Partisan think tanks: between knowledge and politics

The case of Pensar Foundation and PRO party in Argentina

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Abstract

This paper analyses the relationship between a political party and its associated think tank in Argentina. The objective of this research is twofold: first, present a framework to study partisan think tanks, drawing on literature that addresses the relationship between think tanks and political parties; and second, use the framework to study the evolution of Pensar Foundation and its relationship with the party Propuesta Republicana (PRO), considering its growth and victory in the 2015 presidential elections. Moreover, this paper reflects on the notion of partisan think tanks, an actor rarely addressed by the literature.

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Introduction

Even though there are numerous think tanks in Argentina, political parties have not consolidated internal think tanks[1] that contribute to shaping their programmatic horizon[2]. However, a partisan think tank experience has recently stood out in its evolution and consolidation. In June 2010, the party Propuesta Republicana (PRO) publicly relaunched the Pensar Foundation[3], with the objective of designing government plans in case the party's leader and candidate, Mauricio Macri, were to be victorious in the 2011 presidential elections. Since its re-launch, Pensar went through several stages that, incrementally, would result in its establishment within the party. By the 2015 presidential elections, Pensar Foundation was recognized not only as the most consolidated and productive political foundation in Argentina but also as the one that most conformed to the distinctive functions of the think tank category: the production of applied knowledge to attain influence (Acuña, 2009).

Advancing our understanding of the linkages between partisan think tanks and political parties is relevant as it is a type of relationship that sits between the spheres of knowledge and politics – on which the social sciences have reflected on from different angles.[4] In addition, the analysis of Pensar Foundation and its connection with PRO allows to integrate two objects of study that refer to different academic traditions: political parties, addressed by the most classic studies of political science focused on political institutions, and think tanks, which are mainly the concern of public policy studies (Garcé, 2009). Moreover, the experience of Pensar offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the notion of a partisan think tank, an actor rarely addressed by the specialist literature.

This study starts from the idea that, as a partisan think tank, Pensar produced knowledge linked to public policy and presented public policy alternatives to the party's decisionmakers and referents. It seeks to answer the following questions: What factors facilitate the emergence and consolidation of a partisan think tank like the Pensar Foundation? What functions does a partisan think tank fulfil within the structure of a political party? How does a partisan think tank keep a relative autonomy

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1.   See section Partisan think tanks: an overview.

while simultaneously responding to the party' needs and requirements? What factors influence the sustainability of such a think tank?

To understand the experience of Pensar Foundation, the research proposes a framework of analysis that integrates four dimensions: the party system, the functions of the think tank, its strategic autonomy, and its sustainability. The development of a framework for the study of partisan think tanks represents a contribution to the systematic study of these stakeholders, as none exists thus far. In addition, this case study helps advance knowledge on the origin, evolution, functioning, and consolidation of partisan think tanks, given the dearth of research on the topic in academic and professional works. At the same time, the findings of this paper and the lessons about Pensar Foundation are relevant for political parties and policy entrepreneurs that want to promote or enhance the functioning of a partisan think tank.

The first section of this paper addresses the link between expert knowledge and politics. The second discusses the think tank category, its functions, and the question over their independence. The third goes through various theoretical contributions about the relationship between political parties and think tanks, with a special focus on partisan think tanks. The fourth, based on different theoretical contributions, proposes a framework for the study of partisan think tanks, with four critical dimensions. The fifth section applies this framework to Pensar Foundation, examining its origins, evolution, and performance within the party's structure. Finally, some general conclusions are presented, and future research is suggested.

The relationship between knowledge and politics

The relationship between knowledge and politics originates around two processes that become intertwined on the first half of the 20th century: "*the strengthening of the State as a central entity of social regulation*" (Camou, 2006:143), which generated a growing demand for specialized knowledge to fulfil increasingly differentiated tasks; and the progressive specialization and professionalization of scientific disciplines, especially social disciplines (Camou, 2006). The growing complexity of the problems faced by governments began to require specific knowledge to inform public decision-making (Wallace, 1998), increasing the prominence of the figure of the expert as a possessor of technical knowledge who is able to inform the solution of concrete policy problems (Camou, 2006:42).

This offer of knowledge with a practical utility (Morresi & Vommaro, 2011:15) is what prompts decision-makers to increasingly call on experts to define, explain, and discuss public policy problems and establish criteria and procedures for their resolution (Pereyra, 2011). Its applicability is what distinguishes expert knowledge from other types of knowledge[5] (Morresi & Vommaro, 2011). Morresi & Vommaro (2011) identify two other functions attributable to expert knowledge in relation to politics and policy

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2. There have been some foundations of short durability linked to some leaders.

3. The Pensar Foundation will be referred to alternatively as Pensar or Pensar Foundation.

4. Or of some of its variants: link between research and public policy, between ideas and politics, between experts and politics, social influence of research, among others. Indeed, many times, these reflections have sought to understand the nature of the influence of the first field (the knowledge emanating from social disciplines) in the second (politics) (Brunner, 1993; Camou, 2006; Mendizabal & Correa Aste, 2011; Morresi & Vommaro, 2011; Tanaka, Barrenechea & Morel, 2011).

5. In this regard, Botto argues that while in the past competition in the production of knowledge was guided by the criteria of academic excellence, at present, the criteria used to evaluate the usefulness and competitiveness of research are those of "*relevance, innovation and practical efficiency*" (2011: 88).

processes. One is the symbolic function, which refers to the legitimization of discourses and courses of action, insofar as their authority is claimed independently of any political project (Pereyra, 2014). The other one, represented in its bearers, is the ability to generate networks of contacts: experts usually deploy a series of academic credentials obtained in different institutions which endows them with a range of contacts that can be put into use in order to demonstrate and exert influence in the policy arena, but also to serve more prosaic functions such as the mobilization of resources.

> **Three characteristics of expert knowledge give it special consideration in the field of politics: its applicability (instrumental function), its capacity to legitimize courses of action (symbolic function) and its ability to mobilize contacts (networking function).**

To summarize, three characteristics of expert knowledge give it special consideration in the field of politics and public policy: its applicability (instrumental function), its capacity to legitimize courses of action (symbolic function) and its ability to mobilize contacts (networking function). Considering that think tanks are one of the spaces where expert knowledge is developed, and that they have been described as bridges between knowledge and politics (Garcé, 2006; Moreno, 2010), the study of these institutions has often been approached as a gateway to our understanding of this relationship (Acuña, 2009; Heredia, 2004 and 2011; Strazza, 2011).

