

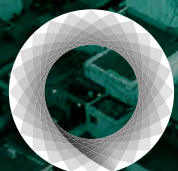


UNIVERSITY OF  
CAMBRIDGE

# From City to Nation:

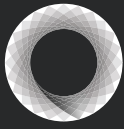
## Digital government in Argentina, 2015–2018

by Tanya Filer, Antonio Weiss and Juan Cacace



Bennett Institute  
for Public Policy  
Cambridge





## **About the Bennett Institute**

The Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge was founded in 2018 with the ambition of becoming a world-leader in achieving successful and sustainable solutions to some of the most pressing problems of our time. It draws on the world-class strengths of Cambridge in technology and engineering and social and political analysis to tackle some of the most complex aspects of public policy this century. The Institute has at its heart a commitment to deep analysis of the economic, social and political systems in which policy is developed; the creation of powerful new networks of policy-makers, influencers and researchers; and the development of a new generation of reflexive and critical policy leaders.

## **About the Digital State Project**

States around the world are responding in diverse ways to the disruptive power of digital and new technologies. As users, developers, procurers, and regulators of these technologies, they have a crucial role to play in determining whether the digitisation of government, society and the economy will produce more or less stable and equitable futures. The Digital State project sets out both to lead policy research and provide a forum for broad-ranging discussion on the opportunities and challenges of the digital transformation of public sectors globally.

## **About the Authors**

Dr. Tanya Filer leads the Digital State project at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge. Dr. Antonio Weiss is a Director at 2020 Delivery and, in 2019-20, a Digital State Affiliated Researcher at the Bennett Institute. Juan Cacace is an alumnus of the MBA at the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, and previously worked in the Argentine National Senate.

## **About Digital State Cases**

Digital State Cases are designed to trigger discussion among policymakers and researchers as well as students of public policy. They bring to light empirical examples of some of the core challenges of the digital transformation of public sectors today, and highlight how practitioners are tackling them in different local, national, and international contexts.

# From City to Nation:

Digital government in Argentina, 2015–2018

---

## Synopsis

In 2015, voters in Argentina elected Mauricio Macri of the centre-right Propuesta Republicana (PRO) as their new President, following a tightly contested race. Macri inherited an office wrought with tensions: an unstable economy; a highly polarised population; and an increasing weariness towards the institutions of governance overall. In this context, his administration hoped to harness the possibilities of digital transformation to make citizens' interactions with the State more efficient, more accountable, and 'friendlier'. Following a successful tenure in the City of Buenos Aires, where Macri had been Mayor, Minister Andrés Ibarra and a digital government team were charged with the project of national digital transformation, taking on projects from a single 'whole-of-government' portal to a mobile phone application designed to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence against women. Scaling up digitisation from the city to the national level was, by all accounts, a challenge. By 2018, Argentina had won global acclaim for its progress on key aspects of digital government, but also increasingly recognised the difficulties of digitisation at the national scale. It identified the need, as observed by the OECD, for an overarching strategic plan to manage the scale, diversity and politics of federal-level digital transformation. Based on interviews with key stakeholders, this case discusses the country's digital modernisation agenda from 2015 to 2018, with a primary focus on service provision projects. It examines the challenges faced in terms of politics and technology, and the lessons that Argentina's experience offers.

### **Key themes:**

digital government; scalability; politics of modernisation; user-centricity; organisational cultures

---

## Introduction

*'We should make digital products that make people fall in love again with the State'*

**Daniel Abadie**  
**Undersecretary of Digital Government, Ministry of Modernisation**

*'The principal objective of digital government is to put the citizen at the centre.'*

**María Inés Baqué**  
**Secretary for Innovation, Ministry of Modernisation**

In a 2014 TedX talk in the city of Mar de Plata, Daniel Abadie, a 33-year-old technology entrepreneur turned civil servant, reflected on the strides his team had made in developing digital services for the citizens of Buenos Aires. After years of public mistrust of political institutions, Abadie described how his overriding ambition during his time in the capital city was to make 'people fall in love again with the State.' An even greater opportunity for realising these ambitions would soon follow. On 10 December 2015, Mauricio Macri, a former engineer, businessman, and Mayor of Buenos Aires, took office as President of the Republic of Argentina. On his accession to the Presidency, Macri appointed Abadie as Undersecretary for Digital Government of the Republic, charging Abadie and his 70-strong team with creating a 'simpler, more agile State' that was 'closer' to citizens. This task would be undertaken from within the newly established Ministry for Modernisation.

President Macri took office following a closely fought election that culminated in the first presidential runoff in Argentine history. The election marked a watershed moment in national politics. Economic growth had returned in the aftermath of the 1998-2002 financial crisis, which saw the country undergo the largest ever sovereign debt default. Yet political and institutional reform trailed behind, and the country was highly polarised (see Exhibit 1). Macri's centre-right Propuesta Republicana (PRO), which had only been established as a formal party in 2010, was elected on an explicitly reformist platform.<sup>1</sup> PRO knew that in order to push through major economic reforms and to be able to govern effectively, it needed to appeal to a broader electoral base than the pro-business, cosmopolitan city-dwellers that formed its natural voter-base. In short, the party needed to build consensus. Amid continued economic precarity and following a number of scandals, fatigue was also growing among the electorate with the political system more generally. In late 2015, almost a third of Argentines believed the system to be 'broken', requiring a 'total change to put things right' (YouGov and Leverhulme Trust Conspiracy and Democracy Project, 2016). More auspiciously for PRO, over 50 per cent believed that the problem was not systemic, and that 'if we elected the right people, they could put things right' (YouGov and Leverhulme Trust Conspiracy and Democracy Project, 2016).

Modernisation lay at the core of the PRO approach to consensus building. Imagined by PRO as a relatively 'politically neutral' strategy, by 'modernisation' PRO meant making the State more efficient and responsive to citizen needs. The Ministry of Modernisation, staffed by 1300 public servants, would be the vehicle for fulfilling this agenda and creating, as its foundational motto declared, 'a state at the service of the people and a connected Argentina' (See Exhibit 2). The approach was not altogether new: despite the youth of the party, PRO had enjoyed success with their modernisation agenda at the city-level, governing the City of Buenos Aires since 2007. As a governance strategy and device for public communications, 'modernisation' thus appeared to offer both the security of past experience and the potential to foster broad-based social cohesion.

