State Regulation of Organized Crime: Politicians, Police, and Drug Trafficking in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

In many developing countries with weak formal institutions, the protection of state actors is essential for organized criminal activities and illicit markets to emerge and thrive. This article examines the relationship between the state's regulation of drug trafficking and its associated violence in highly fragmented markets. It argues that political competition influences coordination among the police, generating different types of regulatory regimes. Police with greater coordination implement protection rackets that curb violence; uncoordinated police carry out particularistic negotiations with drug traffickers that exacerbate criminal violence. This argument is illustrated with a subnational comparison of two Argentine provinces that experienced a similar drug market expansion with different patterns of violence. These cases show how corrupt states can obtain relative order in highly fragmented drug markets, and illustrate police influence in shaping the evolution of drug dealing in metropolitan areas.

Keywords: police, drug trafficking, regulation, violence, protection rackets

In many developing countries with weak formal institutions, important sectors within the state broker informal deals with criminal actors, offering protection in exchange for material payoffs, information, or the promise of order (Gambetta 1996).[1] State actors regulate illicit markets and shape the development of organized crime, including its levels of criminal violence. While police often carry out these arrangements on the ground, elected politicians may tolerate (or participate in) these bargains if police manage to contain crime and prevent specific cases of violent crime against certain victims. These cases can stir societal uproar against police corruption and compel politicians to reform the police (Saín 2008; González 2014).

Many scholars suggest that these informal arrangements between state and criminal actors require concentrated or even monopolistic contracting partners to endure (Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016; Denyer Willis 2015). However, as this study will demonstrate, order can also be attained in highly fragmented drug markets, invoking a puzzle that needs to be addressed.

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Most studies on the politics of drug-related violence focus on how political competition undermines coordination between elected politicians to increase violence. However, these studies often neglect potential conflicts between politicians and the police forces that enforce these arrangements, assuming rather than problematizing police subordination to political incumbents (Arias 2016; Durán-Martínez 2018; Lessing 2018; Ríos 2015, among others). This approach is problematic because police compliance with elected politicians varies greatly among Third Wave democracies in different regions (Hinton and Newburn 2009). Police are not mere instruments of political incumbents but have agency of their own, in their interaction with both governing politicians and criminal actors.

In contrast to this earlier scholarship, this study argues that political competition affects the degree to which police cooperate with political incumbents, shaping, in turn, how police regulate drug trafficking and subsequent levels of criminal violence. The role of police as regulators of organized crime and the different ways such regulation occurs have gone mostly unnoticed by the literature on criminal violence. Furthermore, unlike several studies on police reform (e.g., Davis 2006; Eaton 2008), this study also focuses on the interaction between police and politicians at the same level of government, rather than across government tiers.

The argument is illustrated through a most-similar comparison of the two main Argentine metropolitan provinces, Buenos Aires and Santa Fe. Argentina is a quintessential case of democracy with institutional weakness; that is, low stability and enforcement of formal rules (Levitsky and Murillo 2005, 2013). Furthermore, during the 2000s, Argentina experienced a major surge in drug trafficking as cocaine consumption tripled between 2001 and 2011 (CICAD 2015). However, drug-related violence evolved unevenly, in accordance with police regulation of this activity.

For example, in Buenos Aires, police regulated drug dealing through protection rackets, coordinating to extract rents and maintain order in the province, with the acquiescence and often the participation of governing politicians, achieving relatively low levels of violence. Meanwhile, in Santa Fe, the government's inability to control (and unwillingness to protect) police corruption led to dispersed particularistic negotiations between police and drug dealers, in which police extracted rents for themselves while criminal violence soared. Between 2008 and 2015, homicide rates grew by 5 percent in Buenos Aires but by 40 percent in Santa Fe (SNIC 2018).

This article seeks to make various theoretical contributions. It employs the concepts of regulation and regulatory regimes to explain how state actors shape drug-trafficking markets and produce order. Regulation is understood as the design, promulgation, and enforcement of rules through a public agency (Baldwin et al. 2012). Two types of regulatory regimes are conceptualized: protection rackets and particularistic negotiations. While both regimes involve police extraction of rents from criminal activities, political control of the police and coordination within the force are higher in protection rackets than in particularistic negotiations. In protection rackets, police coordinate to contain crime as well as to extract rents, while in particularistic negotiations, police seek to obtain rents without coordination and without much regard for order. Furthermore, in protection rackets, politicians also protect police from prose-

cution or from reforms that would disrupt their rent extraction schemes, as a reward for police provision of rents and maintenance of order.

The article focuses on Argentina, a relatively unfamiliar case in the drug violence literature. Although other studies have analyzed the role of Argentine police and politicians in regulating drug trafficking and other illicit markets, they have rarely discussed different types of regulatory regimes or the political factors that explain them (Saín 2017; Dewey 2012, 2015; Auyero and Berti 2015). These subnational cases show how order can exist in highly fragmented criminal markets without monopolistic criminal organizations when there is enough coordination between and within state actors (cf. Schelling 1971).

The Argentine case is also helpful in understanding how states shape illicit markets. Its surge in drug trafficking is quite recent and has not reached the scale of other Latin American countries, where drug traffickers can penetrate high levels of the state. Moreover, it has relatively low levels of violence, implying that governments are not overwhelmed in dealing with this problem. The comparison between the country's two most affluent metropolitan areas further suggests that state capacity is not determinant in explaining these diverse outcomes. Even in marginalized neighborhoods where drug dealing prevails, the state is not absent (Auyero and Berti 2015); instead, it can either fuel or contain criminal violence, depending on how it regulates this illicit market.

The next section presents the theoretical framework outlining the relationship between political competition, police coordination, the regulation of drug trafficking, and criminal violence. Subsequent sections describe the research design and illustrate the regulation of drug trafficking and its associated violence in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, using primarily qualitative evidence—fundamentally, 90 interviews with politicians and police—to show contrasting patterns, outcomes, and mechanisms. The article then addresses competing explanations, including drug geography, the availability of resources for drug gangs, and the reform (or lack thereof) of police forces. It concludes by discussing the main theoretical and normative implications of the findings.