Image: Pensar

Think tanks and the question of independence

Think tanks vary considerably both in terms of their physiognomy (size, structure, areas of study) and their imprint (some are more academic, others advocacy oriented, etc...). Given their diversity, many have argued that think tanks should be understood through the functions they perform rather than based on their institutional features (Stone & Garnett, 1998; Acuña, 2009). Two functions are of importance to understand think tanks: the production of knowledge through research as a central activity; and the use of that knowledge to influence public policy decisions[6].

Despite some common functions these organizations manifest themselves in many different ways in their various contexts (Garcé & Uña, 2006), according to the socio-historical processes (Acuña, 2009), national political cultures, institutional arrangements (Stone & Garnett, 1998), and legal traditions that characterize their countries. One of the most important caveats in understanding their different national traditions revolves around their independence from other stakeholders.

For example, the American tradition is one of the best-established ones, and suggests that think tanks are relatively autonomous institutions that participate in the analysis of politics independently of governments, political parties, and pressure groups. But, in Asian countries, think tanks are often found inside corporations (Stone, Denham & Garnett, 1998). Chinese think tanks are sponsored by the government and their researchers work within the framework of patron–client relationships with political leaders. In Malaysia and other East Asian countries, think thanks are semi-independent and often have close interaction with government or political figures (Stone, 2005). In Russia, many think tanks operate within government (Sandle, 1998). In Germany, majority parties have their own political foundations, supported directly or indirectly by the State (Fieschi & Gaffney, 1998). And in Latin America, it is common to find think tanks sponsored by political leaders, as well as institutions with a noticeable alignment with ideologies. This brief journey through the diversity of national and regional traditions in think tanks reinforces the idea that what defines these organizations is their specialization in the generation and dissemination of information and ideas about government problems and public policy in order to generate change in public policy decisions – whether or not they have affinity with, or adhere to, other actors in the political community.

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6. This does not imply that certain civil society organizations do not elaborate studies whose objective is the promotion of new policies or the change in specific policies, "*but this characteristic is not a necessary condition for its existence, as it does with think tanks*" (Strazza, 2011:14). A more specific appreciation of the differences between think tanks and NGOs can be found in Garate (2008).

Partisan think tanks: an overview

Think tank literature suggests there are numerous ways to approach the concept of partisan think tanks – often as a particular kind[7] – but there is no consensus over the attributes that define these organizations.

Baier and Bakvis (2001) argue that the relationship between political parties and think tanks can go from competition to collaboration, acquiring more formal or informal features according to national traditions. In Canada, think tanks operate directly on public opinion, presenting problems and policy alternatives, being perceived as competitors by parties. In the United States, two models are noteworthy: on the one hand, there are think tanks that are rarely associated with parties, although many of their employees come to work in government or parties; and on the other hand, the *vanity model* stands out, in which think tanks are established to support candidates in their electoral career or as party leaders (Baier & Bavkis, 2001). In the middle of the two North American models is the British case, in which parties turn to external think tanks to nourish their agendas of policy proposals. At the other end of this competition–collaboration continuum is Germany, with a very strong tradition of foundations linked to political parties.

Baier and Bavkis' (2001) work suggest a distinction between external and internal think tanks, also called organic (Strazza, 2011) or affiliated (Brown, Knox & Tolmie, 2014)[8]. According to the continuum proposed by the authors, *internal* think tanks would be at the collaborative end (the other end of the continuum being competition).

Different think tanks typologies highlight the existence of organizations linked to political parties. Uña (2006), for example, calls them political foundations. Their governing bodies are usually made up of party leaders, who guide the areas of study and the issues to be addressed in terms of the political situation and the priorities of public opinion. Their stability and sustainability depend in large part on the changes that take place in the political arena and on the fate of the political actors they are associated with.

Brown, Knox & Tolmie (2014) pay attention to target audiences to distinguish between *independent and affiliated think tanks*[9]: although both types seek to produce research and use it to influence public policy decisions, the former seek to act as source of information for all parties, while affiliated think tanks do so mainly for a particular political actor, orienting policy advice towards its interests. According to these authors, there are three ways in which think tanks can be affiliated to a party: having a formal or statutory affiliation; have an informal affiliation to a party and work towards making policy proposals for it; or not present an explicit or formal affiliation, but work guided by a specific ideology that is mostly represented by a party on the political spectrum (Brown, Knox and Tolmie, 2014).

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7. For example, Uña's (2006) think tank typology acknowledges the existence of four types of think tanks: (i) private research centers; (ii) academic centers; (iii) political foundations; and (iv) advocacy groups (2006). In another typology, Stone (2005) calls them organizations generated by politicians or political parties.

8. In this study, I use the following terms indistinctly to refer to think tanks that adhere to a political party: partisan, internal, affiliated, organic or political foundations.

9. Note that the authors refer not only to partisan think tanks, but also to government think tanks.

Strazza focuses on advocacy strategies to establish a difference between external and internal think tanks: the former resort to strategies of indirect influence, while the latter establish "*direct, open and/ or formal collaboration schemes*" with political parties (2011:41). The author suggests the existence of three types of relationship between political foundations and political actors, which respond to different degrees of *organicity*: support for a political party, support for an individual political figure, and ideological proximity: "*The greatest organicity corresponds to think tanks that have been explicitly recognized as the intellectual arm of the party, the institutional space for the generation of knowledge*" (2011:52).

Garcé (2009) suggests considering as internal think tanks centers that are part of the structure of political parties, but warns that, in practice, this type of organization is not frequent. He accounts for two other recurrent situations that suggest the use of a broader definition: the existence of organizations that combine the task of fostering internal reflection and ideas with the training of party cadres, and the existence of structures created by factions of parties or political leaders, who work autonomously of the party though in close proximity to it.

> **(…) partisan think tanks as the *organizations dedicated to the generation of ideas related to policy and technical advice directed to the interests of a political party to which they explicitly adhere and with which they establish direct collaboration strategies.***

When it comes to influencing party decisions, internal think tanks have a few advantages over external ones. These advantages are comparable to the ones that Mackenzie, Pellini & Sutiyo (2015) identify for government think tanks: direct access to the party's decision-makers; an awareness of timeframes and entry points for advice that increase the possibility of uptake; a solid understanding of the programs and priorities of the party, so that the advice is adapted to its needs; being seen by politicians as one of us instead of one of them; the ability to provide critical advice in private; and the ability to coordinate with different areas of the party (members in government positions, parliamentarians, technical teams or referents) (2015:5).

