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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Protest Policing and Political Dynamics: Violent Repression in Democratic Argentina

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ABSTRACT:
This paper integrates perspectives from subnational political dynamics, social movements, and police studies to examine how police responses to protest events are shaped by political considerations alongside the specific characteristics of the protests themselves. Drawing on newspaper accounts and in-depth interviews, the study analyzes variations in police responses to protests in Argentina between 1997 and 2007—a period marked by widespread social unrest and public demonstrations. The findings suggest that, in this context, police repression and protest management were influenced not only by the nature of the protests but also by broader political decisions and entrenched illiberal structures (Behrend and Whitehead, 2017). While these dynamics are particularly evident in Argentina's federal system and history of contentious politics, they may also provide insights into broader patterns of protest policing in other contexts.

KEYWORDS:
Argentina, criminalization of protest, illiberal structures, police violence, protest policing, social movements, subnational politics

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1. Introduction

The period between 1997 and 2007 in Argentina was characterized by hundreds of protests and public demonstrations in streets, parks, bridges, and both private and public spaces. Most of these actions by demonstrators were peaceful and did not result in disruptions or violence. However, human rights groups complained of an increase in police violence against protesters during this period (CELS 1998,

2002; CORREPI 2007). Despite regular elections, freedom of speech, and clear democratization policies, there were serious accusations of state violence during successive administrations, ranging from torture of suspects in police custody to *gatillo fácil* (easy trigger) deaths, police harassment of youth, and persecution of challengers to the government.

Police use of violence at protest events is a common denominator in many democracies. There is, therefore, a growing literature on the policing of protests and what has been known as the criminalization of protest events. One line of research focuses on features of protests themselves, which are expected to result in different degrees of repression (Earl 2003, 2011). This approach draws attention to threats —characteristics of the protest event, such as the number of participants, levels of violence, or the disruptiveness of the tactics used— that may trigger police repression (Davenport 2000, Earl 2003, Earl et al 2003). This "threat approach" argues that larger threats to political elites predict greater repression in terms of frequency and severity. Another line of inquiry emphasizes a blue approach to protest policing where the situational threats posed by protesters to those agents who actually perform repression—local police—are critical predictors of police presence and action (Earl and Soule 2006). The literature on the criminalization of demonstrators expands these discussions by examining how judicial decisions limit demonstrations and amplify repression and control before and after protest events (Gargarella 2008; Bertoni 2010; Alcázar 2020). In addition to these event-centered frameworks, others (Della Porta 2006, Della Porta and Reiter 1998) have also examined the influence of the political system on protest policing, particularly how broader institutional arrangements and political cultures shape policing strategies and responses.

This article seeks to contribute to these debates by bridging the criminalization of protests literature with studies on subnational political dynamics, thereby broadening the understanding of police violence during demonstrations. Specifically, it shows variations in protest policing that are influenced by political decisions and illiberal structures, which sustain authoritarian and violent practices in specific locations within a democratic state. These findings suggest that neither situational threats nor elite threats alone sufficiently explain patterns of protest policing. Instead, local political contexts interact with both types of threats to shape police responses.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, we introduce the research problem—protest policing in contemporary democracies—and the different ways it has been conceptualized in the comparative literature. Specifically, this study is fundamentally concerned with variations in police response to protest events within the same country. Why do police respond with violence when government policies discourage it? Why are certain protests severely repressed while others are not? Furthermore, we review recent developments on police autonomy in connection with variations in subnational democracies, which include anti-democratic practices that might reinforce police use of violent tactics. In the second section, we briefly describe the characteristics of the social and political factors of the periods under study in Argentina. In the third section, we present the methodology and data. Using newspaper accounts and in-depth interviews, the study examines variations in police response across three important moments in Argentina's post-dictatorship history: 1997–1998, 2001–2002, and 2006–2007. In the subsequent sections, we analyze and interpret the results. By analyzing variations in this South American country, we re-examine protest policing theories in new contexts, places, and times (Davenport 2007). The case study of Argentina offers a distinctive example demonstrating that police control of protests is shaped not only by indicators of situational threat but also by political decisions and illiberal structures. This indicates that authorities' responses to protests are often more politically driven than reactive to the events themselves.

2. Why Do Governments and Police Repress Protests ?

According to the literature on repression and protest policing, the purpose of state control is "to prevent or diminish direct and noninstitutional challenges to social, cultural, and/or political power

(i.e., protest, activism, and social movements)" (Earl 2011, p. 262). In democratic settings, given the historical interactions between protesters and police, there are certain features of protests that are expected to result in different degrees of repression. These include the level of violence and disruptiveness, the conflict's intensity, the variety of protest strategies, and the number of participants (Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Davenport 2007; Tilly 1978; Ayoub 2010). For this line of research, the more threatening a movement or protest event is to political elites the more likely it is to be the target of protest control. There are diverse threats that may be considered threatening to authorities, but research has shown that police are more likely to act (and to act in an aggressive manner) when protests are violent, numerous, directly challenging political authorities, organized, and using multiple and innovative tactics (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011; Earl 2003; Earl et al 2003). Boudreau (2005) contributes to this understanding by examining how state precariousness shapes the perception of threat and the choice of repression tactics. He argues that the selection and application of repression depend on whether there is an alignment or mismatch between a regime's capacity to control dissent and the characteristics of the protest. Extending this line of inquiry, Earl and Soule (2006) introduced the "blue approach," focusing on how police perceive situational threats. Unlike elites, who may react to broad, ideological challenges, police often prioritize immediate control, influenced by situational factors suggesting a potential loss of authority and control over a community or crowd (Earl and Soule, 2006).