Police Politics and Drug-trafficking Regulation

In weak institutional contexts, informal pacts between police and politicians are not uncommon. Police officers' professional advancement often depends on supplying rents or other favors to their police superiors and political patrons rather than on objective performance criteria, such as more arrests or fewer crimes (Fogelson 1977; Hinton and Newburn 2009). On the other hand, politicians often resort to informal or illicit funds, including police rents from crime, to strengthen their political machines, dole out informal payments, or line their own pockets (see, among others, Freidenberg and Levitsky 2006; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007).

At the same time, political incumbents need to contain violence, or at least to maintain certain levels of social order, to enhance their electoral prospects. To the

extent that police fail to produce this outcome, they are likely targets for political interventions that will curb their autonomy. Therefore, police commanders know that they need to supply incumbents with acceptable levels of order, and possibly a certain share of rents from criminal activities, to obtain promotions, preserve their corporate privileges, or even keep their jobs. However, individual police officers could shirk their contribution, letting others pay while keeping a larger piece for themselves or neglecting to keep crime under control. When do police cooperate to provide rents and order for politicians?

This study argues that in democracies with weak formal institutions, political competition affects how much politicians can control the police, and subsequently influences coordination within the force itself.[2] The research examines political competition during a given term and over time. During a given term, incumbents face greater competition if they do not have a legislative majority or if they need to form a coalitional cabinet. Over time, lower competition is reflected by a given party or faction's entrenchment in power; that is, the lack of turnover in the state executive.

The degree of police coordination generates different drug-trafficking regulatory regimes; that is, a set of formal and informal rules designed and enforced to govern this illicit activity. Regulation is broader than selective law enforcement or forbearance (Holland 2016; Amengual 2016). Police officers do not only choose whether to enforce the law or not. For instance, as Dewey (2015) shows, law enforcement might also be used to punish criminals who deviate from the informal agreement to supply rents to police. Regulation implies that officers establish and apply a set of rules and practices that shape the behavior of their peers, superiors, and criminal actors. Furthermore, these regulatory regimes exhibit different levels of criminal violence.

Low Political Competition, Police Coordination, and Protection Rackets

With lower competition, politicians face fewer roadblocks to implementing their preferred policies with respect to the police. Therefore, they are more likely to appropriate funds from police corruption, given the absence of effective accountability institutions (see Grzymala-Busse 2003; Chavez 2003). Furthermore, police have more incentives to comply, because they perceive incumbents as the only ones who can influence their career trajectories. In addition, incumbents' entrenchment increases interactions with police commanders and thus can generate more trust between them (see Post 2014).

When politicians can credibly protect police involved in illicit activities, officers have a stronger incentive to contain violence and supply rents to incumbents—even if this means foregoing a larger short-term profit. Political protection is both a carrot and a stick that can deter police defection or shirking. On the one hand, cooperating officers have a greater probability of obtaining protection (and impunity) should they be investigated. Commanders might shield contributors from administrative

sanction, while politicians may influence the judiciary to steer the inquiry away from the suspected officials. Politicians and commanders can also reward good earners with promotions or valued transfers. On the other hand, police commanders and politicians can punish defectors through similar means—from administrative sanctions, such as reassignment to dull duties or unattractive destinations, to physical or psychological violence. The greater the political control over the police, the more credible these sanctions will appear to rank-and-file officers, and the greater the incentive to comply.

When police coordinate their rent extraction from criminals to maintain a stable market and contain violence, this constitutes a protection racket. This regulatory regime implies that police officers formulate informal arrangements with criminal actors wherein the former refrain from enforcing the law in return for criminals' supply of monetary rents and containment of violence on their turf (Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009, 254–55). Officers then distribute these rents to police commanders or political authorities, who, in turn, grant them protection from prosecution. Thus, effective protection rackets require not just police shelter for criminals but also political defense of police.

Protection rackets reduce criminal violence because they provide greater predictability and stability to criminals and induce their compliance. This is true for various reasons. First, if criminals know how much money they need to pay the police on a regular basis, they are less likely to raid their rivals' turf to increase their market share and revenue or to venture into other violent crimes, such as kidnapping or car hijacking. Similarly, if gangs know they must surrender a certain number of drugs to police each month, they will be less inclined to raise the price of the drugs they sell. This, in turn, could avoid increases in property crimes by addicts who steal to support their habit (Goldstein 1985). Furthermore, criminals will try to refrain from "visible" violence (Durán-Martínez 2015), especially against civilians not involved in the drug trade, whose injury or death will cause greater social uproar and invite police raids. In addition, protection rackets may display a "positive" feedback loop. When police contain gangs' territorial or monetary expansion, they also reduce the likelihood that the gang will become powerful enough to either attack its rivals or confront the police.

In short, lower political competition makes police more inclined to provide rents and contain crime, since political incumbents can credibly influence their career prospects and, fundamentally, protect those officers who engage in rent extraction. Credible political protection enhances police coordination in regulating drug trafficking, resulting in protection rackets that contain criminal violence.

High Political Competition, Low Police Coordination, and Particularistic Negotiations

In contrast, with greater political competition, incumbents' control of police weakens, and police are less likely to provide them with rents or order. Incumbents are less capable of protecting corrupt police officers because political opponents are better equipped to expose corruption scandals involving the police that might undermine the incumbents and cost police their jobs (see González 2014). Alternatively, police might have stronger incentives to supply rents to politicians from the opposition, who might have greater influence on their careers once they get to power. Furthermore, when political power is dispersed, as sometimes occurs in coalitional governments, political decisions are more likely to be incoherent, giving police unclear signals as to who is in charge.

Without credible protection or coherent orders from politicians, police officers have weaker incentives to coordinate their control of crime or rent extraction. Consequently, given that larger rents provide more career advantages—such as surplus income, desirable promotions, and transfers—officers will seek to extract the largest possible rents from illegal activities, without regard to what others do.