<sup>1</sup> PRO had existed as a network of political alliances since 2003.

## Exhibit 1: Argentina Country Overview and 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Voting by Province, Presidential Elections 2015

### **ARGENTINA**

**Population:** 43.8m

**Area:** 2,780,400km<sup>2</sup>

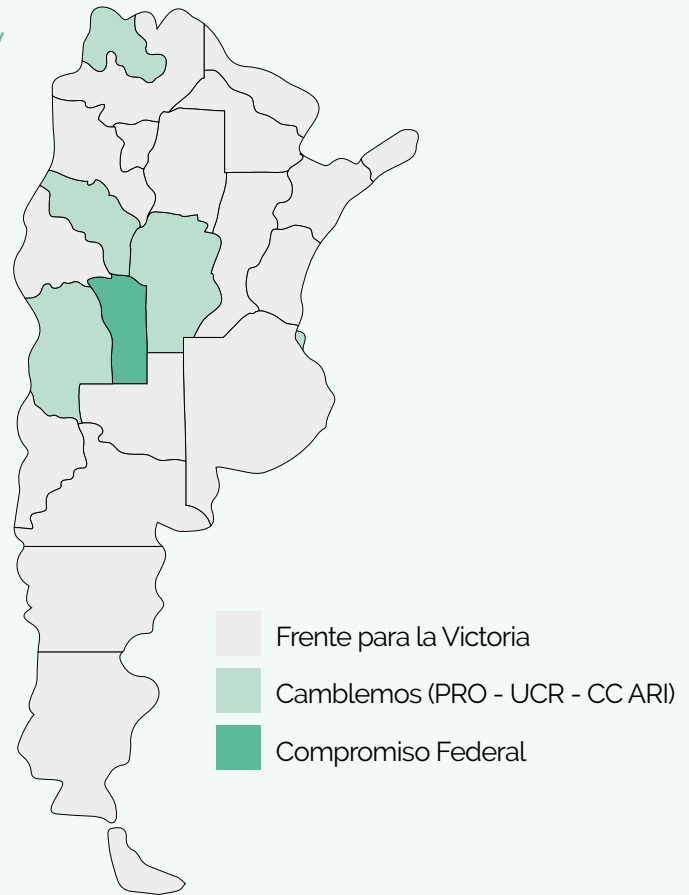
**Population density:** 14.4/km<sup>2</sup>

**GDP per capita:** \$20,425

**Capital city:** Buenos Aires

**Population:**

Urban region 3m; Metropolitan region 16m



**Source:** Sfs90 [CC BY-SA 4.0

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)

## The 'Modern' as Digital

Digitisation was central to the modernisation agenda.<sup>2</sup> The PRO election campaign had emphasized using technology in government communications and public service provision and promoted technology entrepreneurship as a means for Argentina to diversify its agriculture-based economy. Digital capacity within the party, moreover, was widely believed to have contributed to its electoral success: during the 2015 presidential campaign the PRO campaign team deftly engaged digital platforms (Filer and Fredheim, 2016). Macri even came to be dubbed 'the first President of Facebook' (Gallo, 2015), receiving more 'likes' than any political candidate globally before him. This digital capacity was emphasized by PRO both during and after the election, providing it with an image as innovative and future-oriented.

Although engaging a 'modernisation' agenda to downplay polarisation, political reasons also inspired senior PRO leadership to support government digitisation efforts. Following re-democratisation in late 1983, Argentina has swung between populist and technocratic administrations. Macri's predecessor, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of the Peronist Frente para la Victoria (FpV), deftly positioned herself as being in 'direct contact with the people' (Plotkin: 2002); a common feature of populist regimes (Filer and Fredheim: 2016) and one which Peronism, in its various iterations, has long perfected. Fernández spoke frequently and at length in speeches broadcast by state television channel, and, long embroiled in dispute with the principal media outlets, sidelined them in favour of direct social media engagement instead. PRO strategists recognised that to broaden their

<sup>2</sup> In this Case we use the term "digitisation" throughout. Digitisation indicates applying new technologies to pre-existing business models, while digitalisation is typically understood to imply the reinvention of those business models. Although there is stronger evidence of digitisation in the Argentine example, some instances of business model reinvention are also apparent. For consistency, and to avoid a protracted debate regarding the difference between the two terms, we stick to a single term.

support base, the party would need to prove itself adept at both effective governance and citizen engagement. The digital government team and key supporters among senior leadership perceived digitisation as integral to this dual agenda.

In December 2015, with the buzz of the 'digital' election win still fresh, Abadie and his team began to review the strategic plan for digital government that he had begun to work on the year before. But there was a problem. Never having held presidential office previously, and with seemingly little handover from the prior administration, the young party had scant understanding of the system that they were inheriting. As Abadie described, 'our plan was out of date before we even started.' The digital needs of the country, from the rural north to the densely populated cities of Buenos Aires and Cordoba, were far more diverse and complex than PRO had encountered at the city-level alone. As they went back to the drawing board, the digital government team wondered: which areas of government responsibility should they seek to digitise first? How should they work with individual ministries and municipalities? And was broad-scale transformation even possible in a country with a sizeable digital divide and a diverse population? In short, would they succeed in making citizens 'love the State again'? This case explores such questions, focusing on developments in digital service provision during 2015-2018.<sup>3</sup>

## EXHIBIT 2:

### President Macri's modernisation programme - core themes:

- Create a more dynamic and agile public sector
- Professionalise the public service, including creating new leadership roles and attract young talent
- Increase transparency of public sector processes, such as invitations to tender
- Bring the state closer to the citizens by improving digital services
- Encourage better links between citizens and the government by guaranteeing access to information about the public administration