Conversely, the "weakness approach" suggests that repression is more likely when authorities perceive protest groups as lacking political power or the capacity to resist (Earl, 2003, 2006; Escobar, 1993; Gamson, 1990; Stockdill, 1996). This perspective posits that groups deemed vulnerable are more frequently targeted because they are expected to "collapse under pressure" (Earl, Soule, and McCarthy, 2003, p. 583). Davenport and colleagues (2011) illustrate how race and identity can heighten perceived threats and, therefore, the likelihood of repression. In line with this, research on Argentine educational protests shows that repression was less likely due to the high legitimacy costs of targeting students and teachers but increased when these actors allied with more threatening groups (González Vaillant and Page Poma 2021). Della Porta and Reiter (1998) highlight how protest policing is shaped by broader political systems, particularly the Political Opportunity Structure, which channels both situational and elite threats through institutional norms and practices. Police knowledge and discretionary power, mediated by stable or volatile political opportunities, significantly influence how repression is enacted. Researchers have also noted that police organizations, despite being bound by law, wield considerable discretion (Monjardet, 1990). This discretion can be influenced by stereotypes of perceived threats, affecting on-the-spot decisions during protests. Additionally, external factors like media framing (Wisler and Giugni, 1999) and the political environment interact with organizational dynamics to shape the outcome of repression. Della Porta and Reiter (1998) argue that while police operate within legal frameworks, their actions often reflect an institutional culture of discretion.

Although economic crises, unemployment, and inequality characterize many democratic federal systems, the way these structural factors interact with protest policing in Argentina is shaped by its distinctive institutional and political context. Specifically, Argentina exhibits significant subnational variation in policing practices due to the autonomy of provincial governments and their diverse political alignments, leading to differentiated responses to protests even within the same national context. Additionally, the legacy of illiberal policing structures, influenced by Argentina's history of military and authoritarian rule, continued to shape security forces' engagement with dissent during the period under study. This often resulted in a blurring of the boundaries between democratic policing and repressive practices (Glanc 2014). These factors make Argentina an analytically valuable case for understanding protest policing in contexts where democratic governance coexists with entrenched illiberal practices. While the findings of this study are grounded in the Argentine experience between 1997 and 2007, they contribute to broader debates on the role of political considerations in shaping protest policing, particularly in federal democracies where policing

authority is decentralized. By incorporating a subnational lens, this research builds upon existing frameworks of elite and situational threats, demonstrating how the political dynamics of subnational regimes influence police responses.

Costantino (2014) notes that in Argentina, provincial governors wield primary authority over security policies, implementing strategies aligned with their political agendas. These decisions sometimes conflict with police interests, further complicating the dynamics of repression. In federal contexts, variations in police responses must be understood not only through situational and elite threats but also through the specific political dynamics of subnational regimes. Behrend and Whitehead (2017) argue that subnational units in democratic societies can perpetuate practices that reinforce inequality, such as the criminalization of protests. In such contexts, local judicial systems and security forces may enforce a restrictive interpretation of democracy, disproportionately targeting dissident groups. This study, therefore, draws on literature concerning subnational political dynamics to examine how these intersect with situational and elite threats, shaping police actions in response to protest events.

3. Protest Policing in Argentina

Research on protest policing encompasses several complementary lines of focus. One line emphasizes the characteristics of movements or protest events, shedding light on the dynamics that shape collective action. Another examines the actors responsible for administering repression, such as authorities, police institutions, and law enforcement, to explain variations in repression (Earl and Soule 2006; Reynolds-Stenson 2017; Waddington 1994, 1998). Reynolds-Stenson and Earl (2022) highlight the temporal dynamics of protest policing, demonstrating how strategies evolve in response to political, social, and institutional changes. In the Argentine context, integrating these approaches underscores the importance of historicizing research on protest policing by situating it within broader sociopolitical transformations and the evolving practices of police agencies.

The legacy of the 1976–1983 military dictatorship profoundly shaped Argentina's security forces. Under military rule, harsh security measures were aimed at neutralizing “subversion.” In the democratic era, these practices shifted toward managing socio-economic unrest and criminality (CELS 1998; Glanc 2014; Saín 2008). The neoliberal reforms of the 1990s under President Carlos Menem exacerbated poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Privatization, welfare cuts, and restrictions on workers' rights deepened socio-economic disparities, fueling a wave of contentious politics led by piqueteros, unemployed individuals, union workers, and leftist activists (Auyero 2007; CELS 2003). The economic and political crisis of 2001–2002 amplified these dynamics. Mass mobilizations and widespread unrest culminated in the deaths of 39 protesters in December 2001 and the resignation of four presidents. Protesters demanded not only economic relief but an end to repressive and corrupt practices (Schuster et al. 2006). This period reflects Tarrow’s (1995) "cycle of contention," with protests spreading nationwide and reshaping state responses.

Despite Argentina's democratic transition, authoritarian policing practices persisted into the 1990s and 2000s. The 2002 Avellaneda Massacre, in which police killed protesters Darío Santillán and Maximiliano Kosteki, exemplifies this continuity. While individual officers were prosecuted, structural issues, including decisions by higher authorities, remained unaddressed (People’s Dispatch 2018). The presidency of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) marked a "progressive" turn with promises of social inclusion, welfare policies, and grassroots participation (Frederic 2024). Kirchner sought to integrate the *piquetero* movement into state structures and expanded social programs targeting marginalized workers (Garay 2007). His administration also pursued human rights initiatives, such as removing officials linked to the dictatorship. However, these reforms were unevenly implemented, with variations across provinces reflecting differences in institutional capacity, resource allocation, and political alignment with the national government.

Demands for job creation during this time were seen as radical challenges to elite interests, often provoking violent police responses regardless of protest tactics. Protest policing was shaped not only by the content of demands but also by Argentina's federal system, where subnational dynamics played a crucial role. Provincial histories, political contexts, and socio-economic conditions influenced how security forces managed protests (Behrend and Whitehead 2017).

Security forces, both federal and provincial, retained discretionary powers and a culture of obedience rooted in the dictatorship (Sirimarco 2009; Frederic et al. 2013). Coercive practices often took precedence over negotiation, particularly when dealing with marginalized groups demanding structural change (Perelman 2015). Although Kirchner's administration sought to limit police autonomy and strengthen oversight, these efforts were inconsistently applied, highlighting the importance of local political contexts.