Subsequently, we enter the realm of particularistic negotiations, wherein police broker inchoate deals with criminal actors merely for extracting rents, which are not centralized by police commanders—or political authorities. This regulatory arrangement does not seek to maintain order, and it increases criminal violence, for reasons opposite to those for which protection rackets decrease it. Uncoordinated police are more likely to prey on their clients or poach those of other protectors, which reduces the relative certainty drug gangs need to conduct their business. This is likely to drive gangs to attack each other to conquer their competitors' turfs or to raise drug prices that force addicts to steal and potentially commit violent crimes to support their habit.

Additionally, dealers are more likely to punish citizens in their communities for (supposedly) telling on them to the police. Criminals have fewer incentives to be inconspicuous about their violent acts, since police are likely to raid them anyway. Particularistic negotiations also inhibit learning, as the market is continuously filled by new and inexperienced players, who are more likely to get arrested or killed. Thus, greater political competition decreases politicians' control of the police and results in regulation of drug trafficking through particularistic negotiations, which increase criminal violence.

In short, political competition shapes the extent to which politicians can control the police and the force's incentives to coordinate internally. This changes the way police regulate drug trafficking, producing different arrangements—protection rackets or particularistic negotiations—with different levels of violence.

Research Design

This research employs a subnational comparative study with a most-similar research design. The metropolitan provinces of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe exhibit comparable police forces and drug markets, which allows controlling for various alternative explanations for their respective levels of drug-related violence (see Seawright and Gerring 2008).

Case Selection

These provinces display other similarities. In terms of socioeconomic structure, they are the primary centers of agricultural production in Argentina. At the same time, deindustrialization since the late 1970s has resulted in high unemployment and urban inequality in both districts, where one can find shantytowns next to grandiose boulevards and palaces.

The two provincial police forces have similar organizational structures and historical backgrounds. They have two different career paths: upper-level officers and lower-level underofficers. Police officers on both forces have low incomes and precarious working conditions. They also share a history of human rights violations and corruption, especially during the last authoritarian regime (1976–83), and have undergone multiple failed reform attempts to make them more accountable to the rule of law (Eaton 2008; González 2007).

Both provinces experienced continuous Peronist rule for at least 20 years following democratization. The Peronists (Partido Justicialista, PJ) governed Buenos Aires from 1987 to 2015, while in Santa Fe they held the provincial executive from 1983 to 2007. The change when the Socialists took over in Santa Fe in 2007, while the Peronists remained in power in Buenos Aires, was crucial to how each government controlled the police (or not). Relatedly, the Buenos Aires Peronists obtained a sizable majority in both state legislative chambers and governed most of its municipalities, while the Socialists in Santa Fe dealt with multiple years of divided government and controlled far fewer municipalities in the province.

Applying a subnational comparative design (Snyder 2001) helps control for national-level variables, such as the political regime (i.e., Argentina is a federal democracy that transitioned from authoritarianism in 1983), national drug-trafficking legislation (Law 23.737), and public security institutions—for example, the fact that while federal police forces handle drug-trafficking investigations, provincial (or state) police are responsible for the prevention of crime and violence. Furthermore, the case narratives will show how certain variables, such as partisan alignment (or lack thereof) with the federal government, are less relevant in understanding differences in drug-trafficking regimes and levels of violence.

While the focus is on the state-level governments—since subnational police in Argentina are formally accountable to the provincial governor—drug dealing and its associated violence are also a local problem, especially in the informal neighborhoods of its main cities. Therefore, in each province, specific municipalities were

selected to study how this argument unfolds at the local level. In Santa Fe, the largest city, Rosario, was chosen, while in Buenos Aires, the focus was on the similarly populous municipality of General San Martín. Both cities receive a vast share of the drugs entering the country from its northeastern and northwestern borders and serve as transit hubs for domestic and foreign drug markets. Both have a vast number of informal neighborhoods in which retail drug dealing occurs, which also concentrate most of the drug-related violence that takes place in the municipality. Relatedly, in both districts, multiple drug gangs compete for control of these territories; that is, both are fragmented markets. These similar features allow tracing the differences in violence to the ways police regulate drug dealing in each district.

Interviews

This study relies primarily on qualitative evidence, mainly 90 semistructured interviews conducted in both settings. Using the multiple nuggets of information provided by these interviews, I was able to establish the connection between the variables in this framework (Brady and Collier 2010). I interviewed the main government officials in charge of security, police commanders and midrank officers, members of the judiciary, representatives from local NGOs, and crime journalists.[3] To increase representativeness and decrease respondent bias, I approached individuals from different political affiliations and then triangulated these data with newspaper archives, NGO reports, and other secondary sources. In addition, I relied on provincial or local homicide statistics to measure the evolution of criminal violence. While obviously imperfect, homicide rates are considered the most reliable crime statistic, given their low levels of underreporting.

Using these data, I conducted process tracing to show the contrasting patterns of police-government relations, drug-trafficking regulation, and criminal violence in each district and to examine the mechanisms linking them (Bennett and Checkel 2015). The collected qualitative data helped score variables that are difficult to observe directly, such as police corruption and political control of the police.

