

# Argentine first lady build own career

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina --

When President Nestor Kirchner decided not to run for re-election and instead nominated his wife, critics saw a plot to bypass term limits. Supporters of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner saw a recognition of her political clout.

Even as she followed her husband from the wind-swept plains of Patagonia to Argentina's presidential palace, she built an impressive - and impressively independent - political career.

Fernandez, 54, boasts that she won her first national election, as senator for Santa Cruz province, when Kirchner was a mere state official - the governor. When Kirchner moved into the presidency, she switched her residence, and became a senator for powerful Buenos Aires province.

Several major exit polls suggested that Fernandez won the presidency Sunday by a large enough margin to avoid a runoff. She would be the first woman in Argentina elected to the post.

Fernandez was born into a middle class family, and met Kirchner at law school. She was the perfect student; he was politically astute. They shared bold, brash personalities and center-left ideals to match. They married in 1975 and have two children: Maximo, 30, and Florencia, 16.

The young couple set up an office specializing in property law in the southern city of Rio Gallegos. Kirchner became mayor, then governor. She moved up through local legislatures before running for the national senate.

As senator, Fernandez served as Kirchner's de facto floor leader, driving his legislative agenda through Congress and helping him lobby the courts to prosecute atrocities of the 1976-83 dictatorship. She also became active in causes of her own, especially in defending women's rights.

Fernandez's critics call her "Queen Cristina" for her regal air and designer clothes. She dismissed such criticisms as machismo.