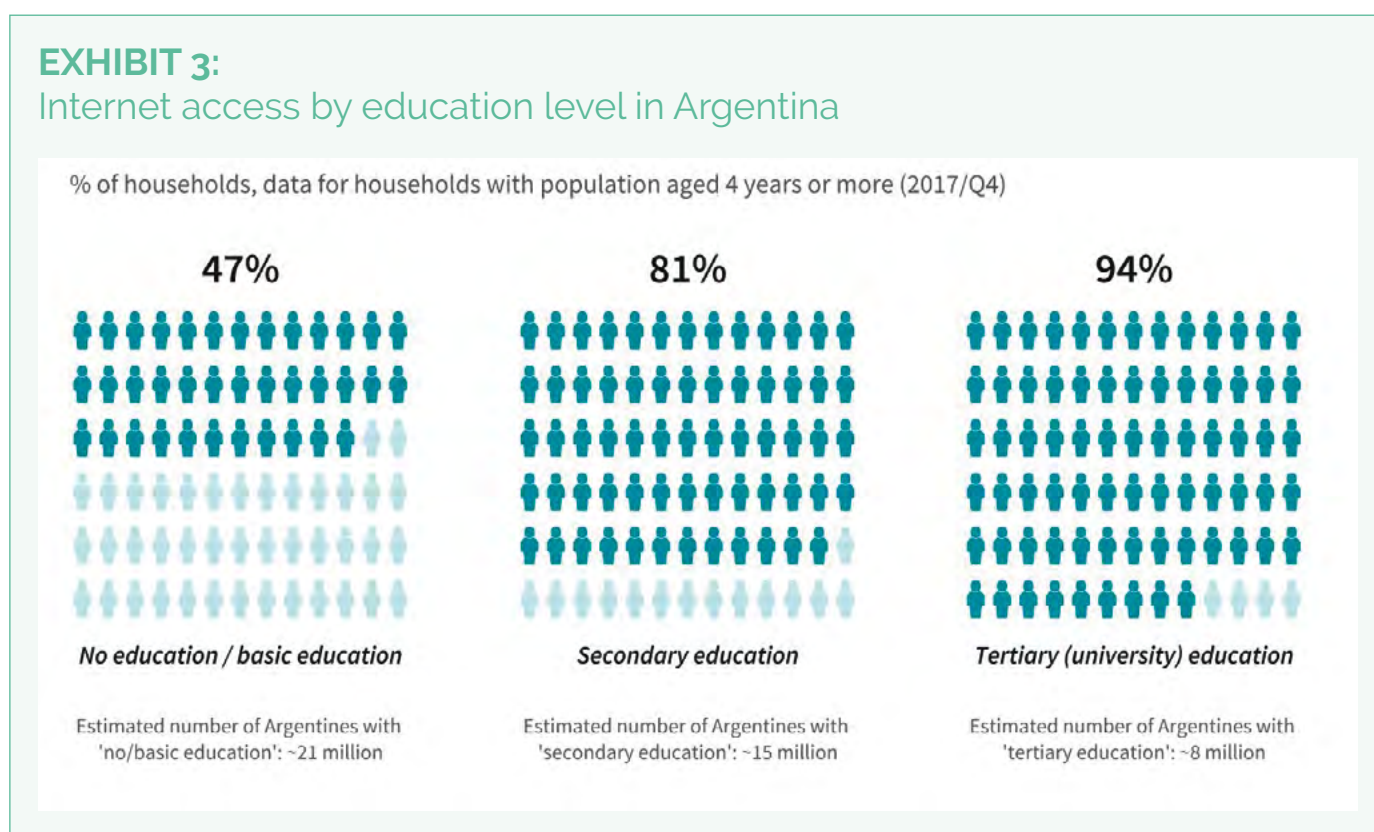
## The digital challenge

The Macri government inherited a country of paradoxes in terms of digital and technological infrastructure. In the early 2010s Argentina boasted the second largest IT market in Latin America, and the highest number of young technology entrepreneurs (Kagame et al.: 2010). In 2011, Argentina had the highest 3G population coverage in the region (Jordan et al.: 2013). President Fernández de Kirchner had launched 'Connect Equality' in 2010 to drive basic digital education across schools (Freedom House: 2017). Argentina had high levels of Internet use too, with particularly strong social media usage: by some estimates, Argentines spent more hours per day on social media platforms than any other nationality (Social media: daily usage in selected countries 2014). Moreover, many younger Argentines had begun to self-identify as 'digital and democratic natives' (Siri: 2014), seeing these two strands of their identity as inseparable. By the early 2010s, this Internet-savvy generation was tired of the perceived failure of the federal and local governments to embrace the Internet.

<sup>3</sup> The Case does not focus on other elements of state digitisation, including open data and digital inclusion. These dimensions are not under the direct mandate of the digital government team but instead have been developed as parallel yet closely related projects within the broader modernisation agenda.

Nonetheless, this picture masks a wealth of variation; despite Argentina's high levels of Internet penetration, by 2015 still a third of the population had no internet access and 94 per cent of municipalities provided no public Wi-Fi (Centre for Public Impact: 2017). Divisions in terms of Internet access correlated strongly with level of educational attainment (see Exhibit 3), with less than half of those with basic or no education having Internet access at home. State digital service provision was particularly wanting. In the 2014 UN Online Services Index Argentina scored 0.55 out of 1. The US, by contrast, scored 0.94. To navigate a cumbersome online state infrastructure, citizens had to contend with over 1000 government websites. An internal analysis of state services in 2015 estimated the government delivered 1388 services to citizens, of which only 21 per cent were available in some format digitally (AR: 2011-15). Up until 2016, to access basic state services the 27 million citizens living outside of the Province of Buenos Aires were expected to physically travel to the capital to file basic paperwork including school graduation certificates. Financially costly and time-consuming, policies such as these made federal government seem not only aloof and lacking empathy but actively obstructive of the desires of citizens to better their own lives.

Daniel Abadie, with political cover from the Minister of Modernisation, Andrés Ibarra, was central to PRO's national digitisation drive. Both had effectively been tasked with the same responsibilities by Macri during his time as Mayor of Buenos Aires. As they set about their agenda, they were soon to discover challenges in scaling their experiences of digital government from a city of around 3 million population, to a country of over 40 million citizens.



## From the local...

### Digital government in Buenos Aires

At least twelve members of the Digital Government team, Abadie included, moved across from the Ministry of Modernisation in the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA). Established by Macri in 2011, the Ministry had been designed to improve city-level public administration by 'creating simplified, efficient, and transparent processes that leverage new technologies to better connect with its citizens and improve public services.' It concentrated on six key areas: Access, e-Government, Open Government, Citizen Engagement, Education, and Industry.