Regulation of Drug Trafficking in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe

Between 2008 and 2015, homicide rates in Argentina increased by 10 percent. However, in that same period, the homicide rate in Santa Fe increased by four times the national average (40 percent), while in Buenos Aires the increase was half the national rate (5 percent). I posit that these divergent trends relate to the provincial government's control of the police and coordination within the force in regulating drug trafficking. In Buenos Aires, the government politicized the police, which then regulated drug trafficking through protection rackets that restrained criminal violence. In contrast, in Santa Fe, the government failed to control the police—either to reform it or to capture its rents from crime. Thus the police regulated drug markets through particularistic negotiations, which led to a dramatic increase in criminal violence (see table 1).[4]

Table 1. Buenos Aires and Santa Fe Scores on Variables

	Political competition	Political control of the police	Regulatory regime	Criminal violence
Buenos Aires	Low	High	Protection rackets	Low
Santa Fe	High	Low	Particularistic negotiation	High

Source: Author's elaboration

Buenos Aires

As in the rest of Argentina, drug trafficking flourished in Buenos Aires in the mid-2000s. Between 2006 and 2013, the volume of seized cocaine grew by 200 percent, according to the state attorney general's report (MPBA 2014). Although in 2002 only 52 persons were detained in provincial prisons for drug-related offenses, in 2010 there were 2,161 (SNEEP 2016). At the same time, criminal violence remained relatively stable, despite the province's extremely fragmented drug-trafficking market and unprofessional police force. This outcome relates to the government's centralization of police rent extraction from organized criminal activities.

Politicization of the Police

The Peronist Party (PJ) governed Buenos Aires uninterruptedly between 1987 and 2015. Most Peronist administrations sidelined police reform and collected police rents from various criminal activities. Intraparty disputes in the late 1990s and early 2000s temporarily destabilized this arrangement, leading to multiple reform attempts that failed due to police resistance and political obstructions (Saín 2008; Hinton 2006; Flom and Post 2016). The PJ remained in control of the province nonetheless.

A new dominant faction emerged in the 2005 midterm elections, the Front for Victory (FPV), which also held power at the national level. In 2007, Daniel Scioli, the FPV candidate, won the gubernatorial election and was easily re-elected in 2011, beating his closest rival by almost 40 points. For most of his two terms, the FPV held a majority in at least one legislative chamber, occupying as much as 90 percent of the provincial senate in 2011. As the Peronists consolidated their control, the provincial police force was no longer the politically destabilizing agent of the past, as reflected by the greater stability of security ministers during Scioli's tenure. Although the province had seen 17 security ministers from 1994 to 2007, only 3 held the office between 2007 and 2015.

During his eight years as governor, Scioli controlled the police, albeit not through reform or formal legislative changes. In fact, he overturned his predecessor's reforms (Arslanián 2011) and rejected the opposition's reformist initiatives, such as the creation of a judicial police in charge of criminal investigations. Nevertheless, politicians and police interviewees highlighted Scioli's politicization of the police.

For example, the former deputy police chief said that Scioli's security minister "placed chiefs because of political requests, not because of their skills" and that these appointees subsequently "didn't confront the minister" (Baratta 2014).

Police subordination to the government was manifest in the scant conflict between the administration and the police leadership, especially when compared to previous periods (see Ragendorfer 2002). A clear example was the police protest of December 2013. While the low-level officers and police unions took to the streets to demand wage increases, police commanders did not support them, and the unions soon reached an agreement with the government, unlike what occurred in many other provinces, including Santa Fe (*La Nación* 2013b).

Centralized Police Corruption

Numerous unconnected interviewees, as well as secondary sources, reported extensive police corruption linked to drug trafficking and other organized criminal activities in various neighborhoods of Greater Buenos Aires. While there is no judicial evidence of direct political involvement in managing these police rackets, it is doubtful that they could have persisted without the knowledge and protection of politicians.

This perception was shared by different members of the opposition. For instance, a state legislator from a competing Peronist faction asserted that the government and police protected various organized criminal activities: "I am absolutely convinced that there is a generalized illegal activity as far as allowing the installation and functioning of drug-trafficking production and distribution, with protection from the judicial power" (D'Onofrio 2014). Similarly, a former security vice minister and, at the time, provincial deputy for another Peronist faction told me,

> The *sciolismo* [Scioli's faction] started to finance itself with [police corruption money]. The great leap in the magnitude of fundraising by the police occurs when the *sciolismo* orders greater levels of contribution by the police. This coincides with its calculus, at that time [2011], which leaned toward breaking with [President] Cristina [Kirchner]. (Saín 2013)

Police interviewees shared this perception of politically organized corruption. A former deputy chief recalled how state and local politicians handpicked officers for key precincts that provided greater rent-seeking opportunities from crime.

> When I [got back from my vacation] they had switched three bosses from the biggest precincts in San Martín because of a political request. Those are just the ones through which all the drug comes into the Northern Area [of Greater Buenos Aires]: it comes through routes 8 and 9, is fragmented in San Martín, and from there it is distributed to the province. . . . You can't put a fox to take care of the chicken coop. (Baratta 2014)

Likewise, three police union representatives also stressed the complicity between politicians and the organization's high command, saying they "look out for each other" (Police union representatives BA 2013).

Overall, the government did little to discourage police corruption. State-level accountability agencies, like the Auditing Office, rarely prosecuted or even administratively punished this type of misconduct (Auditing officials 2013). While previous administrations conducted widespread police purges in the wake of corruption scandals, the former state security minister admitted that no such cleansing initiatives occurred during his tenure (Casal 2014). Nor did the administration modify police selection or promotion procedures to improve the integrity of the force, leaving acting police commanders in charge of these processes. These various pieces of evidence suggest that the government at the very least tolerated, and at most profited from, police protection of criminal activities.

Protection-Extraction Rackets to Regulate Drug Trafficking

The government's centralized control over police corruption enabled the police to regulate the emerging drug-trafficking market in the metropolitan area through coordinated protection rackets, in which police protected dealers from criminal prosecution in exchange for material benefits, often shared with the administration. Several examples show the widespread involvement of the force and the different protection techniques applied by police and politicians. While these examples are mostly from the municipality of San Martín, one of my chosen fieldwork sites, they apply to most districts in Greater Buenos Aires.

Example 1: The Police Chief. An effective protection racket requires the involvement of the organization's leadership. A provincial legislator from the opposition told me how the provincial chief of police protected one of the main drug traffickers from this municipality.