This paper examines protest policing in Argentina during three critical periods: 1997–1998, 2001–2002, and 2006–2007. Drawing on protest policing research (Earl 2003; Earl and Soule 2006), political opportunity structures (Della Porta and Reiter 1998), and Argentina's policing history (Frederic 2008; Sirimarco 2004, 2009), we argue that job-creation demands, intensified by economic crises, were perceived as radical threats. These demands triggered violent state responses mediated by political dynamics at national and subnational levels. Variations in political opportunities, elite and situational threats, and institutional practices shaped the policing of protests across these moments in Argentina's democratic history.

4. Data and Methods

The findings presented in this paper are based on a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative component relies on a database of 3,758 contentious collective action events in Argentina, of which 353 involved police intervention. These events were documented during three distinct periods: January 1, 1997–December 31, 1998; January 1, 2001–December 31, 2002; and January 1, 2006–December 31, 2007. The qualitative part of this study is based on twenty in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who either participated in or directly witnessed the events analyzed. The interviewees included six union and social movement activists, nine police officers, and five state officials. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to two hours. Participants were asked about their experiences during protest events, their specific roles, and their perspectives on security and safety protocols. Additionally, discussions covered their understanding of control and repression and the regulations governing protests. Police officers and state officials were also questioned about how protest control policies were planned and implemented, providing insights into both procedural frameworks and operational practices.

The research employed a sequential but integrated methodology, using the statistical analysis of quantitative data to inform the design and interpretation of the qualitative phase. Public collective action events were identified and coded based on daily editions of the *Clarín*[1] newspaper, with regression models applied to examine patterns and trends. This integrative approach ensured that the general patterns identified through statistical methods were grounded in the nuanced insights provided by qualitative interviews. A contentious event was operationalized as one that is a) collective b) with the purpose of making a public claim and c) that bears on someone else's interests (Tilly, 1986). Contention can be considered as "public performance" to air disputes with another social actor and it can take several forms, including violence, disruption, and convention (Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1986, 1995). By placing the focus on contentious events rather than social movements themselves, we sought to consider not only organized and institutionalized action but also more spontaneous and

[1] Please see Page Poma 2015 for the rationale for selecting *Clarín* newspaper.

sporadic instances of claim making (Koopmans & Rucht, 2002; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, & Giugni, 1992; S. G. Tarrow, 1989).

The dataset of contentious events in Argentina was constructed with a research team at Stony Brook University, using a pre-tested coding sheet to collect the information from newspapers. For each event episode in Argentina, the following data was coded: *date, location, actors, demands, target, type of action, organizations present, size of protest event, and identity of protesters.* Another set of variables were included to measure police presence and violence. These variables included *repressing actor* (e.g. specific police force or security agents, judiciary, military), *characteristics of police action (e.g. type and degree of force employed, type of gear and equipment used); number of people arrested, number of people injured, killed, and property damage.* There was no sampling of days to avoid possible bias and undercounting of events. A long tradition in the collective action literature has demonstrated the usefulness of newspaper archives for the collection of event data (Earl, McCarthy, & Soule, 2004; Olzak, 1989; Tarrow, 1989). However, many studies have also assessed the pitfalls of using newspaper reports as data for analysis of contentious politics due to newspaper's selective reporting of events ("selection bias") (Oliver & Myers, 1999) and their erroneous reporting of information on events covered ("description bias") (McCarthy, McPhail, Smith, & Crishock, 1999). Police might appear at a protest event and watch as the events unfold, but have no interaction with demonstrators. As Earl, Soule, and McCarthy (2003) suggest, "police must first decide to attend a protest event and then decide what actions to take once they are present" (585-6). In this paper we focus on the second stage of this process: what actions police took at protest events. Thus, the sample was limited to events in which police were present at the protest event. We operationalized police actions as violent and non violent. Drawing on the protest policing literature (Earl and Soule 2006, Perelman 2011, 2015, Tilly 1978) the definition of violence in the context of protests in this research is limited to police actions that cause physical harm to people. Police violence includes forced evictions, use of physical force, use of weapons (baton, tear gas, rubber bullets, lead bullets, etc), and when newspapers mention confrontations or clashes between protesters and police[2]. For example, in 1997 in the province of Neuquen, residents organized roadblocks on National Route 22 to demand employment opportunities and government assistance. Following news reports, the protest escalated into clashes with police when security forces attempted to disperse the protesters. The confrontations caused the death of a school teacher, Teresa Rodríguez, who was later confirmed to have been killed by a lead bullet typical of police forces (Clarín June 8, 2000).

It is important to point out that confrontations involve police using violence such as weapons and physical force but, on these occasions, the newspaper also reported that demonstrators were using violent or confrontational tactics, hence the label of confrontation. However, it is not possible to know who started the confrontation.

The qualitative data for this research was collected in Buenos Aires during 2014 and between 2019 and 2023. The six activists interviewed had participated in protest events in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area but also maintained knowledge of and connections with activists in other regions of the country. Their involvement extended to mobilizations during the periods analyzed in this paper. The group included union leaders and left-wing militants. Of the nine police officers interviewed, seven were members of federal security forces with nationwide operational roles. At least one officer had been directly involved in violent repression episodes. The five former state officials interviewed had held positions in national ministries or advisory roles related to internal security at the federal level. Given that the database was based on newspaper reports and contemplated three different points in time and diverse geographical locations, the interviews provided the necessary depth to understand and explain causal relations and mechanisms underplay. Interviews were carried out in Spanish in one-time encounters at public spaces such as cafes. The questions were open/ended and broad, and were used to investigate things that could not be directly observed and did not appear in the

[2] Please see section 5 for more details.

quantitative database, such as feelings, perceptions and meanings about their experiences (Patton, 1980) but also to understand tactics, strategies, internal conflicts within the movements and perceptions about police action and repression.

Furthermore, the interviews allowed us to delve deeper into the histories, tensions and conflicts in both activists, police and state officials and therefore analyze illiberal and antidemocratic practices at the subnational level (Behrend & Whitehead 2017), learning about the narratives that justify and condemn violence both by state agents and activists. Most interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed. A "purposive" non-probabilistic sampling was used to select the interviewees (Sampieri et al 2014). The criteria was to identify police agents, state officials and activists who had participated in protest events during the periods covered in this paper.