The City of Buenos Aires became autonomous in 1994, when a constitutional amendment allowed the city's 2.9 million residents to elect its own authorities for the first time.<sup>4</sup> In theory, this newly autonomous status incentivised local government officials to pay greater attention to citizen needs, as their future in office now depended on citizens' support. But by the early 2000s, porteños, or residents of Buenos Aires, had lost faith in the city administration as accounts of corruption and inefficiency stacked up. This sense of despair reached breaking point on 30 December 2004, when a fire broke out in a Buenos Aires nightclub that had been awarded a permit despite lacking basic fire safety equipment. 194 people died and over one thousand were injured. When Macri, the former President of the legendary Boca Juniors football team, was appointed Chief of Government soon after, he promised to clean up city government, returning citizens to the core of its mission.

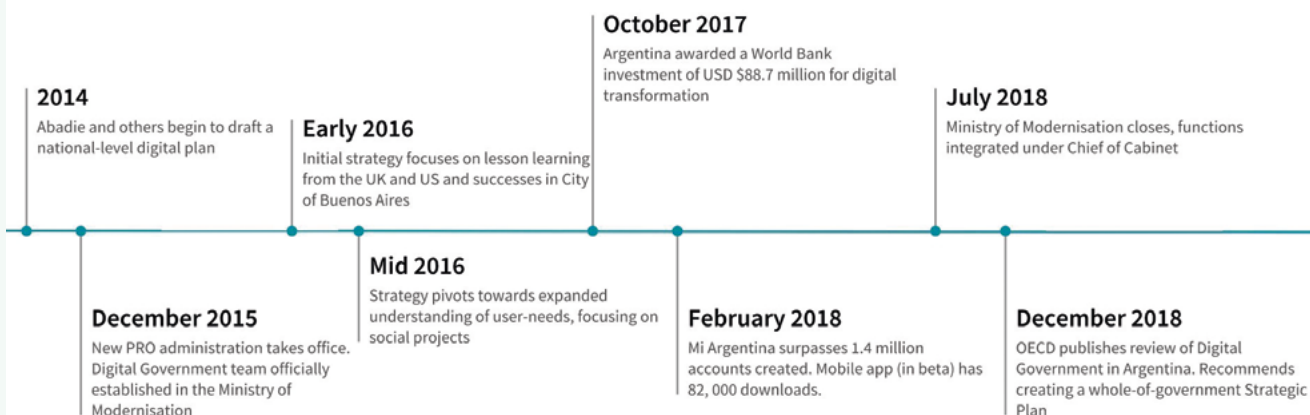
An ambitious e-Government agenda formed part of Macri's plan. Abadie, then in his late twenties, was drafted in from private-sector consultancy to develop public service digitisation projects. Things did not immediately go to plan. Abadie remembered the early days as starting from ground zero:

I went in to improve processes for citizen services, but I ended up installing Windows and putting cables into computers, because that's what was missing. The previous administration had scrubbed everything off the hard disks. We took office with no information, data, nothing. That was my first experience of politics (Abadie, 2016).

In a short period, his team made notable progress. One of their first undertakings was a re-launch of the city government website, [www.buenosaires.gob.ar](http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar). Previously a website focused on providing information, PRO transformed the website into an online portal where citizens could access services which previously necessitated time-consuming, in-person, visits to government offices. The website also reduced transaction costs. Paying traffic fines, requesting civil documents including birth, marriage or death certificates, and asking for official information under the 'access to public information' law act were now tasks that could be completed online. Dozens of administrative procedures for businesses were also digitised.

## EXHIBIT 4: Timeline

### Digital Government in Argentina 2015-18: Key Events



<sup>4</sup> A further 3 million from the broader Province of Buenos Aires make up the city's workforce.



Hundreds of departmental websites were shut down and unified onto [www.buenosaires.gob.ar](http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar), giving citizens a consistent online experience of city government. The team also created a set of public transportation apps that attained iconic local status. BA Cómo llego? (BA How do I get there?), an interactive map which advised on how to get around the city using public or other forms of transportation, was consistently one of the most downloaded apps in Buenos Aires.<sup>5</sup> By January 2018, almost half the citizens of Buenos Aires had downloaded it<sup>6</sup>. The team also overhauled the process of renewing a driving license, transforming it from a day-long activity to a 45-minute process, mainly conducted online. These transformations clearly benefited citizens, making interaction with local government more efficient and less time-consuming. For Abadie, “user-centricity”—the philosophy and practice of focusing on user (in this case) citizen needs, rather than bureaucratic or enterprise “needs”—was at the heart of transformation efforts. This user-centric approach would prove a radical departure from the state’s previous efforts, which were more focused on widening infrastructure access, such as 3G and WiFi.

Digitisation was also used to make the GCBA more transparent. GCBA published over two hundred datasets, in formats legible to a broad cross-section of Buenos Aires residents. They also created BA Obras (BA Public Works), a detailed and searchable database of every public work in the city.<sup>7</sup> In light of earlier corruption scandals surrounding public infrastructure, and with the nightclub fire still alive in citizens’ minds, these projects refreshed the image of GCBA.

Both city residents and colleagues across GCBA were receptive. Abadie’s TEDX talk in Mar de Plata was symbolic of the growing national celebrity of their work. As Federico Abad, the young developer who spearheaded the BA Cómo llego? App recounted, ‘we regularly turned departments away.’ The challenge, they perceived, was not so much to achieve buy-in across government—as other international digital government teams have found—as to resist unnecessary projects that brought positive media coverage for a department but ultimately received low engagement or brought scant tangible benefit to citizens.

In late 2014, with digital government firmly embedded in GCBA and PRO’s eye now on the federal elections, the team began working on a national digital strategy. Macri was launching a presidential campaign and, following its success at the city-level, digital government would be integral to the agenda. What should a national digital strategy look like? What aspects of digitisation could be scaled up from GCBA, and what projects would require an alternative approach? The population for which they were responsible would increase to 43 million across 24 diverse administrative regions and 2.78 million km<sup>2</sup> of territory. And it was not only the population and geographic scale that was set to shift dramatically, but also the diversity of users.