> I had the testimony of a police officer who told me about a drug deal in a car shop. They get in; they arrest two armed guards and see [the dealer] speaking on the phone in the back, unfazed. [The officer] starts walking and his phone rings. The voice on the other side says, "pick up." He says, "I'll call you back boss, I'm on a job." "Pick up NOW." He had to leave the scene. The voice on the other end was the current chief of police, and he was the one speaking with [the dealer]. This is entirely corrupted from top to bottom, and it's not so generalized at the bottom, but they follow orders. (D'Onofrio 2014)

This anecdote also shows how the leadership directly influenced subordinates' behavior to make them participate in the protection of drug trafficking. In this case, the police's hierarchical structure enabled internal coordination. Obviously, there was no political repercussion or judicial investigation against the chief.

Example 2: The Department of Investigations. In 2015, a Federal Police investigation uncovered a major protection ring in San Martín. Two drug traffickers supplied $5,000ARS (Argentine pesos, about US$500) per week to a local precinct boss from the provincial police, in addition to $30,000ARS (US$3,000) to his superiors in the departmental office and the Drug Trafficking Division. The police, in turn,

provided the dealers with drugs seized from other raids and alerted them about the ongoing investigations into their rivals (*La Nación* 2015; *Perfil* 2015).

Two years earlier, during our interview, a former vice minister of security had described police protection of trafficking in this district in similar terms.

> The large drug market [in the municipality of San Martín] is handled by Mameluco Villalba [the largest dealer] directly with the DDI [the Department of Investigations] and the Departmental Boss: that's where the big money is. Where there are better business opportunities, they [the provincial government] send better business managers. The police are a source of financing. (Saín 2013; see also Sica 2013)

This case reveals how different police sectors coordinated their extraction from dealers, as well as how police protected their clients to structure the drug market.

Example 3: The Candela Case. The most notorious episode of alleged police complicity with drug trafficking occurred in San Martín in August 2011, following the kidnapping and murder of 9-year-old Candela Rodríguez. A legislative commission reported that the police had manipulated the investigation to cover up its own links with the local drug traffickers who had abducted and murdered the girl (Comisión Especial 2012). The commission recommended the dismissal of the provincial police chief, as well as the district bosses. However, most police commanders and political authorities kept their positions, which shows the opposition's weakness in denouncing the government's links with drug trafficking. While the executive concentrated political authority, corrupt police would remain protected.

Beyond San Martín. Various secondary sources document police protection of retail drug dealing to finance local political machines in various municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires. For example, in Florencio Varela, a poor municipality in the southern part of the metropolitan area, the Provincial Memory Commission reported that a local Peronist broker sold drugs right next to the headquarters of a powerful local politician, obviously with police protection (Comisión Provincial por la Memoria 2013, 403–5). Auyero and Berti found similar evidence in their ethnographic research in Lomas de Zamora, another municipality in southern GBA. One of their interviewees stated, "It is easy to make a deal with the police . . . they come to you for their commission. Every night, you need to give them $500 or $600 [about $50–$60 USD] and they leave you alone" (Auyero and Berti 2015, 129). Zarazaga records that 85 out of 100 brokers stated that paying party activists with drugs was a common practice (2014, 32). Most brokers operate with protection from both police and local political bosses.

Even Scioli's former security minister Ricardo Casal acknowledged police protection of drug dealing, although he doubted it was extensive.

> It's not rare that every now and then there is a cop arrested. Evidently [drug trafficking] needs certain collaboration. I don't think it's an institutional decision of police to participate, but some sectors do get involved. We've arrested precinct bosses, handcuffed and everything. Local politics also matters. . . . Maybe a council member has a connection [with drug dealers] and they finance his campaign. (Casal 2014)

In other words, the minister denied the provincial government's involvement with drug trafficking, but he shifted that suspicion to local-level politicians. Politics is almost always behind police protection rackets.

Containment of Criminal Violence

While drug consumption and distribution grew significantly in Buenos Aires from the mid-2000s on, criminal violence remained stable or even decreased during the same period. Homicides grew only by 5 percent between 2008 and 2015 and even dropped by 10 percent between 2009 and 2012 (Ministerio de Seguridad 2012). Furthermore, during this three-year interval, homicides committed during robberies decreased by 24 percent. Given that perpetrators are often stealing to support their drug addiction, this could suggest that drug dealers with territorial control were able to maintain order on their turf or that drug prices did not substantially increase during this period.

Police regulation of drug trafficking also prevented the proliferation of conflicts between drug gangs. During the early 2000s, when the police had greater autonomy from the government, kidnappings and violent clashes between drug gangs in San Martín proliferated. In contrast, after 2007, violent confrontations between gangs in this district were few and far between, with only two feuds, in 2009 and 2011, which resulted in four casualties (for a description of these conflicts, see Saín 2017). In short, police regulation of drug trafficking through protection-extraction rackets, built on the government's politicization of the police, contained criminal violence in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area between 2008 and 2015. This trend diverges radically with what occurred in the neighboring province of Santa Fe during the same years.

Santa Fe

On December 10, 2007, for the first time since the return of democracy in 1983, a non-Peronist government took power in the province of Santa Fe. The Socialist mayor of Rosario, Hermes Binner, took office as the head of a broad coalition, the Progressive Civic and Social Front (*Frente Progresista Cívico y Social*, FPCyS). Although the expansion of drug trafficking preceded the Socialist government, it grew considerably during this administration. The number of drug seizures grew nearly tenfold, from 131 in 2006 to 1,234 in 2012. The volume of cocaine seizures increased even more. Although the provincial police seized only 10 kilograms of this drug in 2001, a decade later this amount had grown to 490 kilograms (3,400 percent) (MSSF 2014).

While drug trafficking grew in the entire country, Santa Fe experienced a distinct and unprecedented increase in criminal violence, especially in its major city, Rosario, where homicide rates doubled between 2008 and 2013. Politicians' failure to control police corruption played a major role in this outcome, as it generated particularistic negotiations between police and dealers and destabilized the drug market.