4.1 Three moments in Argentine history

The three moments under study (Neoliberal pre–crisis 1997–1998; crisis 2001–2002; and Progressive post crisis 2006–2007 periods) can be used to unravel ways in which different economic, political, and social contexts might impact the nature of repression and the control of protests in Argentina. In these three periods, there were drastic contrasts in terms of official state policies and discourses towards protest policing. Furthermore, the selection of years contemplates the pre- and post-2001–2002 crisis, as this event implied the end of a cycle of contention and allowed for a clear differentiation in the analysis of each period.

As mentioned earlier, in the 1990s a marginalization process began in large sectors of the workforce as both private sector and state jobs were eliminated[3] and poverty levels increased. Protests led by unions at first and unemployed groups later became widespread and expanded throughout the country (Svampa y Pereyra, 2003: 24-26). During this period provincial police forces together with the national gendarmerie[4] combined operations led by the federal and provincial governments to quell protests. The interventions by the gendarmerie were characterized by high levels of violence as it became the force in charge of controlling and repressing demonstrations (Perelman 2015, 111). Government policies towards contention during the Alianza government (1999-2001) oscillated between hard and moderate. Yet, violent police actions in response to protests characterized the peak of the crisis in 2001-2002. Four years after the crisis—during the 2006–2007 period of Néstor Kirchner's government— the government announced it would end police violence and the repression of protest events. Yet, police and demonstrator interactions are not always controlled by national level political officials. On the ground police had their own understandings and discretionary power which, as we shall see in the next sections, did not always coincide, in their approach to protest events, with government policies.

5 Use of Violence at Protest Events in Argentina

The presence of police may be a useful indicator of government concern regarding the threat constituted by demonstrations, but it is at best an imperfect measure of police violence. Police at a demonstration could possibly have minimal or no interaction with demonstrators. Table 1 below shows police appearances and use of violence by period.

[3] In the Greater Buenos Aires area, for example, unemployment increased from 6.3% in 1988 to 20.2% in 1995, INDEC (National Institute of Statistics and Census)

[4] Argentina's National Gendarmerie is defined as a civilian "security force of a military nature" which provides security in the country's borders and places of national strategic importance.

Table 1: Total Police Tactics by Period

Protest Events	***Neoliberal Menem 1997/8***	***Crisis De la Rua 2001/2***	***Progressive Kirchner 2006/7***	***(%)***
Police present, not violent*	9%	3%	3%	3%
Police present and violent **	4%	6%	5%	6%
Police not present	87%	90%	92%	91%
Total number of contentious collective action events	100%	100%	100%	100%
N	469	1749	1520	3758

Note*:* *Events without police violence include events in which police appear but have no interaction with protesters. It involves watching the events unfold from a distance, displaying force. **Police violence at protest events here includes violent evictions, use of physical force, use of weapons, confrontations between protesters and police, and arrests.
Source: Protest data are from author's dataset

Across all protest events analyzed, police employed violence in a relatively small percentage of demonstrations during each period (4%, 6%, and 5%). These figures challenge the widely held perception among activists, students, and scholars in Argentina that police consistently use coercion when present at protests. This belief is rooted in the country's history of human rights abuses by military and security forces. However, when police did intervene in protests, they resorted to violence in two-thirds of the cases. This included instances where demonstrators were non-violent, as well as cases where police refrained from using force despite violent actions by protesters. Contrary to common assumptions, police violence during the neoliberal period of 1997-1998 was not more frequent than in subsequent periods[5]; police consistently used violence in two-thirds of the protests they attended across all three periods. This suggests that police behavior on the ground did not align with shifts in government policy.

During the three periods, police violence was observed in response to both conventional protest tactics, such as marches, and more confrontational actions like road blockades[6]. This indicates that the nature of protest tactics alone does not reliably predict police violence. Examining the claims associated with violent police responses reveals that demands for jobs and employment were the most frequent grievances in all periods, followed by requests for welfare benefits. These economic demands reflected the socio-economic challenges of the time.

According to the data collected and supported by expert literature (Schuster et al., 2006), wage increases, salary restitution, and opposition to neoliberal policies—such as privatizations, labor flexibilization, and austerity measures—were among the most prominent demands. Other significant grievances included human rights issues, judicial reform, criticism of political privileges, and dissatisfaction with the performance of state officials and the political class. Protest tactics also varied: marches accounted for 45% of all protests, strikes for 24%, and road blockades for 10%. The *escrache*, a public denunciation tactic, emerged during this period.

[5] When police appeared at demonstrations, they used violence 67% of the time in 1997-8; 69% in 2001-2 and, 62% in 2006-7.
[6] Following Earl and Soule (201106), we operationalized confrontational (or disruptive) tactics as building occupations[#], obstructions, blockades, forced entries, lootings, meeting disruption, and physical and verbal attacks. Conventional, -non-confrontational-, forms of protest include rallies, marches, legal actions, assemblies, strikes, and sit-ins

During the neoliberal period (1997-1998), police responded with violence to protests demanding jobs and welfare benefits in 71% and 86% of cases, respectively. During the crisis period (2001-2002), police were violent in 88% of protests demanding jobs and 75% of those demanding welfare benefits. This aligns with the dire socio-economic conditions of the time: unemployment peaked at 19.6% in 2002, and poverty rose to 55.2%. In the progressive period under Néstor Kirchner (2006-2007), police used violence in response to all protests demanding jobs (100%) and in 83% of those demanding welfare benefits. Although unemployment and poverty rates were lower during this period (9.2% unemployment and 22% poverty in 2007), these demands remained central to protests where police violence occurred. Overall, the claims for jobs and welfare benefits were the most frequent demands when police used violence in response to a protest event in the three periods. These demands included issues such as the creation of jobs, improvement of working conditions, payment of late wages, and the implementation and expansion of social and welfare benefits for those living in poverty or marginal conditions.