## ...to the national

### Digital Government as a Federal Project

Despite planning, federal administration came as a shock. María Inés Baqué, Secretary of Public Management and Innovation in the Ministry of Modernisation, had been recruited without policy experience from a senior management role at Microsoft Argentina to oversee several sub-secretariats within the Ministry of Modernisation, including Digital Government. She recalled of the early days that ‘there was no handover, we started from zero’. Abadie, despite his experience in GCBA, also felt uncertain: ‘When we got to the presidency, we realised that our strategic plan was already out of date. We’d made it with little information about the State. I didn’t have a single transition meeting with the prior government.’

5 Other apps included BA Ecobici, enabling citizens to access the city bicycle rental scheme; BA Taxi, connecting passengers with licenced taxis; and BA Denuncia Vial (BA Road Complaint), tasking users to take and upload photographs of traffic offences, such as illegal parking. The app produces an automatic offence invoice, which becomes official following a formal check. At that point, a payment invoice is generated and sent to the offender.

6 [www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/conoce-ba-como-llego-la-aplicacion-mas-descargada-por-los-portenos](http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/conoce-ba-como-llego-la-aplicacion-mas-descargada-por-los-portenos).

7 [www.buenosaires.gob.ar/baobras/buscador-avanzado-de-obras](http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/baobras/buscador-avanzado-de-obras).

As Exhibit 3 shows, there was considerable variation in citizens' comfort with digital technologies. The relatively affluent, educated and urban populace of Buenos Aires was in stark contrast to the rest of the country. As Minister Ibarra described, the objective at the city-level had been precisely to make Buenos Aires a city that 'took full advantage of its human resources.' The technical infrastructure differed too. Connectivity challenges in terms of Internet access were significant issues for rural areas. Natalia Carfi, former Director of Open Government at the Ministry of Modernisation, described the capital city as, digitally-speaking, 'light years' ahead of the rest of the country in 2015. As Minister Ibarra reflected in 2019 when discussing the administration's achievements, 'certainly one of greatest challenges was scaling projects to a national level, with all of the geographic and human diversity that entails.'

Abadie recalls that 'in the first year, everyone wanted us to help!' The digital team initially focused on 'high demand' transactions. Following a similar model to their work in Buenos Aires, they successfully created a new single domain website for government ([argentina.gob.ar](http://argentina.gob.ar)) and closed down over 1000 old websites, and created an electronic document management system. However, Abadie and the team realised that in order to generate traction and demonstrate improvements for the wide and diverse user-base of the country, they would need to branch beyond purely transactional digital channel shift into more socially oriented projects. To continue to follow the mantra of user-centricity at the national level, they would need to rethink what "user needs" entailed.

One of the first social projects that the digital government team decided to tackle was domestic labour conditions. Historically an informal sector, 90 per cent of the 67 million home-cleaning workers around the world have no social security protection, and 80 per cent are women (ILO: 2015). An estimated one-million domestic workers reside in Argentina. To help to ensure that these workers received social security benefits, the Administración Federal de Ingresos Públicos (AFIP, the federal tax office), in conjunction with the digital team, introduced a new online labour registration procedure that ensured the provision of social security to Argentine domestic workers. Following 18 months of work and building on the previous administration's work, in March 2018 the digital team and AFIP (Argentina's federal tax office) launched an improved web platform with a user-friendly format and a new mobile application where both employers and employees could manage their accounts.

Employers were now able to register payments and work licenses, and workers could monitor whether their employers were paying their social security benefits on time. They could also manage personal transactions, such as paying an additional fee to include family relatives in their health insurance cover. AFIP sent emails to more than half a million taxpayers that they believed to employ unregistered home workers, encouraging them to register by highlighting the benefits, such as tax exemptions. With a much simpler online registration process, accessible by mobile phone, the tax agency hoped to double the number of registered workers and position Argentina at the top of the ILO ranking.

A further example of engaging government digitisation as a vehicle for social impact was a new mobile app for women at risk of gender-related violence. The digital team was approached by the Institute for Women, the public office responsible for tackling gender-related violence, to produce the app. With one woman murdered every 30 hours (almost three thousand murders between 2007 and 2018), gender-based violence had risen to public and media prominence under the slogan 'Ni Una Menos' (Not One Woman Fewer) in 2015. The app sought to help women first to identify whether they were victims of gender-related violence, and then, if so, to remove themselves from the situation. It offered a self-assessment test based on fourteen questions for women to help to determine whether they were in a violent relationship. This starting point—identifying the signs—was one with which many women struggled, the Institute had found. Through the app, a woman could leave a message for a professional to call her during 'safe' hours, be connected to the 911, or share the result of the questionnaire with a trusted third-party, such as a family relative or friend. Women could also search a geo-referenced map to find the nearest help centre.

Although data on usage and outcomes of these and other projects was not publicly revealed at the time, re-conceiving user needs to focus on a broad array of social issues helped to create the conditions for the team to focus on the delivery of a major project that had been in the pipeline since the outset: a service delivery platform called Mi Argentina, where citizens could create a personal account to store and update national identity documents, including driving licenses (in coordination with the Ministry of Transport) and bone marrow donor cards (in coordination with the Ministry of Health and Social Development). The platform had a fairly slow start: by February 2018, the mobile version had been downloaded 80,000 times. By March 2018, less than 5,000 appointments had been booked on it. Nonetheless, by late 2018, 2.4m users had interacted with Mi Argentina. Even though Mi Argentina had limited features, and critical national agencies including AFIP and PAMI, the public health insurance agency, continued to host services on their own portals, the idea of developing a citizens' personalised digital dashboard represented a significant milestone towards efficiency and modernisation for a citizenry used to time-consuming and productivity-thwarting bureaucratic procedures.

Despite these numerous achievements, there was a sense in the team by late 2018 that they could have delivered even more. An initial underappreciation of the diversity of needs of the wider Argentine population and an under-developed public communications strategy were two contributing factors but politics, inevitably, played a role too.

