The Strength of Democracy in Argentina and Where it Stands Today

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Jake Wallihan is a junior at UNC Chapel Hill majoring in Political Science and Global Studies. He wrote "Democracy in Argentina and Where it Stands Today" for his Democracy and Development in Latin America course in the Political Science Department. Jake wrote about democracy in Argentina because he's passionate about the spreading of democracy.

The topic of this paper is the democratic transition of Argentina from authoritarianism to democracy in the 1990s. I will be using Latin America scholar Kenneth Roberts’ framework on Latin American dual transitions outlined in the book, Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World¹. Specifically, I will argue that of Roberts’ three types of democratic transitions—Institutionalized Pluralism (IP), Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty (HPS), and Oligarchic Restoration (OR)—Argentina’s transition throughout the 1990s and early 2000s best falls into the category of Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty. I will organize my argument into three sections: contestation and participation, presence of a left-right axis, and careening. Then, I will shift focus to modern-day Argentina and argue that HPS no longer applies to the country, analyzing the country under the same three dimensions.

Roberts identifies a few factors to classify democratic transitions². Contestation is the level of competition between parties in electoral politics and the associated rights that enable it to occur in a democratic fashion. Participation is the extent to which the population participates in elections and political issues. Ideally, a regime-transitioning country will possess both high contestation and participation for democracy to flourish. A clear left-right axis is the presence of distinct parties with differing ideologies and their adherence to these ideologies. Again, the presence of this factor is ideal in democracy following a transition. Careening occurs when the population loses faith in established parties and no longer identifies with any of them, leading to the rise of political outsiders not associated with the established political system, and the emergence of new parties. Careening worsens democratic conditions and demonstrates that a country has become a case of Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty or Oligarchic Restoration rather than the ideal Institutional Pluralism. I will argue that in the 1990s and early 2000s, Argentina was a case of HPS because it lacked high levels of contestation and a clear left-right axis. While there are some events in Argentina that point towards careening, the factor isn’t as relevant in this case as it is in other countries with HPS.

Contestation and Participation

Prior to dual transition and the market-based reforms, throughout the 1980s and early 90s, Argentina demonstrated high levels of political participation, with citizen engagement being centralized around unions and workers. How-
ever, the neoliberal reforms implemented throughout the 90s greatly weakened labor power in Argentina; as a result, unions became less politically relevant. Instead, the informal sector became much more important in electoral politics, with the Peronist Partido Justicialista (PJ) shifting their platform to appeal towards the heavily impoverished. As Leandro Gamallo put it, collective action shifted from taking place in the factory to taking place in the neighborhood\(^3\). This transition brought an informal transformation in social mobilization as impoverished people expressed their dissatisfaction with the economy through destructive protests, highway blockages, and uprisings. These forms of social conflict persisted all the way to the end of the 90s and the start of the 21st century. The dual transition in Argentina did not decrease the high levels of participation in Argentina; it changed how participation and collective action occurred\(^4\).

While these new forms of social mobilization were successful in calling attention to the failure of the neoliberal model, they did not lead to the rise of a new hegemony because there was a lack of a popular alternative to the established PJ and Radical Civil Union (UCR). Beginning in 1993 and persisting through the 2000s, the PJ dominated the political scene\(^5\). From 1989 to 2015, the PJ was in power for all but two years: 2000 and 2001. During this brief period, UCR member Fernando de la Rúa held the presidential office but he was quickly forced to resign due to widespread protests over the economic crisis. Despite the UCR’s brief stint in power in 2000 and 2001, the PJ maintained a powerful grip on the country throughout the 90s and 2000s. One example of this was the Olivos Pact. Formed between PJ President Carlos Menem and UCR leader Raúl Alfonsín, this was a mutually beneficial agreement where Menem would be granted the ability to run for reelection, while the UCR would gain control over the mayorship of Buenos Aires. This is because the amendment also allowed for elections for the mayor of the city, whereas it was previously decided by appointment from the president. While this may seem to have benefited both parties, in reality Alfonsín agreed to the amendment out of fear that had he not, Menem and the PJ would push for term limit reform through undemocratic means. Because of the PJ party dominance, Argentina lacked the competition between institutionalized parties required of a strong democracy\(^6\).

**Left-Right Axis**

Compounding the issue of a lack of competition was the absence of a clear difference in ideologies between the PJ and UCR in the 1990s. It is important that the established parties in democracies possess distinct ideologies and policies so that the population may be adequately represented by parties that best match their position. Unfortunately, the PJ took positions more associated with the right during the 1990s rather than the leftist positions of their constituency. Historically, the PJ was a leftist, populist party with statist policies commonly seen in Latin America during this period. However, the party leader, Carlos Menem shifted the party away from this ideology and toward neoliberal policies. Primarily, the rise of Carlos Menem led to the deinstitutionalization of the party and the blurring of the political axis in Argentina\(^7\).

Menem ran his presidential campaign largely independent of the party, as he was ideologically disparate from most of the PJ in his ascendence to power. Thus, his independence from the party carried over into his administration with him mostly appointing those he had personal ties with to cabinet positions and even going so far as to appoint avid anti-Peronists\(^8\). These ties to anti-Peronist conservatives represent a clear affinity for conservative ideologies in the Menem administration. More importantly however, they represent his growing hegemony, refusing to be bound by checks or compromises, whether that be from the opposition or his own party\(^9\). By the early 1990s, the PJ no longer held accountability over Menem, but was more so a tool under Menem as it shrank and lost all its power. Thus, the values of the PJ were bound to Menem’s values, which in this period were market-based, neoliberal policies.
Careening

In 1999, Menem was no longer allowed to re-run, and due to a growing economic crisis, UCR member Fernando de la Rúa was elected to presidential office. However, this economic crisis continued to grow throughout de la Rúa’s term, which heightened dissatisfaction with the political system. Disapproval from the public culminated in the 2001 midterm elections, which occurred at the height of the economic crisis. Under de la Rúa, unemployment rose to 21.5 percent and poverty rose to 35.9 percent, as a result of de la Rúa’s removal of Menem’s Convertibility Plan. The plan collapsed the banking system and spurred massive capital flight. These poor economic conditions led to another massive wave of protests and uprisings, signaling the height of careening in Argentina’s HPS.

During this time, protests included widespread roadblocks, lootings, riots, yelling in the streets, and more. Despite the UCR’s removal of the Convertibility Plan as the catalyst for the crisis, dissatisfaction with the political system was no longer solely directed at the ruling party. Rather, both the UCR and the PJ received flak for their failure to govern in an effective and democratic manner. The sentiment of protest chants at the time prove this, with protesters chanting “Out with them all!” and “Everyone should go!” Furthermore, blank and spoiled ballots cast rose to an all-time high that midterm election, with 24 percent of voters casting such ballots. Clearly, there was a strong dissatisfaction with both of the major parties, and a desire for an alternative to the two established parties.

Argentina most closely relates to Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty in the 1990s because of Menem’s undemocratic means of governance. Menem blurred the distinction between the left and the right through his implementation of bait-and-switch neoliberal reforms. Alongside this, he eroded party institutionalization through his appointment of patrimonial officers and leaders, which contributed to the low levels of contestation at the time. Left or right, PJ or UCR, one had to be loyal to Menem to gain power. An illiberal style of governing combined with neoliberal reforms led to mass protest against both parties and a call for a restructuring of the political class. However, as I’ll discuss in the next section, HPS did not run its full course, and instead resided on low contestation with Peronist domination through the 2000s.

**Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty Throughout the 2000s**

Argentina began to diverge from other examples of Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty starting in the early 2000s. Although there was widespread discontent with the entire political system, the massive social uprisings at this point did not lead to the rise of a populist outsider or the creation of a new powerful party. Rather, this only led to further dominance by the PJ and the utter decimation of the UCR throughout the 2000s. While the PJ still faced much backlash at the height of the crisis in 2001, substantially greater ill will was channeled toward the UCR, resulting in it becoming majorly unpopular. Meanwhile, the PJ still possessed enough popularity to stave off the defeat from a non-establishment newcomer. From here, the traditional HPS trajectory remained partially complete, with the alternative HPS pathway allowing the Kirchners and their leftist wing of Peronism to govern throughout the 2000s and up to 2015.

The election of Néstor Kirchner as president in 2003 led to the rise of a wing of the PJ that was ideologically distinct from the PJ of the 1990s, which possessed many neoliberal and market-oriented ideals. Instead, he implemented many social reforms to raise living standards and appeal to the demands of the people, including lowering unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Kirchner was able to do so because of the favorable economic conditions from the commodity boom that had just begun. These favorable economic conditions also allowed for the re-strengthening of labor power and the re-institutionalization of social conflict, with the Kirchner government encouraging negotiations with unions. The oppositional voter base was thus weakened during this...
time as union membership grew alongside employment. The PJ continued to perform well throughout the commodity boom, with Néstor’s wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, taking over as president in 2007 and serving for two terms up to 2015. It is at this point that HPS finally begins to dissipate as in 2015, a non-Peronist is elected as president and for the first time in 14 years, Peronist supremacy is called into question.

Modern Day Argentina: Left-Right Axis

The decline in support for the PJ can be attributed to the end of the commodity boom in 2013, where inflation rose to thirty percent and GDP growth declined to almost zero percent. These declining economic conditions allowed for Mauricio Macri, a center-right member of the Republican Proposal (PRO) party, to gain office. For the first time in over a decade, a markedly conservative candidate had been elected as president.

Macri’s administration towed the line between centrist and conservative policies, operating under a guideline of tweaking previous statist policies for improved economic performance without undertaking structural adjustment. In this sense, the Macri administration is less conservative than other Latin American counterparts, but they remain ideologically distinct from Peronism. The Macri administration decided not to remove Kirchner’s conditional cash transfer programs or minimum wage policies, which would have certainly been very unpopular. Instead, their main policies were the implementation of a floating exchange rate, the removal of export duties, the reduction of household subsidies for public utilities, and the compression of further wage increases. With the election and successful completion in office of Macri’s administration, one can argue there has been a re-establishment of a clear left-right, where the PJ fell on the left side of the political spectrum and PRO fell on the right (a facet that was somewhat evident in the 1980s but not present in the 1990s).

Modern Day Argentina: Contestation and Participation

Today, Argentina has also improved on contestation and participation measures, with contestation improving from the previous two decades. As previously mentioned, the PJ faces considerable competition with the PRO party and their coalition. Macri was able to win against the Peronist candidate in 2015. However, he did not win as a populist outsider overthrowing the hegemonic party. Instead, Macri and the PRO party formed a coalition, known as the Cambiemos, with the UCR and the relatively new Civic Coalition ARI party (ARI) to present a powerful center-right alternative to the Peronists. Although PJ regained control of the executive in 2019 where former president Alberto Fernández was once again elected president, this coalition remains a threat to the Peronists today. The Peronists achieved a majority in the Senate and an approximately even control in the Chamber of Deputies, with the Peronists possessing 120 seats and the Cambiemos possessing 119. This distribution of congressional seats is much more competitive than the supermajorities that the Peronists maintained throughout the 2000s. With this large number of seats in Congress, the Cambiemos can present checks on the Peronist authority.

While the 1990s mainly saw informal means of social mobilization and the 2000s formal means, the 2010s has seen both, with street protests frequently occurring, along with a continuation of union activity from the 2000s. For example, Argentina’s Women’s Movement led mass mobilizations to protest gender violence in 2015 and thousands of protesters took to the streets in 2017 to protest a Supreme Court ruling that reduced the sentence of those convicted of crimes against humanity, a ruling that was later reversed. Meanwhile, unions remain a powerful form of collective action, with the General Labor Confederation carrying out two massive strikes in 2017 and 2018. Additionally, informal workers are now better represented with the formation of the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers, a union that represents informal workers. Overall, participa-
tion is still a strong facet of Argentinian democracy today.

**Modern-Day Argentina: Careening**

Careening has not been present in the 2010s to any extent due to Argentina's improving democratic conditions. Contemporary Argentinian politics operates in a formal manner, where the PJ, the UCR, and PRO are the major established parties, and are not threatened by the sudden emergence of new parties or by populist outsiders. In the past two Argentinian elections, all of the major presidential candidates have been from one of the established parties while the Peronist coalition and the Cambiemos have won a supermajority of congressional seats.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The state of democracy in Argentina today is more stable than it was both at the height of Menem's power in the 1990s, as well as during Kirchners' dominance during the 2000s. That being said, democracy in the country still faces challenges. One of the most important issues still plaguing Argentina today is the presence of presidentialism in governance. For example, according to V-Dem, judicial checks on the executive have fluctuated throughout the past 20 years, and now reside lower than they did in 1987. The horizontal accountability index, which measures checks and balances between state institutions, has fallen from .99 in 2016 to .69 in 2022, the largest decrease seen in the country since President's Menem term in the 1990s. This decrease represents an Argentinian government more likely to abuse its power without oversight. Thus, improving horizontal accountability by strengthening institutional checks and balances, specifically within the judicial branch, would be one of the best ways Argentina could further bolster their democracy.

Argentina has improved on all three of the factors relevant to Roberts' classification of dual transitions. For one, there is a distinct left-right axis in represented ideologies which was not present during the Menem era. Contestation has vastly improved as well, where the previously dominant PJ now faces considerable challenge from the other side. It is therefore evident that Hegemonic Popular Sovereignty no longer applies to Argentina, nor are any of Roberts' paths for dual transitions relevant to modern-day Argentina. Democracy in Argentina is not without flaws as specific measures certainly need improvement, but analyzing the state of democracy under Roberts' features is no longer important nor relevant. This is because distinctions within Roberts' framework are defined by the three features analyzed throughout this article, factors that are now stable within Argentina.

**References**

11. Roberts, Changing course in Latin America: Party systems in the neoliberal era, 254
17. Lupu et al, “Campaigns and voters in developing democracies: Argentina in comparative perspective”, 159-160

(Next page and above) Studying abroad in Seoul, South Korea, summer 2022. Photo by Ler Hser, Junior Health Policy and Management Major, German Minor.

(Next page on the right) A monkey hanging out at the steps of the Batu Caves in Kuala Lampur, Malaysia. Photo by Stuti Shah, Senior Business Administration and Public Policy Major.