Based on these findings and the theoretical frameworks of the threat and blue approaches, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: In contexts of increasing informality and unemployment, demonstrations demanding jobs or wage increases are more likely to be perceived as threatening by authorities and result in violent police responses compared to demonstrations with other grievances.

Hypothesis 2: Demonstrations involving property damage and violent tactics by protesters are more likely to elicit violent responses from police compared to demonstrations employing conventional or nonviolent tactics.

The next section tests these hypotheses using the collected data.

5.1 What's the threat?

Considering all the information presented above, the table below displays the results of a binary logistic regression analysis predicting the likelihood of police using violent tactics during contentious collective action events. The dependent variable, *violent police behavior*, is dichotomous, where 1 indicates that police used violent tactics (i.e., physical force or coercion), and 0 indicates that police did not use violence. Violent tactics by police include reports of physical force (such as pushing, kicking, or pulling hair), the use of weapons or equipment (e.g., batons, tear gas, rubber bullets), or direct confrontations with protesters to disperse or control the crowd. The category for "Yes" (police used violent tactics) does not include arrests unless accompanied by one of these violent actions. In contrast, the "No" category (police did not use violence) applies to instances where police appeared at the event but took no action, or only engaged in minimal activities such as diverting traffic, blocking roads, or setting up barricades. It is important to note that while police may have appeared at protests and made displays of force to deter protesters, this was classified as "no use of violence" unless specific violent actions were reported by the media. The non-violent category was therefore based on news reports that did not mention violence, though it is possible that some level of violence occurred without media coverage. Additionally, police violence may have occurred during the arrest of protesters, in settings not visible to the public. Human rights organizations have repeatedly documented such abuses, particularly in detention facilities (CELS 1998).

The seven independent variables used in this analysis correspond to factors identified in previous research as potential determinants of police violence. These variables primarily measure the actions of protesters during the event, as discussed earlier in this paper.

- The first predictor is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether protesters *used violent tactics*. Previous research has shown that the use of violence by protesters increased police presence and response (Davenport et al., 2011). Violent tactics include the use of weapons (guns, sticks, rocks, firebombs, bricks), physical confrontations, or a combination of these. For instance, in the 1990s, protests often involved demonstrators throwing rocks and setting fire to tires as part of road blockades.
- The second predictor is also dichotomous and measures whether demonstrators caused public or private property damage or destruction, such as to cars, buildings, or parks. In this dataset, property damage occurred in about 44.6% of the events.[7]
- The third variable measures whether arrests took place during the event. Human rights reports in Argentina (CORREPI, 2012) have indicated excessive police violence during arrests. However, as shown above, arrests increased in 2006-2007 when reports of police violence were reportedly declining. Arrests were made in 38% of events during the Neoliberal period, 48% during the Crisis period, and 51% during the Progressive period.
- The fourth variable refers to the *target* of the protest. Research indicates that protests directly targeting the government are perceived as more threatening to state officials, which may lead to more aggressive policing. This variable is coded as 1 when the protest explicitly targeted any level (local, provincial, national) or branch of the Argentine government. In this dataset, 70% of the events targeted the government.
- The fifth predictor measures the demonstrators' demands for jobs and welfare benefits. Following Soule and Davenport (2009), we acknowledge that what is considered a "radical" demand can vary by time and context. While demands for gay rights may not have been radical during the periods of this study (especially after the approval of gay marriage in Buenos Aires in 2010), demands for jobs and welfare benefits were considered more radical. These demands accounted for 46.7% of all protests during the Neoliberal period, 48.8% during the Crisis, and 24.4% during the Progressive period.
- The sixth variable is dichotomous and indicates whether the protest occurred in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region. A common critique of event datasets is that protests outside urban centers receive less media attention, leading to underrepresentation. In this study, events in Greater Buenos Aires accounted for 52% of all protests, while the remaining 48% occurred in other regions. The distribution was 41.7% in Buenos Aires during the Neoliberal period, 47% during the Crisis, and 63% during the Progressive period.
- The seventh variable (used in the second model only) categorizes the three periods under study: the Neoliberal period (1997-1998), the Progressive period (2006-2007), with the Crisis period (2001-2002) as the reference category. There were 60 events during the Neoliberal period (17.5%), 164 during the Crisis (47.8%), and 119 during the Progressive period (34.7%).

In the second model, we also included an interaction term for property damage and violent tactics to assess their combined effect. This interaction term was included because 27% of the protests involved both violent tactics and property damage.

Before delving into the logistic regression analysis, it is essential to address some limitations of the sample and their potential implications for the results. According to the threat theory, authorities and police respond to protests based on their perceived level of threat. Consequently,

[7] It is important to highlight here that the damaged or destroyed property is most often attributed to demonstrators but it is not clear who actually did it. Actual damage could have been caused by demonstrators, by counter-demonstrators, by the police, or by confrontations involving police and demonstrators.

analyzing the characteristics of protest events is crucial to understanding police violence. Two key factors often associated with perceived threat are the size of the protest and the presence of counter-demonstrators. While larger protests in Argentina tended to draw greater police presence, this did not necessarily result in an increased likelihood of violent police tactics[8]. Instead, these events often prompted preventive or vigilante actions. One possible explanation is that larger protests involve more extensive preventive planning by police, partly due to the heightened role of media coverage in reporting and condemning police violence.

The presence of counter-demonstrators is another factor that has been shown in prior research to heighten the likelihood of conflict at protest events[9] (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong, 2011; Earl, 2006). However, the Argentine newspaper accounts used in this study did not report the presence or absence of counter-demonstrators for any event[10]. This absence of data meant that this variable could not be included in the analysis. While counter-demonstrators may have been present, their impact remains unexamined due to the lack of available information.

Another notable characteristic of Argentine protests is the use of self-organized security protocols by protest groups. Groups such as the *piqueteros*, unemployed workers, students, and unionized collectives have developed strategies to protect themselves and maintain order. These protocols often involve appointing security leaders who can be identified by special clothing, caps, bracelets, or signs. Leaders may use ropes to encircle the group during marches, ensuring participants stay close together and preventing infiltration or provocations that could escalate tensions with police.

The analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with steps taken to ensure the validity of the logistic regression assumptions. Diagnostic statistics revealed no significant issues with multicollinearity, as variance inflation factor (VIF) scores did not exceed 2.5 for any variable (Allison, 1999). Additionally, outlier events were identified and removed, and subsequent analyses confirmed no issues related to outliers (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007).

As shown in table 2 above, a test of the full model (1) with all six independent variables against the constant only model was statistically significant, $X_2 = 451.772$, p less than .001, indicating that the predictors, as a set, reliably distinguished between police use of violence and not. The model as a whole fits significantly better than an empty model (i.e., a model with no predictors). The Nagelkerke R^2 is similar in size to the pseudo R^2, suggesting again that this set of predictors help discriminate between police use of violence at contentious collective action events.

[8] Although there is a large proportion of missing data measuring the number of protesters (41%) it is clear in the dataset used here, that larger protest events were not subject to more aggressive or violent policing. The data shows that police used violent tactics at large protest events (of 1000 or more participants) 31% of the time.

[9] This is due to the hostile interactions between them (counter-demonstrators) and protesters (Davenport el al 2011: 159)

[10] The reporting of counter-demonstrators by newspapers changed dramatically in 2010. During that year, thugs from a railway workers union attacked a demonstration and killed a railway contractor who was protesting in demand for better work conditions and wages. Several other people were injured during the assault, which was later proved that the union had intentionally generated the violent incidents. The killing of Mariano Ferreyra was widely covered by the media. http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariano_Ferreyra

Table 2: Binary Logistic Regression Estimates Of Police Violent* Behavior

	Model 1	**Model 2**
Violent Tactic (1=Yes)	.032 1.033 (.013)	.811 2.249 (2.916)
Property Damaged (1=Yes)	.393 1.481 (2.262)	.803** 2.233 (6.086)
Arrests (1=Yes)	.098 1.103 (.184)	.166 1.180 (.499)
Target Government (1=Yes)	.122 1.129 (.231)	.125 1.133 (.233)
Claims for Jobs or Welfare (1=Yes)	.878*** 2.407 (13.400)	.804*** 2.235 (10.552)
Buenos Aires (1=Yes)	—.027 .973 (.014)	.063 .938 (.072)
Property Damaged by Violent tactics	—	−1.214** .297 (4.242)
Neoliberal period (1997/8 pre−crisis)	—	.580** 1.786 (3.042)
Progressive period (2006/7 post −crisis)	—	.107 .899 (.170)
−2 Log Likelikhood	451.772	443.572
Chi−Square Change	19.283**	27.483***
Cox−Snell R−Square	.055	.077
Nagelkerke R−Square	.073	.103
N (valid cases)	343	343

Notes: Police violent behavior here does not include making arrests. The first number is the unstandardized logistic regression coefficient, the second number is the odds ratio, and the third number is the Wald statistic. **Indicates p<0.05 and ***indicates p <0.001
N (valid cases) for Model 1 and 2 = 343. Cases with missing data were excluded from the analysis. See Additional Information for Descriptive Statistics for Binary Variables.
Source: author's data set of protest events.

Let us now examine the independent variables in the first model. According to the Wald criterion, one predictor variable was significantly associated with the likelihood of police using violent

behavior: claims for jobs or welfare benefits. The regression coefficient for job-related claims is positive and significant (b = 0.878; Wald = 13.400, p < 0.001). The odds ratio indicates that when a protest raised claims for jobs or welfare, the likelihood of police violence against demonstrators more than doubled. In contrast, non-economic protests—such as those advocating for human rights or judicial reform—exhibited a relatively lower rate of police violence. This finding underscores the heightened sensitivity of authorities to economic demands, likely due to their immediate implications for governance and resource distribution.

Although this model demonstrates that the group of variables collectively has a significant impact on the rate of police violence, only the job claims variable reaches statistical significance. This pattern aligns with our earlier observations: while other variables trend in the predicted direction, they lack sufficient impact to achieve statistical significance when analyzed without controlling for additional causal factors. To assess the stability of these trends, Model 2 controls for the three periods as well as measuring the significant interaction effect between property damage and protester violence. This second model was statistically significant (X_2 = 443.572, p< 0.001) with the Nagelkerke R^2 indicating that this set of predictors is more discriminating than Model 1.

Model 2 demonstrates that there are multiple, interacting factors determining the probability of police violence at protests. First, it confirms the significance of demands for jobs and welfare benefits, with protests that raise these demands more than twice as likely to be subjected to police violence—even when the demonstrators were not otherwise provocative. Moreover, there is no greater likelihood of police violence if the protesters target the government (B=.122, OR=1.13, ns). It is important to note that protest policing scholars have argued that demonstrators claiming radical or revolutionary goals will be considered more threatening by authorities and thus more likely to be policed aggressively (Davenport 1995; Tilly 1978; Wisler and Guigni 1999). During the period of this study, which includes the Crisis Period, one of the most popular slogans at protest events was "Que se Vayan Todos" *(Away/Out with them All*). With it, protesters demanded that all politicians, government officials, and corporate elites resign. The radical nature of the slogan was toned down when it became the recurring motto of all types of protest events, mainly those of middle class sectors who had their savings accounts frozen.

According to prior studies, the radicalness of the protest could be measured by analyzing whether the target was governmental or not. Thus, while the nature of demands has some impact on the rate of police violence, the proposition that direct threats to government provoke police violence is disconfirmed here. The claims for jobs and welfare benefits, in turn, were perceived as threatening and thus included in the analysis, which confirms their significance.

Second, we note that during the Neoliberal administration of Carlos Menem, the police were significantly more likely (b=.580, Wald 3.042. and p<0.05) to utilize violence, compared to both the Crisis Period and the Progressive Period. This gives substance to the interesting result above that while the police were not more likely to be sent to demonstrations, there were more likely to utilize violent tactics at protests they are assigned to monitor/control. This finding confirms the observation of scholars and demonstrators that the rate of police violence was higher during the Menem administration. (Svampa and Pandolfi 2005). But it contradicts the impression that the Kirchner regime's campaign against police violence resulted in a lower rate of police violence, since there was not a substantively significant decline as compared to the crisis period.