## Politics of modernisation

It is a frequent feature of new, reforming ministries and departments that they encounter resistance from the existing state apparatus. This was the experience of the Government Digital Service (GDS) in the United Kingdom, from which Abadie's team openly took inspiration. GDS, in particular, faced challenges of authority when dealing with some of the largest departments; those tasked with tax and benefits. In Argentina, the Ministry of Modernisation appeared to face some similar challenges. Ibarra had excelled as an operator at the city-level, but national government represented a new challenge of scale. As many public servants who moved from city to federal government observed, the power dynamics and relations on a political level between the city and national level were a world apart. State-wide modernisation required complex negotiation with departments, the consent and support of 23 notionally autonomous provinces and the City of Buenos Aires (Exhibit 1), and over 2,500 municipalities run by different political parties.

### EXHIBIT 5:

#### Key Digital Government Achievements between 2015 to 2018

- 70% of provinces signed the Federal Commitment for the Modernisation of the State[11]
- Argentina rose from 54th to 17th in the Global Open Data Index[12]
- Argentina reached 43rd in 2018 e-Gov ranking
- Mi Argentina platform achieved 2.4m users
- 780 citizen services transformed, with 13,000 forms now available online
- Digital Signatures enabled for numerous forms and agencies
- More than 300 digital centres created across the country[13]
- More than 50 municipalities' websites launched[14]
- A guide to more than 7,500 administrative processes is now accessible online, and services such as remote medical consultations have been made available [15]
- Centralised website for public sector job opportunities[16]
- More than 70 datasets are available from a wide range of public institutions [17]
- Business registration online and in one day



**EXHIBIT 6:**  
Comparator countries<sup>8</sup>

## Argentina compared with countries used as inspiration for digital strategy

	Argentina	United Kingdom	United States	Estonia
Population	43.8m	66,900,000	327,200,000	1,300,000
Area	2,780,400 km <sup>2</sup>	242,495 km <sup>2</sup>	9,147,590 km <sup>2</sup>	45,227 km <sup>2</sup>
Population density	14.4/km <sup>2</sup>	270.7/km <sup>2</sup>	32.8/km <sup>2</sup>	72.5/km <sup>2</sup>
GDP (PPP)	\$20,425	\$45,565	\$62,518	\$35,717

Such challenges were exposed as Abadie's team sought to digitise the end-to-end payment of monotributo—labour taxes. The status quo was clearly suboptimal. Abadie's team found that many Argentines would search online for how to pay taxes, often ending up at user-generated content sites such as Taringa, unearthing piece-by-piece information on how to complete the transaction. Yet the relatively simple digitisation process the team made took over a year and a half to negotiate with AFIP, the Argentine tax service. Abadie's digital team were popular in many circles, but, they perceived, when seeking to reform some of the major services, were viewed as a threat to ingrained ways of working.

All public sector reform operates against a political backdrop, and in 2018 those dynamics rose to prominence. In late 2017, PRO and its broader Cambiemos electoral coalition had won a sweeping victory in the mid-terms, winning in 13 of Argentina's 24 voting districts. The vote was viewed as a referendum on President Macri and his reform agenda, thus giving PRO a more comfortable runway for delivery. But in 2018, Argentina suffered a currency devaluation, with the peso losing half its value against the US dollar between January and September of that year. The devaluation was attributed to a chronic public deficit and 45 per cent annual inflation, coupled with rising interest rates in the US. The national government opted for a quick deficit reduction. Macri centralised decision-making, reducing the number of Ministries from twenty to ten with the Ministry of Modernisation becoming a Secretariat, now under Chief of Cabinet supervision. Andrés Ibarra was named Under-Chief of Cabinet and also Secretary of Modernisation.

The structure of the now defunct Ministry of Modernisation ostensibly transplanted unchanged to the Chief of Cabinet, and the more centralised position of modernisation was viewed by some to strengthen its power. Yet in practice, such departmental changes frequently halt progress. A four-year funding package of USD\$88.7m from the World Bank in 2017, for 'Modernisation and Innovation for Better Public Services in Argentina' undoubtedly cushioned digitisation from regressing.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the deliverables achieved in the second half of 2018 by the digital team decreased in volume, probably as a result of macroeconomic factors drawing political attention away from the original reforming agenda.

<sup>8</sup> Country census data; International Monetary Fund; Wikipedia.  
<sup>9</sup> World Bank, 2018.

## Learning from elsewhere

Abadie's team was young. He was only thirty-five on becoming Undersecretary, and the wider digital team were of a similar age and younger. Compounding this, Macri's cabinet ministers had little experience of national politics; this was the first President to be elected who did not hail from either the Peronist or Radical political tradition in Argentina. The Ministry of Modernisation therefore had few Argentine blueprints to follow. They turned to international examples instead, such as Estonia's e-government programme, GDS in the UK and 18F in the US, forming strong relationships with the founding teams of both GDS and 18F. Yet as Exhibit 6 demonstrates, these countries differed materially in terms of geographic scale and population size, as well as demographically and politically. The population of Argentina is almost 35 times that of Estonia, while the GDP of Estonia is almost twice that of Argentina. There is also a myriad of cultural discrepancies. "Best-practice" is hard to ascertain in such a nascent field as government digital transformation, but Argentina needed more comparable countries with which to discover "good practice".

As such, Abadie and others also proactively brought Argentina much closer into a regional network of digital leaders. Its practitioners form part of a community of practice developed through both formal institutions and events and informal meetings and communications. On a formal level, Argentina is a member state of Red de Gobierno Electrónico de América Latina y el Caribe (the Electronic Government Network of Latin America and the Caribbean, Red Gealc), a regional network of e-government departments and practitioners sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Organisation of American States (OAS), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC/CRDI). The network provides an online platform on which digital governments from across the region share news, ideas and best practices. Red Gealc also organises an annual conference where practitioners share projects and experiences. Argentina is an active member state and a frequent platform contributor. Beyond Red Gealc, Abadie and his counterparts across Latin America also discussed ideas and difficulties that they were facing informally, on a near-daily basis, via WhatsApp (Abadie, 2018). Participants in the WhatsApp group were digital government Undersecretaries (or their equivalents) in several Latin American national governments, including Mexico and Uruguay. Together, they formed an informal rapid-response network, in tune with the fast-paced, 'agile' approach of the digital government team.