In this paper, a definition of internal think tank is proposed that integrates attributes presented by different authors: the production of knowledge and the generation of ideas with a claim to influence, typical of the think tank category (Acuña, 2009), the explicit recognition of a political party as its target audience (Strazza, 2011), orienting advice to their interests (Brown, Knox & Tolmie, 2014), through direct collaboration strategies (Strazza, 2011). I propose to understand partisan think tanks as the *organizations dedicated to the generation of ideas related to policy and technical advice directed to the interests of a political party to which they explicitly adhere and with which they establish direct collaboration strategies*. Excluded from this definition are those research centers whose ideology coincides with certain political parties, or which construct implicit and circumstantial ideological alliances with these, but which define themselves as independent[10].

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10. For cases of non-partisan think tanks, who in practice demonstrate ideological affinity with a political party, see the relationship between CIEPLAN and the "Concertación" in Chile in Cociña & Toro (2009) and between FLACSO-Ecuador and "Alianza País" in Bellettini & Carrión (2009).

Image: Infobae

A framework for the study of partisan think tanks

The scarcity of studies on partisan think tanks suggests the importance of building a conceptual framework to advance the theory on this political actor. The framework presented below integrates four dimensions of analysis that, from the literature and interviews with experts[11], have been identified as relevant for the study of these organizations. The dimensions refer both to aspects related to the functioning of partisan think tanks as well as to the context in which they operate. These are: the party system, functions, strategic autonomy, and sustainability. A graphic representation of the framework is followed by the analysis of the dimensions.

Figure 1. Framework for the study of partisan think tanks

Political Party System

Political party

Functions
Strategic
autonomy
Sustainability
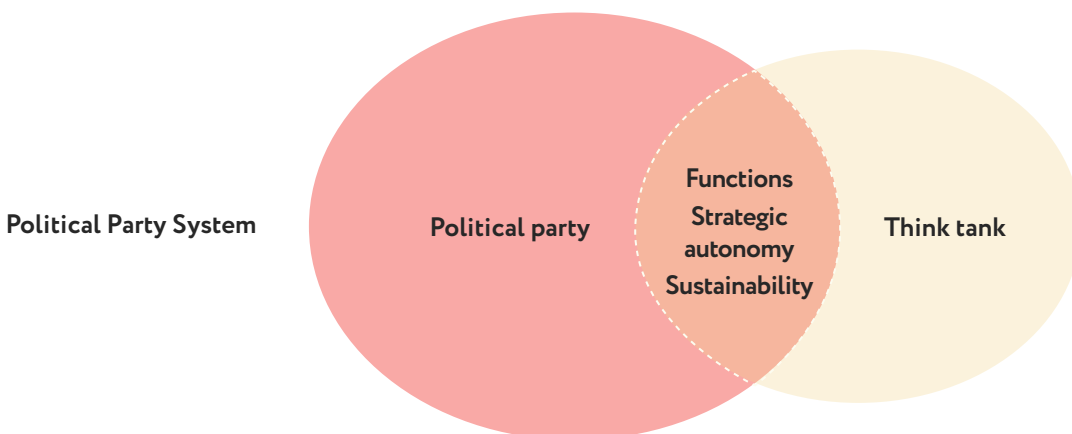
Think tank

Source: Author's elaboration

11. To build the framework for the study of partisan think tanks, I turned to the literature specialized in the link between expert knowledge and politics and particularly in the link between think tanks and political parties, think tanks and types of affiliations, and partisan think tanks. In addition, interviews were conducted with nine national and international experts in the world of think tanks and/or the relationship between expertise and politics.

The party system

The characteristics a political party system can help explain the type of think tanks that prevail in different societies and the relationship they establish with political parties (Wallace, 1998; Mendizabal, 2009; Garcé, 2009 and 2011; Botto, 2011; Tanaka, Barrenechea & Morel, 2011; Riorda, 2013). In particular, the degree of institutionalization of the type of party system[12] (Garcé, 2011) tends to influence which type of think tanks prevails. In stable or bipartisan systems, think tanks are also stable and partisan (Riorda, 2013). In party systems that are very fragmented, explicit partisan identification is not common (although ideological affinities may exist), and internal think tanks are more difficult to identify and describe (Mendizabal, 2009).

The degree of political competition[13], which is tightly linked to the type of party system, also affects the existence of internal think tanks, being more common in contexts of strong political competition, as they tend to generate greater demand for ideas (Brown, Knox & Tolmie, 2014)[14]. The characteristics of this competition also influence the existence of internal think tanks: if politics are programmatic, the rivalry between parties will be based on ideas, which favors the appearance of internal think tanks; if, on the contrary, the quality of public deliberation does not favor policy debates (being based on mere promises or more aggressive dynamics), the need to invest in generating of ideas is diminished (Echt, 2014), which hampers the emergence of medium and long-term knowledge production initiatives.

Functions

Baier and Bavkis (2001) have developed a typology of the possible functions of a think tank for a political party in the case of Canada, which has been adapted by Uña (2006) for Argentina. It is important to highlight that these functions, whose character is analytical, are developed on one function common to all think tanks: generate knowledge and influence public policy. In addition, these activities are part of the role of expert knowledge in relation to politics: instrumental, symbolic and network (Morresi & Vommaro, 2011).

1. *Think tanks as sounding boards*. Think tanks use their research and recommendations to promote spaces to meet, exchange, debate and negotiate (Ducoté, 2006) among a variety of actors in the political community. In particular, internal think tanks offer political leaders the opportunity to consider alternatives and develop their proposals outside the public sphere, becoming friendly (and safe) spaces for decision-makers to reflect, propose and experiment with new ideas.

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12. Drawing on Mainwaring and Scully (1996), Garcé defines the institutionalization of party systems based on four dimensions: (i) stability of the patterns of interparty competition, (ii) legitimacy of parties and elections, (iii) social roots of the parties and (iv) internal organization of the parties (2011:359).
13. In her study about political competition and political competitivity, Méndez argues that the former is defined by the following basic features. Above all, it is a set of structural conditions under which political parties have the chance to get into a competitive situation. Competition assumes there are opportunities to see alternation in power, that there is no monopoly nor control over the election, and that results are not predetermined. Moreover, competition implies that positions are disputed by two or more truly independent parties, with the same opportunities and rights to compete. Finally, the competition includes a consensus element, mutual trust in the rules of the game, legitimacy, and respect for them (2003:32).
14. At the same time, the authors argue that environments of low political competition conspire against the existence of affiliated think tanks, while think tanks will not want to pay the cost of confronting the ruling party.

2. *Think tanks as policy legitimators.* Through advice on the design and implementation of public policy, think tanks help legitimize the actions of political actors. Ammunition in "*battle of ideas*" (Stone, Denham & Garnett, 1998) is another benefit that political actors can obtain by forging ties with think tanks.

3. *Think tanks as knowledge networks.* Think tanks articulate networks of individuals and institutions, providing the party with preferential access to experts, even those from different ideologies. Experts who do not usually participate actively in politics find in these organizations a sheltered and unacknowledged environment of partisanship from which to debate ideas (Baier & Bavkis, 2001). Professionals with political ambitions find in internal think tanks platforms from which to jump to positions in the party or government. Networks can also be used to mobilize resources (Morresi & Aronskind, 2011).

4. *Think tanks as support to political activity.* Internal think tanks support political activity by developing, disseminating and adapting the proposals of a political sector or candidate. In electoral periods, internal think tanks can underpin the positioning of candidates or referents of the party.

5. *Think tanks as money pipelines.* Given the nature of foundations of many of these organizations, internal think tanks can allow the channeling of resources to the party or candidates (whether from the private sector or from international cooperation) (Baier & Bavkis, 2001).

These functions are not mutually exclusive, are not always clearly defined and, in practice, think tanks tend to carry out more than one of them simultaneously. The functions indicate what is the strategic pattern that these organizations choose to achieve their objective (Strazza, 2011), and their different modalities and levels of participation in the public policy process. Based on these functions, Garcé distinguishes three main types of partisan foundations: (i) oriented to the generation of inputs for public policy; (ii) oriented to the promotion of political debate and theoretical reflection; and (iii) oriented to the training of cadres (2009:39).

This diversity of functions has led Thompson (1994) to argue that the purposes of political foundations tend to be comprehensive and unspecific, which broadens their field of action and allows them to reorient their activities according to political circumstances. One aspect that inevitably alters the work dynamics of internal think tanks are electoral campaigns (Uña, 2006; Cociña & Toro, 2009), periods in which they focus on three main functions (Cociña & Toro, 2009), which can be grouped within the functions identified by Baier & Bavkis (2001) and Uña (2006): the generation of inputs for the proposals of the candidates of the party (*support to political activity*), the building of campaign messages that feed the speeches of the candidates (*policy legitimators*), and the recruitment of cadres and party operators (*knowledge networks*).

Finally, it is worth examining the research function in internal think tanks. Although this is a central feature of the think tank category, and usually has a prominent place in their mission, the production of knowledge through research is one of the least likely functions to be developed as a systematic activity by internal think tanks (Thompson, 1994; Baier & Bavkis, 2001; Mackenzie, Pellini & Sutiyo, 2015). In them, research is limited to advising legislators, visualising future scenarios to determine possible courses of action, and designing government plans. Internal think tanks tend to operate as intermediaries (brokers) or information managers (Mackenzie, Pellini & Sutiyo, 2015), opting for the contracting of third-party services for research purposes.

Strategic autonomy

As discussed above, the issue of independence is recurrent in think tank literature. Acuña (2009) assigns think tanks the category of *actor*, which suggests that in order to fulfill their role (production of specialized knowledge to influence policies), they must have strategic action capacity, defined as the "*ability to identify interests, define objectives according to them, design a course of action to achieve these objectives and have relative autonomy to implement this course of action*" (Acuña, 2009:19). This autonomy is independent of whether or not they are embedded in more comprehensive institutions, be it universities, business foundations, trade unions or political parties, that is, in other words an affiliated think tank could be (or not) autonomous depending on where it stands in relation to that definition.

In this regard, Mackenzie, Pellini & Sutiyo (2015) identify a series of challenges that governement think tanks face due to *being inside* which also apply to partisan think tanks. These are: difficulties in criticising the party; the risk of becoming a mere support center without the capacity and space to analyze and propose policies or participate in the party´s strategy; the potential overlap with the functions of other areas within the party structure (communication teams or parliamentary advisors); and competition with external think tanks (2015:5).

The notion of a think tank as an autonomous actor is interesting when it comes to analyzing internal think tanks: How do the attributes of actor (concerting autonomy) and agent (organizational resource) (Acuña, 2009) interact in the functioning of an internal think tank? How can it be autonomous and at the same time functional to the political party? Can the measure of autonomy be the same for internal think tanks and external think tanks? The answers to these questions will be addressed through the analysis of the case study and in the conclusions.

Sustainability

Electoral processes are often critical milestones for internal think tanks (Uña, 2006; Cociña & Toro, 2009), as parties require ideas and projects to prepare for office (Stone & Garnett, 1998:15). In addition, their clear identification with a political party means that their life cycle is closely tied to their electoral fate (Thompson, 1994), and they tend to have shorter life spans than other think tanks (Strazza, 2011).

> **Electoral processes are often critical milestones for internal think tanks , as parties require ideas and projects to prepare for office.**

The fluctuations of the political-electoral cycle generate a constitutive uncertainty to partisan think tanks: both victory and defeat in elections generate an organizational cost. In a scenario of victory, it is highly probable that members of the think tank join the new government, significantly affecting its work capacity, which could lead, in extremes, to the emptying of the organization. In addition, Garcé warns that political parties entering government diminish the interest in expert advice by politicians (2006:314). But it is not only a matter of disinterest, but also of competition, as parties in government have available the information, and structure, of the State, which diminishes their demands of technical inputs from think tanks (Tanaka, Vera & Barrenechea, 2009; Gallardo, Garcé & Ravecca, 2010; Cociña & Toro, 2009). On the other hand, an electoral defeat also affects the sustainability of the think tank, as many organizations are created with the objective of obtaining victory. Additionally, maintaining them in non-electoral periods is expensive, especially for opposition parties, who do not have access to the government´s budget to commission research, and private sector funding is more difficult to maintain in the face of defeat.

Image: Mauricio Macri for Creative Commons

Case Study: Pensar Foundation and the party Propuesta Republicana (PRO)

Methodology

The research follows a case study methodology. The systematization of primary and secondary sources was carried out between the last quarter of 2014 and the last quarter of 2015. Existing documentation of Pensar Foundation was reviewed, including its website, publications and other public products until 2015. Moreover, 28 in-depth interviews were conducted: 13 to members of Pensar in its various stages, 14 to referents of the political party[15], and one to an academic specialized in the study of PRO. The study also reviewed articles from digital editions of Argentine newspapers and other news portals.

About Pensar Foundation

In Argentina, the strongest development and growth of political foundations occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s after the end of last dictatorship[16] (Thompson, 1994). The 1990s saw the emergence of new foundations under the paradigm of *technopolitics*, mostly of a neoliberal nature, many of which managed to position cadres in the public administration (Heredia, 2004). However, partisan think tanks in Argentina were and remain scarce compared to other types of think tanks (Strazza, 2011). The interviews carried out with national experts and the press articles reviewed suggest that, by 2015, the Pensar Foundation was the most consolidated political foundation with the greatest amount of activity[17], as well as the one most akin to the think tank label.

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15. This division of roles has been done for analytical purposes, as many interviewees held many of these roles simultaneously: at Pensar, the party and the public administration of the City of Buenos Aires.

16. Argentina was under military rule between 1976 and 1983.

17. See, for example: El Estadista, "La Fundación Pensar se prepara para 2015", May 7th, 2015. Available here: http://elestadista.com.ar/?p=4370.

PRO is one of the youngest parties in the Argentine political spectrum. It formally emerged in 2005 as an electoral alliance between the parties *Compromiso para el Cambio, Recrear para el Crecimiento and Partido Federal*[18]. Core members began to meet at the end of 2000 in the context of one of the most important political-economic crises in the country's recent history. The group expressed a pro-market ideological orientation. Along with former cadres from other forces and businessmen with a public vocation, the group relied heavily on the *NGO faction* (Morresi, Vommaro & Belotti, 2015)[19], drawing on young professionals from think tanks and other non-profits linked to research and the promotion of public policy. The reliance on professionals with a research and non-profit background gave PRO its imprint, being key in its conformation and evolution as a political force. Since 2007, and for three consecutive periods (2007-2011, 2011-2015 and 2015-2019), PRO has governed in the City of Buenos Aires, the capital of the country. In 2015, in addition to retaining the City, the party, under the *Cambiemos* alliance[20], won the presidential elections as well as the government of the Province of Buenos Aires (the largest district in the country). These three victories strengthened PRO (and the *Cambiemos* alliance) as a political force on a national scale (Mauro, 2015).

Four stages stand out in the evolution of Pensar Foundation until 2015:

> *Origin and ideological affinity (2003-2007).* In the aftermath of the 2003 presidential elections, a group of people with political and intellectual trajectory agreed that ideas linked to a free market, limited government and the private sector as a motor, had not been represented in the political arena after the crisis of 2001. Inspired mostly by the Foundation for Analysis and Social Studies (FAES)[21], the group sought to bring likeminded people closer through the organization of meetings or seminars. Aware of the growing political career of Mauricio Macri and PRO, the group began to identify a leader capable of raising the ideas they proclaimed. At the same time, PRO began to see in this heterogeneous group another space from which to support its rising power. In 2005, the group acquired legal status and became the Pensar Foundation.

> *Growth and partisan overturn (2007-2010).* PRO's victory in the 2007 elections in the City of Buenos Aires was a key milestone for Pensar. The growth of the party as a political force accelerated the bond with Pensar and increased it´s standing as a partisan organization. Some of its members joined the government of the City, others were elected legislators, while others moved away from the growing partisanship of Pensar, seeking to protect their perceived independence as professionals. At the same time, other foundations close to PRO were weakened by the migration of their main cadres to the public administration, which reinforced the protagonism of Pensar. However, between 2007 and 2010, Pensar did see a deceleration of its activity[22] as most of its members had moved to the public administration.

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18. Compromise for Change, Recreate Growth and Federal Party.

19. Morresi, Vommaro and Belotti (2015) argue that the heterogeneity that characterizes PRO can be organized into five factions: the "right wing faction", the "business faction", the "radical faction", the "Peronist faction" and the "NGO faction" (acronym for "non-governmental organizations"). This last faction refers to young professionals who joined the new party, coming from foundations, think tanks and other NGOs linked to research and the promotion of public politics. Pensar is part of the "NGO faction".

20. Cambiemos is a national political coalition founded in 2015 to compete in the elections, with Mauricio Macri as its presidential candidate. Its main members are Propuesta Republicana, Coalición Cívica ARI and Unión Cívica Radical.

21. Created in 1989 by the former president of Spain and leader of the Popular Party, José María Aznar.

22. Stages of deceleration are very common for think tanks affiliated for political parties.

Institutionalization of partisanship (2010-2011). As PRO decided to compete in the 2011 presidential elections, it also decided to relaunch Pensar and assigned it the work of preparing government plans (this strategy had been used for the management of the City of Buenos Aires and had given good results). The new roles assigned to Pensar were inspired by Policy Exchange, a UK think tank defined as independent, but which had performed as a plan maker and provider of cadres for Boris Johnson's government, when he was elected in 2008 as mayor of London. The hiring of Miguel Braun[23], one of the most experienced think tankers in the country, as executive director, gave Pensar the stamp of think tank. Pensar began to attract technical profiles: academics, political cadres and young professionals. The board of directors, made up of more than 30 of the most prominent PRO leaders, reinforced and made explicit the partisan link. In June 2010 the Pensar Foundation was referred to by the public as "*the PRO's ideas factory*". However, during the electoral year, Macri, candidate of PRO, withdrew his candidacy, causing a new deceleration in Pensar's activity.

Consolidation and key piece of the political-electoral construction (2011-2015). After the 2011 failed candidacy, Pensar began to support the party in preparing for the 2015 elections. This four-year period, in which PRO grew as a national political force, allowed Pensar to rearrange itself within the party´s structure, manage its growth, and professionalize and diversify its functions. This stage would culminate with the victory of the party, under the Cambiemos alliance, in the 2015 presidential elections.

Analysis of the experience of a partisan think tank: Pensar Foundation

The analysis of the experience of Pensar, and its linkages with PRO, applies the four dimensions of the framework presented earlier: the party system, the functions of the think tank, its strategic autonomy and its sustainability.

PARTY SYSTEM

The literature on Argentina'a party system highlights its weak institutionalization, especially since the 2001 crisis (Abal Medina & Suárez Cao, 2002; Torre, 2003; Calvo & Escolar, 2005; Leiras, 2007). Moreover, the matrix of political-partisan competition in the country (Camou, 2006) suggests that Argentinean parties are far from being programmatic, and that there is a deep personalization in them. Applying the concept of political knowledge regimes, Garcé (2014) suggests that in Argentina the level of public deliberation and the use of research by decision makers are low. These characteristics undermine the incentives of political parties to create internal technical capacities that support the design of electoral proposals and public policy (Heredia, 2011).

PRO's decision to configure a space for the generation of ideas seems to go against what is expected in this context, at least in two aspects. First, in contexts with a fragmented party systems such as the post-2001 Argentina, explicit party identifications are not common (Mendizabal, 2009). However, it should be noted that while Pensar as an ideological group began in a framework of fragmented and unstable party systems, its consolidation as a party organization took place with the increasing positioning of PRO as a national opposition party (Mauro, 2015) in a context of strong polarization with two well-defined political forces: the *Kirchnerismo*, the ruling party until 2015, and PRO, under the Cambiemos alliance.

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23. Co-founder and former director of the Center for the Implementation of Public Policy promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC), one of the most influential external think tanks in Argentina.

Second, in a context where political competition is usually not programmatic, and in which incentives for the creation of an internal think tank are scarce, PRO opted for a long-term project of knowledge production, differentiating itself from other political actors. The importance that PRO gave to expert knowledge since its inception, and the contribution of Pensar to the national political building (see Functions), explain the reasons for its existence. Nonetheless, the political polarization prevailing in the country did determine many of the functions of Pensar (at least until 2015). In particular, the power distribution (with PRO as a legislative opposition) and the limited programmatic dialogue that existed in Parliament, affected Pensar's capacity to influence current parliamentary and public debates, hence it prioritized the design of future government plans.

FUNCTIONS

As mentioned, Pensar Foundation was relaunched in 2010 as PRO's think tank, with the aim of underpinning Macri's presidential aspirations through the elaboration of government proposals. A news article stated about this "*The idea behind this is that in order to talk about the great national issues, he needs to have access to knowledge, and at the same time install his candidacy in the public debate.*"[24]

The key functions carried out by Pensar from its origins, but mostly from 2010 to 2015, are:

Support to political activity

Design of government plans. Macri declared in 2010: "*If we want to ask people for their trust, we have to know how to tell them what we are going to do and with whom we are going to do it*"[25]. The government plans would generate trust about the actions of PRO in case it reached office, and would allow it to adapt to the national public administration, a terrain hitherto unknown to PRO. The work to develop government plans was organized in three blocks (economic, social and institutional), building a systemic and interdisciplinary view of policies. Party's referents or people linked to the management of Buenos Aires City were involved in the development of plans: politicians suggested the thick line of the policy to work on, and the technical teams introduced solidity and specificity to the proposal. The methodology included a diagnostic and a proposal phase. The proposals were validated in round tables with internal and external actors. Macri met regularly with the tables to be updated on progress. In some cases, policy briefs were produced and uploaded to Pensar's website; in other cases the documents were only for the party's internal use.

Advice to Members of Parliament. In 2011, Pensar incorporated the figure of legislative liaison, with the aim of strengthening the work with PRO and with other associated parties in the parliamentary bloc. It was an important space for Pensar to occupy, as it gave them access to national politics[26]. A member of Pensar was present at PRO´s national parliamentarians bloc meetings, contributing to the revision of bills in discussion and bringing technical information as an input for voting in the Congress. This support included periodic meetings with the heads of the office and other advisers to the legislators. Additionally, Pensar encouraged parliamentarians to join their round tables.

24. La Política Online, "El gabinete en las sombras de Macri que trabaja para la presidencial del 2011", March 2, 2010. Available here: http://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/42718/.

25. El Estadista, "La Fundación Pensar se prepara para 2015", May 7, 2015. Available here: http://elestadista.com.ar/?p=4370.

26. Until winning the 2015 presidential elections, PRO governed only in the City of Buenos Aires.

Support to territorial political construction. The Federal Network (Red Federal) was a space created within Pensar in 2012, with the aim of supporting PRO's territorial expansion as a national force, especially ahead of the 2015 elections. Although the Network started as a sounding board, organizing talks and seminars in the provinces, they soon realized that there was room to achieve a more permanent presence. New Pensar headquarters began to be opened in the provinces, with resources from local private financing, and the support of the national office. The provincial headquarters attracted individuals who wanted to collaborate in the election campaign (*network function*) and, over time, became strategic in: the identification of subnational candidates, putting together work teams, creating spaces for debate on local public policy, generating campaign content for the provincial candidates, and fostering links between civil society, private sector, academics, politicians and neighbors.

> **The discussion of government plans was also an opportunity to nurture a national network of leaders who wanted to join the debate and who also contributed with their grassroots activism and territorial building.**

Knowledge networks

Recruitment of political leaders. The discussion of government plans was also an opportunity to nurture a national network of leaders who wanted to join the debate and who also contributed with their grassroots activism and territorial building. These leaders, for their part, approached these spaces to generate contacts and networks within the party.

Recruitment of technical profiles. A *raison d'être* for Pensar was to be a quarry for PRO to recruit members, as the party was in constant development[27]. For many of these people the incentive was to potentially occupy a position in government. Thus, assembling plans and training technical teams to carry them forward were two aspects of the same objective. The search for talent also acquired a legitimizing character as it helped showcase the party as a space that cared about the capacity of future decision makers.

Relationship with journalists and influencers. An important communicational goal was building relationships with opinion leaders, especially journalists. The op-eds and the organization of meetings between Pensar's experts and journalists, were some of the strategies carried out. In addition, Pensar's members appeared on television programs to discuss issues of the political agenda, which contributed to legitimize PRO.

Building international networks. Although, not an explicit aim, Pensar engaged with organizations such as FAES, sponsoring international events and seminars in Argentina, or participating in courses and meetings in Spain. The insertion in these networks earned Pensar international recognition, positioning it as one of the leading partisan think tanks in Latin America in 2013, and the only one in Argentina, in the renowned ranking developed by the University of Pennsylvania (McGann, 2014). These international recognitions were also capitalized by PRO leaders to highlight the technical profile of the party.

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27. Indeed, Pensar was only one of the spaces that PRO created and fostered to recruit members from different sectors and with different profiles. For instance, while Pensar fostered technical experts, other spaces focused on recruiting members of the private sector.

Sounding board

The different phases of the design of government plans were conducted in dialogue with relevant sectors, in weekly round tables aimed at creating consensus and validating policy proposals with academics, businessmen, politicians and government teams. Moreover, Pensar participated in the *battle of ideas* by organizing public events to which different actors were invited to discuss an agenda of strategic national issues, transcending the partisan discussion.

Policy legitimator

Generation of inputs for candidates' proposals, and construction of campaign messages. Pensar generated the discursive content, especially in the electoral campaign. This required a fluid relationship with the party's communication team, which requested inputs from Pensar and worked together on its refinement before they were made public.

Positioning of PRO as the new politics. The symbolic function of Pensar has been critical in the political building of the party. According to Morresi and Vommaro (2013), the main difference between new and established parties is the way of doing politics, not so much their content. Throughout its growth, PRO showed itself as the *new politics*, in contraposition to the *old politics*, which were short-termed, hierarchical and personalistic. The figure of the think tank contributed to the construction of a new image that PRO wanted to promote:

- An organization like a think tank helps raise the bar of planning, as opposed to the systematic improvisation typical of the *old politics*.
- Planning comes with a managerial approach to policy: "*For each aggression [of the National Government], we offer a proposal*"[28], was one of the main slogans of PRO's electoral campaign.
- Pensar's work contributed to raising the importance of evidence as an input for decision-making, again in opposition to *old politics* which relies more on intuition and ideology.
- The multi-stakeholder round tables that Pensar organized reinforced the idea of dialogue and consensus as a way of doing politics.
- The emphasis on the capacity of their teams was one of PRO's major selling points in the 2015 elections: the expertise of Pensar's technical teams, most of them with postgraduate studies, certified the parties' future actions.
- Unlike the *old politics*, in which the ideological commitment is what bring activists to the parties, PRO's activists presented a more technical profile, with Pensar as the maximum exponent of that *expert activism*.

Money pipeline

Although this was not explicit, Pensar's non-profit status made it a financial conduit to support PRO's political activity, channelling contributions of private sector's representatives, who felt more comfortable financing a foundation rather than a party.

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28. In Spanish "Por cada agresión [del Gobierno Nacional], nosotros ofrecemos una propuesta".

Analyzing Pensar's work Miguel Braun, Executive Director between 2010 and 2015, reflected: "*Pensar's approach needed to be technical, electoral and political*". The analysis of Pensar's functions show how it responded to typical functions of expert knowledge providers and think tanks. In summary they: undertook the design of government plans; worked with parliamentarians as a key function of knowledge and as support for their political activity; organized round table discussions, talks and seminars to discuss and present their ideas; generated discursive content as a symbolic function and as policy legitimators; and it linked with other actors to strengthen its knowledge network.

Reflecting on these functions leads to ask to what extent Pensar produced knowledge applied to public policy (a distinctive aspect of think tanks). The answer is that more than a knowledge producer (with research as a systematic activity), Pensar performed as a knowledge broker (Mackenzie, Pellini & Sutiyo, 2015). It generated evidence by commissioning studies from third parties (consultants, external think tanks, universities) that were discussed with other stakeholders, and drawing on that evidence and discussion it elaborated government plans and produce discursive content.

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STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

One of Pensar's founders argued, in an interview, that the organisation had been a success, achieving the goals it was founded for. In its evolution from ideological group to partisan think tank, Pensar achieved recognition both internally (with the party) and externally (with the media and other audiences). From 2011 onwards, Pensar went through an institutionalization process and, as it professionalised, it grew in importance, becoming more relevant for the party as it clarified its role within it. First, as a space where government plans were designed and technical profiles were recruited, and later, as a structure to support the party's territorial expansion, Pensar managed to be recognized by PRO as "*one of us*". However, the positioning of Pensar within PRO's structure was not straightforward and required a process of mutual learning and adaptation.

The first factor that explains the success of Pensar and its integration with PRO is the explicit support that Macri provided to it (and the direct access to the party's leader that it entailed). Thus, while Pensar legitimized PRO, the party's leader support also legitimized the think tank. A second factor was the clear division that PRO's leaders established between the party, as a political space, and Pensar as a technical one, thus giving it a specific function and making it attractive to new collaborators. Third, in 2011 Pensar initiated a process of professionalizing its communication strategy, which proved essential to linking it to the party explicitly. Fourth, Pensar provided strategic political analysis, which increased it prestige within the party's structure, this line of work contributed to achieving political–electoral objectives, like the territorial expansion to the provinces. Fifth, Pensar showed partisan discipline and avoided clashing with the political goals of the party, for example on several occasions it had to lower its media profile and/or remove documents from its website that could affect electoral objectives. Sixth, the pursue of the party's goals meant, in practice, a lack of ownership over an agenda; following the traditional features of political foundations, Pensar's agenda was PRO's agenda (Morresi, Vommaro &

Bellotti, 2015). It's agenda was a reactive one, on the demand of the party, and shadowing the debates in the national political agenda (Uña, 2006).

Pensar's path to recognition and acceptance as PRO's think tank required a balanced and strategic management of two attributes: being an actor with autonomy, but also an agent (an organizational resource to PRO) (Acuña, 2009). Pensar's experience suggests that, in partisan think tanks, the management of that balance responds to the political objectives and context, so it is not stable but in constant movement. In that sense, the question is whether it is possible to demand of internal think tanks the same autonomy as from external ones, since, after all, their objective is first to be functional to the party to which they respond to. When analyzing internal think tanks, it seems more useful to draw a continuum that goes from greater to lesser autonomy with respect to the party, a continuum that the think tank navigates according to its needs and circumstances.

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SUSTAINABILITY

The different cycles that Pensar has gone through, since its foundation, have been influenced by electoral campaigns and the results of elections. For example, the work started in 2011 had as its exclusive horizon the 2015 presidential elections. Furthermore, the dynamics of political competition had a direct impact on the organizational density of Pensar, for many people joined as PRO grew in the polls, which changed its work balance. Moreover, as the electoral process approached, the discussion of public policy and work on government plans was relegated in favor of the construction of candidacies and territorial activism (for example by 2015 the Federal Network acquired great importance, representing 75% of Pensar's activities).