Third, there is not a great rate of police violence outside of Buenos Aires. Even when the nature and militancy of the demonstration is held constant, the police are no more likely to utilize violence outside the capital, where media attention is lower and protest-tolerance has been historically less established.

Finally, Model 2 records a complicated relationship between protest tactics and the rate of police violence. While protests that involve either violent tactics (odds ratio 2.25) or property damage (odds ratio 2.23)—but not both—are more than twice as likely to trigger police violence than peaceful demonstrations; those that combine violence and property damage (odds ratio .40) are only modestly

more likely to attract police violence. As we saw, the interaction term between property damage and violent tactics is negatively associated with police use of violent tactics.

Overall, the data demonstrates that police violence during protests was not directly—or solely—a reaction to the actions of the demonstrators. Specifically, violent tactics employed by protesters—such as throwing rocks, setting fires, using firecrackers, or attacking buildings or people—were not independently associated with police violence. Similarly, protests targeting the government did not appear to predict police violence. In a country marked by recurring economic crises and social conflicts, where most protests are directed at the government, such demonstrations may not be perceived as a significant threat by authorities or the police. However, protests demanding jobs and welfare benefits—despite the limited leverage of challengers—were perceived as more threatening by authorities and/or police and were consequently met with harsher repression. It is worth noting that the newspaper data used in this study did not provide sufficient detail to distinguish variations in police responses at the subnational level. Reports often failed to specify whether the police present at a protest belonged to federal forces or provincial ones, leaving us unable to determine the role of illiberal subnational structures and practices in shaping these dynamics. Nevertheless, the connections between repression and subnational political dynamics merit further exploration, particularly in light of existing literature and qualitative data. The latter offers a deeper contextual understanding, capturing local systems of meaning and illuminating nuances often absent in quantitative analyses (Engle Merry, 2016).

6. The uneven control of protests

Argentina consists of a federal government and twenty-four subnational units, each with its own executive, legislative, and judicial powers governed by its constitution, while adhering to the National Constitution. Policing and security in the country are shaped by this republican, representative, and federal structure. Each subnational unit maintains its own police force, while the national government oversees the Argentine Federal Police, the Airport Security Police, the National Gendarmerie, and the Naval Prefecture. Despite distinct jurisdictions and organizational structures, these federal forces share similar missions focused on preventing, investigating, and apprehending federal-level crimes, including smuggling, drug trafficking, and crimes against humanity. Following Argentina's transition to democracy, democratic practices spread unevenly, leaving illiberal structures and practices at the subnational level (Behrend & Whitehead, 2016). Provincial authorities and police agencies varied in experience and preparedness, and up to 2007, most lacked effective strategies for managing protests. During the study period (1997–2007), protests demanding jobs and welfare—while not inherently radical—were perceived as threats by authorities. This perception was exacerbated by economic challenges, including rising unemployment, informal jobs, and precarious work. As a union leader described:

> *"When the economy is not well… when the country's economy is at a standstill, there are no possibilities of responding to social demands. It is very difficult to provide favorable answers to social conflict, so what the government does is limit social protest. The government doesn't want any more demonstrations. As it has been happening here. First, there is denial of the conflict, there is denial of poverty levels, of unemployment… but then, there is an increase, an emergence of new legislations that seek to criminalize and limit social protest" (Union leader, Buenos Aires, August 2014).*

This perception of threat led to varied and often violent responses to protests, highlighting the unevenness in provincial and federal policing practices.

Under Néstor Kirchner's administration (2003–2007), the national government adopted a "no weapons" approach to protest management, prioritizing restraint and adherence to human rights principles. However, this policy was not consistently implemented across provinces. For example, during a teachers' protest in Neuquén in 2006, provincial police—acting under the orders of Governor Jorge Sobisch—used lethal force, resulting in the death of a teacher. This incident highlighted the disparity between federal policies and provincial practices, underscoring the autonomy of provincial governments in making policing decisions. Moreover, provincial police forces often operate with fewer resources and less training compared to their federal counterparts. As one Gendarmerie officer noted, "Provincial police do not have the military discipline and respect for hierarchies we have and many times act erratically" (Gendarmerie officer, May 2022). This lack of standardization and capacity at the provincial level further contributes to uneven and, at times, problematic responses to protests.

Evidence indicates that local security forces occasionally made autonomous decisions regarding protest responses. A police officer described how discretion was exercised in the field, explaining that during some events, the police maintained a perimeter, considering the protest non-threatening. In contrast, at other events, if they believed the situation could escalate, they used force to disperse the crowd without waiting for formal orders (Interview, police officer, August 2022). This example highlights how the discretionary actions of subnational forces sometimes diverged from federal directives.

As discussed in the previous section, the lack of a significant correlation between protesters' violent tactics and police violence suggests that police responses are not solely determined by the level of confrontation initiated by demonstrators. Instead, contextual factors—such as political directives, public scrutiny, and media presence—play a crucial role in shaping police decision-making. Subnational variation in policing practices, influenced by differing political priorities, resource constraints, and discretionary decision-making, may explain why the expected correlation between protester violence and police repression is not observed in the quantitative analysis. Interviews with police officers suggest that, particularly after the 2001–2002 crisis—when police repression resulted in multiple protester deaths—security forces became more cautious about using force during mobilizations. A key turning point was President Kirchner's directive prohibiting police from carrying firearms during protests, aimed at preventing further violence. This policy reinforced a shift toward de-escalation strategies, as officers recognized that excessive force could lead to media backlash, political repercussions, and institutional accountability measures.
Gendarmerie regulations reflect this shift, stating:

> *"All personnel must consider the need to calibrate the use of public force, which is authorized only to the extent necessary. Before resorting to firearms, officers must first employ lower levels of defense, including chemical and physical deterrents… Carrying weapons entails greater responsibility, and their use is restricted to 'extreme cases and as a last resort,' specifically in response to unlawful aggression with firearms that endanger the lives of officers or others…"* (Riot Regulation, Article 1.023, g, 3).

During informal conversations, police officers explained that when deployed to riot control, they are acutely aware that responding to violent protesters with force can backfire. Officers expressed concerns about being held accountable for excessive force, which discourages them from escalating confrontations. This suggests that, in some instances, police restraint is not merely a reaction to protesters' actions but rather a strategic decision shaped by broader political, institutional, and social considerations.

Before 2003, armed force was a common response to demonstrations, often resulting in injuries or fatalities. During the 1990s, the Gendarmerie—a militarized security force originally tasked with border patrol—became central to managing protests. Officers emphasized adherence to strict protocols:"We do not fire weapons or use force without an order, adhering to a clear chain of command" (Gendarmerie officer, September 2023). The Gendarmerie's hierarchical and disciplined structure made it the preferred force for managing large-scale demonstrations, especially when provincial police were overwhelmed or complicit. For example, during the 1999 General Belgrano Bridge protests in Corrientes province, the Gendarmerie was deployed to dismantle blockades after provincial police, who were also protesting unpaid wages, failed to act. These instances highlight the federal forces' role in compensating for provincial deficiencies or mitigating more repressive local practices.

Despite federal efforts to standardize protest management in line with human rights principles, subnational governments often acted autonomously, reflecting distinct political priorities. For example, Salta, Corrientes, Córdoba, and Jujuy experienced repeated episodes of violent police repression during protests. Such practices were not limited to physical violence. Judicial prosecution emerged as a key tool for controlling dissent, with social movement leaders charged with offenses such as blocking roads, coercion, or obstruction of industrial activity. In extreme cases, anti-terrorism laws were applied (CELS, 2017). These judicial actions intimidated activists, discouraging mobilization and amplifying stigmatizing discourses propagated by media and political actors. As one activist explained: "Police have knowledge about our groups' structures and movements and often adapt their responses to our organizations and our safety strategies" (Movement activist, June 2023). Another activist shared her belief that for years (during 1990s and early 2000s) both she and her organization were under constant surveillance by the police or other security agencies. While recounting her experience, she acknowledged that this might sound exaggerated to some. However, she cited several incidents as evidence to support her claim that a state agency was monitoring her and her group (Movement activist, July 2014).

This nuanced understanding of protests by police, combined with stigmatizing media narratives, reinforced criminalizing discourses. In Neuquén, for instance, teaching unions were portrayed as violent instigators, justifying harsh repression. Media coverage frequently delegitimized protests by framing demonstrators as engaging in illegal or violent activities (Artese, 2009). The combination of violent police actions, judicial prosecution, and delegitimizing media portrayals created a powerful mechanism for suppressing dissent. These practices not only silenced protests but perpetuated repressive practices and stigmatization. While national authorities sought to curtail violence and align protest management with human rights, subnational practices often contradicted these efforts. The Neuquén case illustrates that provincial decisions, rather than mere lack of control over police forces, prioritized state authority over demonstrators' rights.

7. Final thoughts

Police violence at protest events is a persistent issue in many contemporary democracies. This article examined the dynamics of police violence and the criminalization of protests in Argentina between 1997 and 2007, a period marked by significant economic and social upheaval. Our findings reveal that protests demanding jobs and welfare benefits were met with repression across different socio-political contexts and administrations. Security forces employed varying degrees of violence, irrespective of the political orientation or protest policing strategies of the regime in power. These findings challenge the assumption that the Néstor Kirchner administration's campaign to limit the police use of weapons led to a meaningful reduction in violence. While the government formally rejected violent repression, the data indicate no significant decline in police violence compared to the Crisis period.

The study further problematizes the relative autonomy of police institutions in Argentina. Despite policy shifts at the federal level, police forces sometimes acted independently, guided by their institutional logic, interests, and interpretations of how protests should be managed. At the same time, they are expected to follow orders from political authorities, and their actions at the subnational level are often shaped by the priorities and directives of provincial executives. This dual dynamic—operating with a degree of autonomy while remaining embedded within broader political structures—underscores the complex interplay between police institutions and political power.

The evidence also suggests that police violence was not simply reactive or provoked by demonstrators. Variables such as the nature of the demands, the number of participants, or the tactics used by protesters—ranging from throwing rocks and setting fires to attacking buildings—did not consistently correlate with police repression. Similarly, demonstrations aimed directly at the government were not inherently more likely to result in violent responses. Instead, subnational variations proved decisive in shaping the level of police repression. The characteristics of provincial political systems, including the persistence of illiberal structures and the discretionary power of local authorities, played a key role in determining how protests were policed. In regions where authoritarian practices endured within democratic institutions, police violence was more pervasive and closely tied to local political decisions.

The qualitative analysis further revealed that the control of protests often begins well before the events themselves. The criminalization of dissent, including judicial actions and public accusations against leaders and activists, served to preemptively delegitimize mobilizations. This layered approach—combining preemptive criminalization with selective repression during demonstrations—demonstrates the multifaceted nature of state responses to protests. The Argentine case highlights how subnational variations in protest policing reflect broader tensions within federal systems. The coexistence of democratic governance and authoritarian practices in specific regions complicates attempts to standardize protest management in line with human rights principles. Thus, any analysis of state responses to protests must account not only for political decisions but also for the enduring illiberal structures that perpetuate violent and repressive practices.

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Additional information

Descriptive Statistics for Binary Variables

Variable	Yes (1) Absolute Count	Yes (1) Percentage
Violent Tactic	118	34.4%
Property Damaged	153	44.6%
Arrests	162	47.2%
Target Government	180	52.5%
Claims for Jobs or Welfare	129	37.7%
Buenos Aires	175	51.0%
Neoliberal Period (1997/8 Pre-crisis)	60	17.5%
Crisis Period (2001/2002)	164	47.8%
Progressive Period (2006/7 Post-crisis)	119	34.7%

Notes: All models are based on 343 protest events. The descriptive statistics table provides absolute counts and proportions for key independent variables to assess category sizes. Source: Author's data set of protest events.