Both the formal structure of Red Gealc and the informality of the WhatsApp group enabled Abadie and his team to tap into the collective experience of peers who both face contextually similar challenges, such as sizeable digital divides and a high ratio of users accessing Internet services through mobile telephones, and who serve users with comparable needs.<sup>[1]</sup> Taking part in these networks fed into a deliberate strategy to avoid the expense and risks of 'unnecessarily reinventing the wheel' (Baqué, 2018). The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on digital government with Uruguay in August 2018 indicates a likely future aspiration for Argentina to join the Digital 9 ('D9') group of leading digital governments into which Uruguay was recently accepted (see Exhibit 7), further cementing the country's position as a regional leader. Where institutional memory within federal government had lacked, the digital government team welcomed the opportunity to contribute to, and learn from, the broader 'institutional' memory of a regional community of digital government leaders and practitioners, and to draw on policies and strategies that had proved effective elsewhere.

### EXHIBIT 7: The Digital 9 'D9' members of leading digital nations.<sup>10</sup>

Estonia, Israel, South Korea, New Zealand, the UK, Canada, Uruguay,  
Mexico and Portugal

<sup>10</sup> The D9 members self-designate as digital 'leaders'.

## Towards a Comprehensive Digital Strategy

The breadth and rapidity of Argentine Digital Government work to date has won national support and international acclaim. Tom Loosemore, co-founder of UK GDS and a leader in digital government globally, describes the team as 'one of the fastest growing, hardest working, and most ambitious government teams' that he has encountered (Loosemore, 2018). Baqué is ranked as one of most influential digital government leaders globally (apolitical). Chat Crecer, a virtual assistant for pregnancy and early childhood, won the team a Webby Award (the 'Internet's highest honor', according to the New York Times), suggesting that public-sector organisations can readily 'hold their own' among the most successful private-sector Internet-enabled, social interventions.

In 2014, Abadie described falling in love with the 'scale of government', and the impact that it therefore allowed committed public servants to have. Five years on, the opportunities of scale remain on his mind, but there is also growing recognition among the digital government team of its challenges. As the OECD registered in its late 2018 assessment of Argentine digital government, they must now move from an impressive yet disparate collection of projects towards a cohesive, overarching 'strategic-level action plan with a medium and long-term perspective in terms of policy milestones and delivery times'. The government Digital Agenda 2030, announced in early 2019 after several months' work, formalises the intention to develop a long-term whole-of-government approach, in the continued effort to make citizens love the State again. Any such plan must necessarily take into account the political complexity of coordination at the federal level; and the range of skills and approaches required to serve the full diversity of citizens across a large, aspirational middle-income country whose citizens live markedly different lives from one another.



## Lessons learned

The experience of Argentina's digital government programme from 2015 to 2018, undertaken initially through the Ministry of Modernisation and latterly under the auspices of the Chief of Cabinet, poses several lessons for consideration by policymakers.

- 1. Understanding the challenge of scaling from local to national.** President Macri and his digitisation team had made significant improvements to user-facing services for citizens at the city-level. Yet the digital team discovered they could not scale the plans developed for an urban, mature infrastructure to a more geographically and demographically diverse country. The challenge was not necessarily size so much as diversification of user needs, forms of connectivity, and the complexity of the federal interplay with provincial and municipal governments. How can digital government teams ensure that assessments of scalability fully account for the challenges of diversification? Are certain digital services non-scalable across diverse populations, or best delivered at the local level?
- 2. Choosing where to learn from carefully.** Argentina initially looked to the US and UK models for inspiration. They were also interested in the Estonian approach. But how translatable were lessons from these countries to Argentina? Beyond the many differences between them, 'best-practice' is hard to ascertain in such a nascent field as government digital transformation, with little sense of long-term effects of individual programmes and strategies anywhere. How can digital government teams move towards a culture of seeking 'good practice' rather than 'best practice' given both the difficulty of generalisability and the relative newness of government digitisation for so many? What kinds of digitisation strategies can usefully be adapted from countries with markedly different demographic and political features?
- 3. Deciding where to start and why.** Momentum is a powerful force. A long-term, strategic pipeline of initiatives to work on can help to sustain momentum. The team made strong progress developing the [argentina.gob.ar](http://argentina.gob.ar) single domain but were significantly slowed down when working on labour tax reform. Yet they also quickly understand what they did not know and demonstrated sufficient flexibility to change course. How can teams build in opportunities to pivot, and make it culturally acceptable within a government organisation? Is it easier to do so within a new team or newly created ministry or department?
- 4. Clearly stating the reform agenda.** Abadie's team benefitted from a transparent and explicitly flagged modernising agenda promised by President Macri. This gave the digital agenda significant early political salience. Nonetheless, following the election, public communications of digital transformation projects was minimal. President Macri's official Facebook page had almost 4.5 million followers—the work of a strong and professionalised presidential communications team. Yet the social media presence of the Ministry of Modernisation, particularly on Facebook (the preferred social media platform of most Argentines) lacked.<sup>11</sup> Despite featuring valuable information, the Mi Argentina page had less than 2,000 followers by the end of 2018. The absence of a robust public communications strategy may have contributed to the low numbers of subscribers to [miargentina.gob.ar](http://miargentina.gob.ar).<sup>12</sup> How can digital government teams ensure that public communications, via the channels most likely to reach broad-based and diverse national audiences, are consistently integrated into a digital transformation agenda?

---

<sup>11</sup> [www.facebook.com/mauriciomacri/](https://www.facebook.com/mauriciomacri/).

<sup>12</sup> By early 2019 Macri was directly promoting the use of Mi Argentina on his official Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/mauriciomacri/videos/licencia-de-conducir-en-tu-tel%C3%A9fonoahora-vas-a-poder-acceder-a-tu-licencia-de-co/1915750581855640/](https://www.facebook.com/mauriciomacri/videos/licencia-de-conducir-en-tu-tel%C3%A9fonoahora-vas-a-poder-acceder-a-tu-licencia-de-co/1915750581855640/).