Lack of Political Control

The Socialists inherited a police force that had remained essentially unchanged for 24 years, but they did not implement broad reforms to bring the police under the rule of law, either. Although Binner created the Ministry of Security, this decision immediately encountered serious administrative hurdles and police resistance. Former security minister Daniel Cuenca told me that "in setting up a ministry from scratch, I wasted a lot of time on administrative issues, such as promotions, transfers, prisoner custody, etc., and had less time for daily operations" (Cuenca 2013). The minister rapidly encountered police resistance to his command, from passive disobedience ("some get in line, others pretend to") to active intimidation. For example, he found notes in his office that read, "Get out, usurper," and eventually decided to bring in his own meals to the ministry for fear that the police who worked there might put something in the cafeteria food. Ultimately, the stress took its toll: Cuenca suffered a near–heart attack and resigned in December 2009.

The Socialists' control of the police was also hampered by their internal fragmentation. The appointment of Cuenca's successor, Álvaro Gaviola—the former director of the Civil Registry, with no prior experience in security—further diminished political control of the force, largely due to conflicts within the cabinet. As soon as he took office, Gaviola appointed a former police commander as secretary of security, but had to backtrack after several reformist cabinet members, appointed by Cuenca, threatened to resign (*La Capital* 2009). As these officials left the cabinet, the administration relinquished control over the police. As a legislator from the opposition told me, "instead of politicians driving things, they were allowing police sectors to come into the government to run the force" (Toniolli 2013). All five legislators from the opposition concurred with this view.

Although the Socialists remained in power in 2011, their political clout decreased. Their vote share in the gubernatorial election dropped from 52 to less than 40 percent—they won the election by only 3.6 percent of the vote—and they lost their majority in the provincial legislature. The new governor, Antonio Bonfatti, appointed the former secretary of penitentiary affairs, Leandro Corti, as security minister in December 2011. Corti, another nonpartisan minister, intended to assert greater control of the police but did not find enough political support, showing the lack of internal coherence in the administration. As he told me,

> You need to have a lot of political support because you will not be making any friends. Hitting these guys on the head implies having a pretty big dick, so to speak. You have no personal life, and the cops know everything: if you take drugs, if you're gay, if you are a womanizer, if you have kids, if you are separated, everything (Corti 2013).

Corti resigned in June 2012, after Bonfatti undercut his decision not to hold a soccer match in Santa Fe for security reasons. Subsequently, Bonfatti appointed long-time Socialist state deputy Raúl Lamberto as security minister. Lamberto was the first minister appointed from the party ranks, and proved to be the most stable,

remaining until the end of Bonfatti's administration in December 2015. However, this shift did not increase the government's control of the police. Many opposition politicians and even former government officials criticized Lamberto's "consensual" approach. Former minister Corti stated, "I know that Lamberto is not corrupt, but he has this political thing of winging it, [muddling] through, and here you need someone to make determinations and political decisions with support" (Corti 2013). Only in 2013, after the provincial police chief was arrested for protecting drug dealers, did the government attempt a partial police reform.

Political fragmentation, especially within the Progressive coalition, also eroded the government's control over the police. Both political rivals and police officers pointed to the administration's "lack of coherent messages" to the force. A current police union delegate stated, "There are no precise orders. It's all improvised, day by day. Today there is [one secretary of security], but tomorrow you come along with other ideas and modify everything" (Police union representative SF#2 2013). This situation was exacerbated by an empowered opposition, as the Socialists lost their majority in the lower chamber. A legislator from the Progressive Front, as well as other members of the administration, claimed that police "operated with legislators to change the course of policies, to prevent the new selection and promotion mechanisms" (Gutiérrez 2013).

The degree to which the government could not control the police also manifested itself in the December 2013 protests. As in Buenos Aires, police protested over their low salaries and poor working conditions, declining to patrol the streets. However, unlike the outcome in Buenos Aires, the police rejected the provincial government's offer, and the federal government had to send 2,200 National Military Police to ensure order (*La Nación* 2013a). In short, the government's internal divisions and reduced political strength hindered its capacity to control the police.

Particularistic Negotiations with Drug Dealers

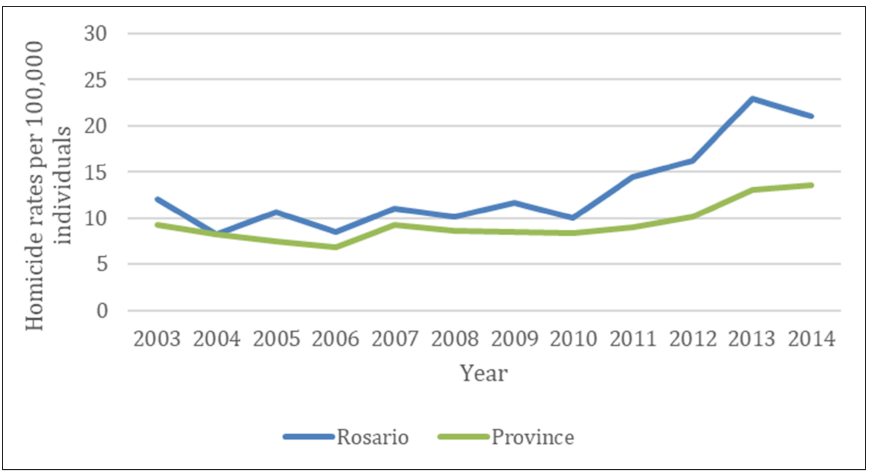
The Socialist administrations' lack of control over police corruption encouraged the force's regulation of drug trafficking through particularistic negotiations, a fact the administration did not ignore. Bonfatti's undersecretary of complex crimes admitted that police protection of crime was no longer credible, since it did not end up in politicians' pockets. As she told me,

> Some police officers are still collecting money, but they also know that it's not for any of us. That's a strong message because it says [the police] can no longer guarantee impunity. They can charge but they can't guarantee protection [to criminals]. Because I don't warn you when I'm going to raid the place. Then you'll have to be accountable, but that's your problem. (Viglione 2013)

The vignettes below illustrate how this regulation took place.

