters.

Conclusions

There are different types of lessons that our experience can contribute to the broader understanding of the role of think tanks in electoral reforms. First, there is the complexity of being involved in several stages of the policy process. Second, there are lessons about the challenges implementing communication strategy. Third, there are the specifics of electoral reforms, and the role of think tanks in these processes of change.

Being involved in several moments of the policy process

What we learned from being involved in the implementation of an electoral reform are probably the most important lessons. First, some consideration of CIPPEC's different strategies to influence policymaking over the years is in order. Collaborating with governments in implementing public policies was one of CIPPEC´s original goals. The organisation's name includes the word 'implementation' because the founders' aim was to create a 'think and do tank'. Argentina has had many promising policies or laws that failed because of shortfalls in their implementation. Thus, although initially we strived to position the organisation, through its research and academic production, amongst journalists and politicians, in 2007, following the Board's direction, CIPPEC committed itself to increase its collaboration with governments.

Accepting government funding for projects was the subject of a long and heated internal debate. While we all agreed that receiving funds from a government limits, at best, the perceived independence of the organisation (and, in certain cases, it

might directly affect the independence of researchers), our experience over the years proved that governments were more likely to get more involved in reform processes and consider CIPPEC's recommendations more seriously when they decided to 'hire' the organisation, rather than when CIPPEC, with third party funding, offered their advice.

Having said this, our role in the implementation of the reform brought about several challenges. The provincial opposition (the Peronist Party) claimed, several times over the electoral campaign, that the electorate would not be sufficiently informed about how to cast a vote using a new ballot so we knew that the costs of doing this wrong could be quite high. Based on this case study, we can ascertain that the role of knowledge during the implementation stage proved to be far from the idyllic portrait in the evidence-based policy literature. During implementation, instead of just providing solutions to problems, knowledge was also manipulated in the political battle between the government and opposition.
We also learned some lessons from our involvement in the evaluation stage. In the future, CIPPEC needs to define its parameters in evaluating reforms in which the organisation has also been involved in implementing. Since the organisation has a 'think and do tank' focus, it is likely that similar opportunities will be taken again in the future. One lesson to draw from this project is that CIPPEC needs to have an internal debate to define a protocol to determine in which cases the organisation should participate in both the implementation and the evaluation of a policy, and what processes are needed to ensure the reliability of these assessments.
In the future, an aspect to consider might be the need to introduce another recognised external organisation or researcher into the evaluation process in order to evaluate CIPPEC's work and ensure a non-biased evaluation.

About the communication strategy

Prior to the enactment of the single ballot law in Santa Fe, CIPPEC had not developed a model law on the specific design of the ballot that would contribute to a successful implementation of the single ballot system. For example, CIPPEC's position on whether there should be a single ballot for all competitions or one per competition had not been prepared. The evaluation revealed, in fact, that the design of the single ballot is a crucial factor to ensure the correct expression of electoral preferences, an aspect on which CIPPEC only started to work after the Santa Fe election, and which led the organisation to refine our views about the specific features of the single ballot. We worked on this model law afterwards, based on what we learnt from several evaluations conducted by CIPPEC: at time of writing, this has not yet been widely disseminated.

Second, we learnt that it is necessary to choose the communication tool that best allows us to shed light upon a complex subject in accessible way so it is possible to convince key decision makers about the medium- and long-term problems of not changing the system.
Finally, there is a need to develop an evaluation of the impact of the different

communication tools on the perception of decision makers, journalists and voters. This data is essential to confirm the effectiveness of the strategy and identify what changes are needed.

Think tanks in 'dirty politics'

Although CIPPEC has been involved in several implementation projects, our experience shows that electoral reforms are of a different type. The dangers of our evidence being utilised as 'bullets' (as coined by Peter Weingart) in the political battle were much higher than in other projects. We learnt that the adaptation of the communications strategy was key to the success of the project and had to be thought through at the same time as the knowledge-building process (and not afterwards, as is often the case). We now foresee why international organisations devoted to electoral technical assistance preclude nationals of the country from being involved in the projects. But, how sustainable and appropriate would it have been to have foreigners advocate for changes to Argentina's political system? The risk of being caught in the firing line is high, and we probably would have gotten injured if CIPPEC's national legitimacy had not been consolidated by the time we committed to the project.

References

Balthasar, A. and S. Rieder (2000) 'Learning from Evaluations: Effects of the Evaluation of the Swiss Energy 2000 Programme.' *Evaluation* 6 (3): 245–260.

Duncan, S. (2005) 'Towards evidence-inspired policymaking.' *Social Sciences* 61: 10–11.

Faundez, J. (2005) 'The Rule of Law Enterprise: Promoting a Dialogue Between Practitioners and Academics.' *Democratization* 12(4): 567–586.

Franklin, J. C. (2008), 'Shame on You: The Impact of Human Rights Criticism on Political Repression in Latin America'. *International Studies Quarterly*, 52: 187–211.

Garcé, A. (2006) *Una interfase estrecha e inestable. Think tanks y partidos políticos en Uruguay*.

Garcé, A. (2007) *Partidos Políticos y Think Tanks en América Latina*.

Jones, Nicola, Julia Pomares, Arnaldo Pellini with Ajoy Datta (2009) *Think Tanks in Post-Conflict Contexts: Towards Evidence-Informed Governance Reform*. Discussion Paper 16. Oslo: UNDP Governance Centre.

Keeley, J. and I. Scoones (2000) 'Knowledge, Power and Politics: The Environmental

Policy-Making Process in Ethiopia.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 38(1): 89–120.

Landry, R., M. Lamari, et al. (2003) 'The Extent and Determinants of the Utilization of University Research in Government Agencies.' *Public Administration Review* 63(2): 192–205.

Leiras, M. and E. Calvo (2011) *La forma de votar importa. Documento de Trabajo*. Buenos Aires: CIPPEC.

MacLennan and More (1999) 'Evidence, what evidence? The foundations for housing policy.' *Public Money and Management* 19 (1): 17–23.

Mendizabal, E. and K. Sample (2009) *Thinking Politics: Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America)*. London: IDEA International and Overseas Development Institute.

Nutley, S., I. Walker, et al. (2003) 'What Works – Evidence-based policy and practice in public services.' *Evaluation* 9(2): 125–148.

Peters, Guy, B. (2012) *The Politics of Bureaucracy*. Routledge: New York.

Quigley, K. F. (1997). For Democracy's Sake: Foundations and Democracy Assistance in Central Europe. Washington, D.C, The Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Ron, Ramos et al. (2005) 'Transnational Information Politics: NGO human rights reporting, 1986–2000' *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (3): 521–588.

Rusk, Jerrold (1970) 'The Effect of the Australian Ballot Reform on Split Ticket Voting: 1876–1908.' *The American Political Science Review* 64 (4):1220–38.

Sanderson, I. (2004) 'Getting Evidence into Practice: Perspectives on Rationality.' *Evaluation* 10(3): 366–379.

Scott, J. M. (1999) 'Transnationalizing Democracy Promotion: The Role of Western Political Foundations and Think-tanks.' *Democratization* 6(3): 146–170.

Scott, J. M. and K. J. Walters (2000) 'Supporting the Wave: Western Political Foundations and the Promotion of a Global Democratic Society.' *Global Society* 14(2).

Simons, H. (2004) 'Utilizing Evaluation Evidence to Enhance Professional Practice.' *Evaluation* 10(4): 410–429.

Spangaro, J. (2007). 'Eleven obstacles to translating research into policy on gender-based violence.' *Evidence & Policy* 3(4): 553–66.

Straface, Fernando and Geraldine Onisczczuk (2009) *El camino hacia la boleta única. Análisis y recomendaciones para su posible utilización en la Argentina*. Documento de Políticas Públicas/Análisis N°63. Buenos Aires: CIPPEC. May. http://www.cippec.org/-/el-camino-hacia-la-boleta-unica

Sutcliffe, S. and J. Court (2006) *A toolkit for progressive policymakers in developing countries*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Weiss, C. (1979) 'The Many Meanings of Research Utilization.' *Public Administration Review* 39(5): 426–431.