In 2015, when the interviews for this research were taking place, the electoral campaign was starting. The interviewees imagined different paths for Pensar in the face of victory or defeat scenarios for PRO. All interviews confirmed the constitutive uncertainty about the future of the think tank. The elections, beyond the results, are a critical moment that mobilizes the think tank and its members, forcing them to imagine new scenarios (both as individuals and collectively). The transition of leadership and adaptating to different scenarios emerged as the main concern. Furthermore, sustainability was also tied to funding, and a scenario of defeat would affect the support of the private sector's the most, as their support tends to be tied to the party's victory in the elections.

On November 22, 2015, a ballotage took place between Mauricio Macri, candidate for the Cambiemos alliance, and Daniel Scioli, for the ruling party Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory). The former was elected by a narrow margin (51% to 49%). In addition, PRO retained the City of Buenos Aires, and surprised everyone with a victory in the province of Buenos Aires, the largest one of the country. Additionally, numerous victories were achieved at the municipal level.

The electoral success created a challenge not only for Pensar but, above all, for the party itself, which had to manage the strong political growth that followed. After the elections, PRO and Cambiemos had to cover many positions in government. Pensar became one of the main sources of human resources, and its members filled positions at all levels of the national and subnational government structure (including

ministers and secretariats[29]).The appointment of members in key government positions accounts for Pensar's influential role, however it left the organization headless and without active members[30].

Additionally, like Pensar's members, members of PRO's NGO faction (Morresi, Vommaro & Belotti, 2015) also occupied key posts in the new national cabinet and in the governance of different territories of the country. Expert knowledge thus occupied a central place in the new government administration. Four days after the second round and considering the first appointments for the future Cabinet of Ministers, one of the largest Argentinean newspapers had as headline: "*Macri designates a cabinet with strong technical imprint and some politicians*"[31].

> **Pensar's experience confirms the constitutive uncertainty that exists in partisan think tanks. The fate of the party, resulting mainly from election results, is what determines the new form and functions of the think tank.**

Pensar's experience confirms the *constitutive uncertainty* that exists in partisan think tanks. The fate of the party, resulting mainly from election results, is what determines the new form and functions of the think tank. In the case of Pensar: the migration of some of the most important members to public administration in the 2009 and 2015 elections, its expansion due to the arrival of new collaborators, or the changing weight of the different areas, shows the impact of electoral cycles in the life of an internal think tank.

The research for this paper ended with PRO's electoral victory under the Cambiemos alliance in November 2015, but some press articles releases since have shed light on the future of Pensar. After the lethargy that happened after the election of 2015, Pensar came back to activity at the beginning of 2018 in preparation for the 2019 presidential elections[32]. Their social networks, one of PRO´s main channels to connect with followers, were injected with new activity in this period. Appealing to the Federal Network scheme, key in PRO's territorial expansion in 2015, the renewed agenda of Pensar has emphasized working in the provinces: with PRO governing and established at the national level, it now needs a think tank that supports the provincial candidacies.

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29. For example, Jorge Triaca, first executive director of the foundation in 2009, was appointed Minister of Labor, Employment and Social Security; Francisco Cabrera, president of the foundation between 2010 and 2015, assumed the role of Minister of Production, adding to his team other members of Pensar; and Miguel Braun, executive director from2010, served as Secretary of Commerce.

30. In January 2016, an Argentinean political news portal suggested that Pensar "*run out of people and is closed*". La Política Online, "La Fundación Pensar se quedó sin gente y está cerrada", January 28, 2016. Available here: https://www.lapoliticaonline.com/nota/95600/

31. La Nación, "Macri designa un gabinete con fuerte impronta técnica y algunos políticos", November 26, 2015.

32. Ámbito Financiero, "Relanzan Fundación Pensar mirando 2019", January 15. 2018. Available here: https://www.ambito.com/relanzan-fundacion-pensar-mirando-2019-n4009355

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the relationship between a partisan think tank and a political party, illustrated in the case of Pensar Foundation and the PRO party, and sought to understand the linkage between knowledge and politics in this framework. The resulting work contributes to the study of internal think tanks, which are seldom explored in think tank literature. One of the key contributions of the paper is the framework elaborated to analyze the relatioship between the think tank and the political party. Said frameworkd integrated four dimensions: the party system, the functions of the think tank, its strategic autonomy, and its sustainability.

Applying this framework to the case study yields the following findings. First, the origin of Pensar suggests that the creation of an internal think tank – although related to the features of the party system, the dynamics of political competition, and the features of the political knowledge regime– depends on characteristics of the associated party and the value it gives to expert knowledge *vis a vis* its political goals. Second, this case study shows that the technical knowledge housed in a partisan think tank fulfills three important functions in politics: a) it generates inputs created to be applied (instrumental function), such as the government plans drawn up by Pensar; b) it legitimizes the discourse and action of the party (symbolic function), strengthening its profile and technocratic credentials, and; c) it expands the political–institutional linkages of the party (network function). Third, Pensar's evolution indicates that the integration of the think tank into the party's structure requires a process of mutual adaptation, and the think tank striking a balance between being an autonomous actor and an agent (an organizational resource to the party), but also aware that the political goals prevail over technical ones. Fourth, Pensar's experience confirms the constitutive uncertainty that underpins any partisan think tank, as its evolution (and that of its members) depends largely on the performance of the party in elections.

The framework proposed and the case study contribute to deepening the knowledge of the link between expertise and politics. Further research should focus on finding out the role of expert knowledge played within PRO when governing at the national level. Other research questions include: Is the link between knowledge and politics proposed by PRO different when compared to other party traditions in the country? To what extent were the government plans elaborated by Pensar implemented once the teams took office? Was the role of the internal think tank as important for PRO as the ruling party as it was for PRO as oppositor? What role will the Pensar Foundation have in the 2019 presidential elections in which PRO will seek to be re-elected? Furthermore, to what extent has the evolution of PRO as a national force contributed to cementing the importance of expert knowledge in the formulation and implementation of policies? Will the internal think tank be a model that arouses the interest of other political forces?

Relevant questions also arise for the current political context in Latin America, which shows a growing turn towards neoliberal governments (in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia, among others). What kind of link between expert knowledge and politics propose the forces that arise and are established in power in different countries of the region? What kind of political foundations are built to support these political processes? What characteristics of the political, economic, social and cultural context favor the creation of these institutions? To what extent can the concept of "expert activism" explain new forms of political activism in contexts where political contests and public policy decisions are increasingly defined in the field of communication and technologies? The study of other cases of partisan think tanks in the region and in other latitudes in light of the proposed framework would allow testing the validity of the latter.

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