Example 1: The Police Chief. As in Buenos Aires, police corruption reached the highest levels of the organization. The difference is that in October 2012, Provincial

Figure 1. Homicide Rates in Santa Fe Province and Rosario, 2003–2014



Source: Homicide Report 2014, Ministerio Público de la Acusación, Data from Provincial Security Ministry

Police Chief Hugo Tognoli was detained, along with several officers from the Narcotics Division, and charged with protecting a wholesale dealer in exchange for $ARS30,000 per month. The arrest, following an investigation by the Federal Police, exposed the government's lack of control of the police leadership, as both Binner and Bonfatti had promoted Tognoli because of his "impeccable record."

Example 2: The Canteros Drug Gang. The government's lack of control of police rent extraction left corrupt officers without political protection, which facilitated their arrest by judicial authorities. For instance, the investigation into the main drug gang in Rosario—the Cantero family, also known as "Los Monos"—ended up convicting 9 officers from a total of 35 defendants. When I interviewed him in his office, the lead case prosecutor told me of wiretaps that revealed the depth of police complicity with this gang, the lack of coordination within the police, and its consequences in terms of criminal violence (see also De los Santos and Lascano 2017).

> In the wiretap that reveals the extent of police corruption, there is a conversation between Monchi Cantero [one of the gang leaders] and a cop who is now indicted and in prison. Monchi asks about a specific address and tells the officer to talk with the local precinct and ask "what's going on." The officer replies: "I'll get back to you." Ten minutes later, the officer calls back and says, "I just spoke with number 2. He says it's open." What does it mean? Somebody [another dealer] was paying the Narcotics Division to run the selling point, "but you can go in, no problem. We'll settle later." The guys [the Canteros] went in, shots blazing, and a little girl was killed." (Camporini 2014)

Essentially, the police officer enabled the Canteros to seize a selling point protected by another police unit, signaling the police's uncoordinated deals with different drug-dealing gangs.

Example 3: The Bunkers. Police corruption was not only severed from political protection but also increasingly fragmented within the force itself. Multiple police units engaged in dispersed deals with low-level traffickers to extract rents from drug dealing. Twenty-three of the 38 Santa Fe interviewees spontaneously signaled that in Rosario the main drug distribution mechanism was through "bunkers"—enclosed fortifications in impoverished neighborhoods—which operated in broad daylight. A federal judge described this egregious protection by the police: "The emblem of impunity is the way drugs were sold in Rosario, the bunker—a Rosarian invention—a fortress so that everybody knows. The only thing missing is a neon sign" (Vera Barros 2014). This same judge explained that "drug trafficking in Rosario became scandalous because police protection, which always existed but was contained, became decentralized, so every police precinct ran three or four bunkers." As former security minister Corti stated, "[today] even Corporal Cacho asks you for the money" (Corti 2013).

Escalating Criminal Violence

Particularistic negotiations generated a substantial surge in criminal violence in Santa Fe, particularly in Rosario. Between 2003 and 2014, homicide rates in Rosario increased from 12 per 100,000 individuals to 21.1 per 100,000 (see figure 1). In 2013, Rosario had its most violent year on record, with more than 260 homicides, reaching a rate of 23 killings per 100,000. To put these numbers in perspective, these rates were triple the homicide rates in Greater Buenos Aires (7.3) and double the rate in San Martín (9.2)—both figures from 2011.

The Santa Fe provincial police were incapable of containing the increased fragmentation of the drug market. According to one of the journalists most familiar with the drug trade in Rosario, the four gangs that vied for control of the city's distribution points outsourced retail drug dealing to families or individuals in poor neighborhoods (Del Frade 2013). Social movement activists in one of these neighborhoods explained this link between police autonomy, decentralized drug trafficking, and criminal violence.

> Today, what's happened with drug trafficking is a product of deregulation, of the de facto self-government of the police; the business has grown horizontally. Small and midsize family companies have proliferated that devote themselves to drug trafficking without being heavyweight drug dealers. It is even becoming a problem for the police to regulate all this. There is a horizontal spread of violence. All kinds of conflicts, in most cases, are solved with guns. (Social movement activists 2013)

Between 2007 and 2012 the number of weapons seized by the police quadrupled, from 36 to 162. Many weapons and much ammunition were also stolen from police precincts or military facilities. In 2014, there were 560 reports of stolen firearms in Santa Fe, of which 110 belonged to police officers, many of whom could not explain how the theft happened (*Página12* 2015). In this sense, police corruption directly contributed to criminal violence.

In previous years, as in Buenos Aires, the police had regulated drug trafficking and other organized criminal activities through protection rackets. A police union representative told me that previously, "the police controlled the streets, and if something happened, it was minimal, or it had a license to happen." In contrast, he stated, "Today, there are areas where the police cannot enter. The police are irrelevant. You put a vase and it's the same." (Police union representative SF#1 2013) In other words, the police's disorganized corruption ultimately diminished its capacity to control crime and violence.

Alternative Explanations

The case narratives show how the state regulation of drug trafficking affected criminal violence in the metropolitan provinces of Buenos Aires and Santa Fe. It is also important to consider other recurrent explanations in the criminal violence literature, focusing on economic and political factors.

Economic Factors: Resources, Structure, and Geography

A first group of studies argues that violence increases as criminal groups obtain greater resources, especially high-caliber weapons and young men recruited as foot soldiers, to attack each other or the state (Dube et al. 2013; Sampson 2006). However, these factors do not sufficiently explain the variation between Buenos Aires and Santa Fe. In both provinces, most homicides are committed with low-caliber weapons, which are readily available, given the country's large domestic arms industry (see Spinelli et al. 2015).

In terms of manpower, criminal groups in both provinces have an abundant labor force in poor, young men from informal neighborhoods. Kids guarding drug-dealing locations, referred to as "little soldiers," are often younger than 13 years old. Due to their small scale and lack of monetary resources, neither gangs in Buenos Aires nor Santa Fe have outsourced protection to private militias, notwithstanding a few homicides conducted by hired hitmen in Rosario.

Market structure is also an insufficient predictor of variation in violence, since there never was a dominant gang capable of enacting centralized pacts with the state in either province (Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009; Cruz and Durán-Martínez 2016). If anything, we would expect violence to be higher in Buenos Aires, which has a more fragmented drug market—and a greater territory and population for the police to control—yet the opposite occurs.

Other authors suggest that violence is greater closer to international borders or, more relevant to this study, along drug transit routes (Reuter 2014; Dube et al. 2013). However, both provinces are key transshipment hubs for illegal drugs entering Argentina, particularly marijuana from Paraguay and cocaine from Bolivia. Although Rosario clearly is the largest port in Argentina, San Martín is one of the main weigh stations for drugs heading to the rest of the metropolitan area, including the city of Buenos Aires, one of the country's largest consumption markets (Observatorio de la Deuda Social 2016). Additionally, most violent episodes in Argentina involve gangs dedicated to retail domestic distribution rather than wholesale international commercialization.

Political Factors: Protection Networks and State Strategies

This study posits that political competition affects the government's control of police, and through it, the regulation of drug trafficking and criminal violence. Several scholars have similarly argued that violence increases when informal protection networks collapse, especially at the end of authoritarian regimes, invoking two mechanisms. One is that regime transitions decentralize political authority and disrupt protection arrangements with criminals because of state coordination problems or partisan conflict (Ríos 2015; Trejo and Ley 2017; Dell 2015).

This study offers a slightly different perspective. Unlike in Mexico, where drug cartels preceded democratization, drug trafficking did not become prominent in Argentina until two decades after the democratic transition. Furthermore, both Buenos Aires and Santa Fe exhibit a "one protector (provincial police), many organizations" scenario, given the absence of local police forces and the sporadic intervention by the federal police (Snyder and Durán-Martínez 2009, 258). Therefore, the main difference between these cases is not which state actor is responsible for confronting drug trafficking—which does not vary either between the cases or over time—but the extent of coordination within each police force. As we saw in Santa Fe, the greatest surge in violence stems from the police's inchoate regulation of drug dealing.

One could argue that partisan alignment between the state and federal governments influenced the evolution of organized crime. However, Scioli's Peronist government in Buenos Aires also experienced multiple tensions with the federal administration of Cristina Kirchner, including a struggle for federal funds to pay state salaries (*La Política Online* 2013). At the same time, political conflict between the Santa Fe Socialists and the federal government spiked following the growth in police corruption and deregulation of drug trafficking, which took place during the first Socialist administration (2007–11). For example, the provincial government complained about the removal of the National Military Police from Santa Fe, yet this occurred in September 2013, after the growth in homicides had already started (*La Capital* 2013).

A second mechanism, other scholars argue, is that democratic transitions, and especially police reforms, end impunity for the specialists in violence—that is, police and military forces—who handled protection rackets during authoritarian regimes, and thus make criminal violence run amok (Tilly 2003; Volkov 2002; Cruz 2011). However, both Argentine provincial police forces underwent numerous failed, or at best incomplete, reform processes during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In fact, the Scioli administration in Buenos Aires (2007–15) reversed the partial reforms implemented by its predecessor. Yet the Buenos Aires police were more effective in regulating drug dealing than their Santa Fe counterparts. In short, democratization cannot account for the differences in order and violence exhibited in these subnational states.

State capacity also falls short as an explanation of the different patterns of violence in these cases (Skaperdas 2001; Williams 2009; Richani 2010). On the one hand, both administrations lack professionalized police forces with proper training, salaries, and working conditions. On the other hand, their security ministries have one of the largest budgets in the government, as well as vast numbers of police personnel with the capacity to detect, reach, and penetrate even neighborhoods with drug gangs or large levels of violence.[5] In any case, we would expect Buenos Aires to show higher violence rates if this explanation were valid, since its police force must cover a much greater territory. These cases show that how the state exercises its regulating role matters more than whether it is present or not.

Conclusions

Organized crime typically requires state protection to persist. However, state actors do not just protect, tolerate, or authorize illicit markets, but through their regulatory actions, can also shape their development, especially in terms of their inherent violence. By comparing the provinces of Santa Fe and Buenos Aires, this study shows how police can regulate drug markets to produce order and contain violence, even under high market fragmentation, when centralized pacts are not feasible.

Order is more likely when politicians control the police and the force has internal coordination. This study's finding that political competition can decrease political control of the police is not a recommendation for noncompetitive regimes. Sooner rather than later, governments with little opposition are likely to employ the police for their own benefit, including rent extraction, and halt necessary police reform. The acceptance of police (or political) corruption is not the solution, either. As the Argentine cases show, the dynamics of corruption, rather than its scale, can affect levels of criminal violence. While not arguing for a centralized rent extraction mechanism, this study suggests that policymakers need to be aware of the institutional context in which they operate, especially in terms of their police forces, and the consequences of the political decisions they make with respect to their police.

Many theories of organized crime neglect the state or simply refer to its absence or weakness. These subnational Argentine cases, like many others in Latin America, at least nuance this perspective. In granting protection—credible or not—to nonstate

criminal actors, state actors in weakly institutionalized regimes often adopt the standard role of organized crime, engaging in the business of private protection (Gambetta 1996), which invites us to rethink this concept and its empirical implications.

Notes

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1. "Criminal actors" are those that do not occupy a formal role in the state.

2. Given the enormity and complexity of police organizations, this study focuses on politicians' interactions with police commanders and on the patrol and investigative divisions directly in contact with drug dealers.

3. The online appendix lists all interviews and secondary sources (see table A.1 for summary).

4. The online appendix compares the vote shares of governors (table A.2) and the legislative vote shares of the governing party in both provinces (figures A.1 and A.2).

5. At the end of Scioli's administration, the province of Buenos Aires had 90,000 police officers. Santa Fe had about 19,000.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting materials may be found with the online version of this article at the publisher's website: Appendix.