5. **Distributing political support as widely as possible.** The digital team were both young and had little political experience. Considerable political cover derived from the figure of one highly influential individual and post; the Minister for Modernisation. Would a more distributed political support base with greater experience of state-wide reform have helped?
6. **Maintaining momentum amid changing political and economic circumstances.** From the outset, the mantra had been to de-politicise modernisation and the team successfully managed to continue delivery despite significant political and economic upheaval. A World Bank grant in 2017 helped to fund much of the digital work and shield it from a reigning back of public expenditure from 2018 onwards. What lessons can be learned regarding how to successfully continue a reform agenda amid considerable political turbulence?
7. **Engaging a broader community of practice.** Argentina is home to a thriving 'civic tech' community, particularly in the cities of Buenos Aires and Cordoba. Yet digital government projects have been delivered in relative isolation from it. As GDS found in the UK, engaging with a community external to government can have many advantages, including testing new ideas and exposure to emerging developments on the market. In Argentina, the civic tech community has cultivated cross-partisan dialogue among its members. Stronger engagement with this community could help to ensure longer-term continuity beyond the uncertainties of the political cycle, fulfilling Minister Ibarra's commitment to digitisation as 'a long-term public policy that transcends governments and focuses on the people'. How can digital teams best build and engage with an external community of practice?
8. **Looking beyond user needs.** An alternative model to having public administrators predict or research 'user needs' and then build responsively for them is to create an enabling 'platform-ecosystem' in which government creates and offers the underlying infrastructure, while allowing suppliers to build upon it, and departments to see what other departments are purchasing to ensure lack of duplication.<sup>13</sup> This model may also stimulate innovation in the broader economy. Given Argentina's strong technology capacity, could this approach (or integrating aspects of it) have yielded greater gains?
9. **Turning a sprint into a marathon.** The digital team, especially those who had been part of Macri's election campaign, were highly motivated and driven by the ambition of delivering a "digital state". But amidst a public sector pay freeze and faced with the challenges of transforming long-held ways of working, it became difficult to retain such high levels of energy; three-quarters of digital professionals ended up working less than two years in the Argentine public sector (Peer Review: 2018). How can digital teams working in government best retain talent and avert burn-out?
10. **Measuring success.** How should one evaluate digital success in a national context? Argentina took inspiration for its digital strategy from countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Estonia. These do not form easy benchmarks, differing in cultural, economic and geographic terms. The World Bank proposed a number of evaluation metrics for Argentina in 2017 as part of its grant, while the UN digital government ranking seeks to offer global comparison. What measures should Argentina and other countries utilise to consider the effectiveness of national digital programmes?

---

<sup>13</sup> Mark Thompson, 'Digital Government Isn't about User Needs – It's More Fundamental than That', *Digileaders.Com*, 15 September 2016. <https://digileaders.com/digital-government-isnt-user-needs-fundamental/>.



## Trámites en sede comunal (CGPC)

Todo lo que podés hacer en tu barrio

Buenos Aires Ciudad

Buenos Aires Ciudad

# metribus

LINEA 59 ARRIBANDO EN 1 MINUTOS

LINEA 100 ARRIBANDO EN 5 MINUTOS

11:13  
Móvil 10 de Octubre

Subte

### Estado del servicio

- A Normal
- B Normal
- C Normal

### Disponibilidad de bicis en cada estación

ESTACIONES	UBICACIÓN	CANTIDAD DE BICIS
Florida	Av. de la Independencia y Av. Corrientes	25
Adriana	Florida y Avenida	15
Pedro Berra	Florida y Corrientes	10
Plaza Lavalle	Avda. de Mayo y Plaza	10
Ortiz	Avda. de Mayo y C. de Mayo	10



## Work Cited

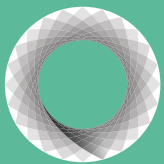
- 'Digital Government Review of Argentina 2018'. Paris: OECD, 2018. <https://www.oecd.org/innovation/digital-government/digital-government-review-argentina-key-findings-2018.htm>.
- Filer, Tanya, and Rolf Fredheim. 'Popular with the Robots: Accusation and Automation in the Argentine Presidential Elections, 2015'. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28 July 2016, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-016-9233-7>.
- 'Freedom on the Net 2017: Argentina Country Profile'. Freedom House, 2017. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/argentina>.
- Gallo, Julián. 'El Primer Presidente de Facebook'. *La Nación*, 26 November 2015. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1849036-el-primer-presidente-de-facebook>.
- Gimenez, Josefina. 'The Modernisation of Argentina's Public Administration'. Centre for Public Impact, 5 September 2017. <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/case-study/modernisation-argentinass-public-administration/>.
- Jordán, Valeria, Hernán Galperin, and Wilson Peres, eds. *Broadband in Latin America Beyond Connectivity*. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. Santiago, Chile, 2013. [https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/35899/1/S2013644\\_en.pdf](https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/35899/1/S2013644_en.pdf).
- Kagami, Mitsuhiro, Masatsugu Tsuji, and Emanuele Giovannetti. *Information Technology Policy and the Digital Divide Lessons for Developing Countries*, 2010.
- Plotkin, Mariano Ben. *Mañana Es San Perón : A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina*. Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2002.
- Siri, Santiago. 'Internet y Democracia'. *La Nación*, 10 January 2014. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1654367-internet-y-democracia>.
- 'Social Media: Daily Usage in Selected Countries 2014 | Statistic'. Statista. Accessed 12 November 2015. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/270229/usage-duration-of-social-networks-by-country/>.
- Thompson, Mark. 'Digital Government Isn't about User Needs – It's More Fundamental than That'. *Digileaders.Com*, 15 September 2016. <https://digileaders.com/digital-government-isnt-user-needs-fundamental/>.
- YouGov, and Leverhulme Trust Conspiracy and Democracy Project. 'Conspiracy (Argentina)'. YouGov, March 2016.



**Images:**

**Pg.17:** Mauricio Macri observó funcionamiento pantallas Metrobus 9 de julio. (1 de 2) by Matias Repetto-gv/GCBA <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>

**Above:** BA Apps 2012, Ceremonia de premiación del primer concurso de aplicaciones del Gobierno de la Ciudad: Buenos Aires Apps <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>



**Bennett Institute  
for Public Policy**  
Cambridge

Department of Politics and International Studies  
Alison Richard Building  
7 West Road  
Cambridge, CB3 9DT

[www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk](http://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk)