

CHAPTER II

PERCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY, VALUES, REGULATIONS, REPRESENTATION, AND POWER

Daniel ZOVATTO

I. Democracy as a Form of Government

In Argentina, we find ample support for democracy as a desirable form of government. There is disparity, however, among people's aspirations—basically regarding their economic and social welfare—and the results that the system actually yields for them.

As the document *Aportes para el desarrollo humano de la Argentina* [Input for human development in Argentina], prepared by the United Nations Development Program (PNUD), says, most of the Argentine people tend to think of democracy more in social rather than political terms, but they are definitely sticking by it.³⁵

1. *Supporting democracy*

Although democracy is deemed the best form of government, events in Argentina over recent years, especially on the economic front, have spurred higher expectations regarding consideration given to problems regarding the population's socioeconomic welfare. There is also the idea that it would be worth bolstering the democratic regime with a few institutional adjustments that could make it viable and durable.

Democracy seems to be securely riveted to the cultural patterns of the Argentine people. Asked "*With which of the following statements do you agree most?*," 72% of the people polled said that democracy is preferable to any other form of government; 24% said that "in some circumstances a non-democratic government may be better;" 2% said "six of one, half a dozen of the other;" 1% said none of the above, and 2% professed not to know, or gave no answer.

The data do not reveal any significant age-related differences in the appraisal of democracy. In fact, values recorded for the variable *preference for democracy* are similar among all age groups, increasing somewhat with age. An analysis of the results going by economic position show greater acceptance of democracy among the upper classes (84%) as compared to the lower classes (64%).

A positive opinion of democracy rises along with schooling levels (83% among university graduates and above, compared to 64% of those who have not even completed secondary school). Likewise, support for a non-democratic government in some circumstances is higher among those with less schooling (30%), compared to those who have more academic training (15%).

Analysis of the data from a geographic perspective reveals less enthusiasm for democracy in provincial cities: 67% prefer it over any other form of government, 10% less than in

³⁵ According to this report, 63% of Argentines think of democracy as guaranteeing people's welfare with jobs, health and education. Voting and freedom of opinion are secondary.

large metropolitan areas (77%). Similarly, support levels for a non-democratic government are greater in the provincial cities of the country: 29%, as opposed to 18% in metropolitan area.

A comparison of data gathered in this poll with those recorded by the Latinobarometer for the 1996-2004 period shows that democracy in Argentina is strongly linked to public discourse and public opinion. The average obtained by the Latinobarometer for the period was 68%, very close to the 72% recorded in our poll, and much higher than the Latin American average over the same period (57%).

Another observation made was that respondents in our poll consider their support for democracy to be on the same level as what society **generally** perceives overall. So, when asked *“Which of the following statements do you think most people agree with more?”*, 71% said that most people think *“democracy is preferable to any other form of government,”* while 24% said that most people believe that *“in some circumstances a non-democratic government may be better.”* Moreover, 3% maintained that *“people think it’s six of one and half a dozen of the other,”* 1% said none of the above and 2% admitted that they did not know.

To sum up, in Argentina a solid majority support democracy as a government system, along with its problems, of course, but as its preferred option.³⁶ And, as mentioned before, the population’s biggest demand is that their economic and social rights be honored.

2. Strengthening democracy

In Argentina, conventional wisdom dictates that corruption, impunity, injustice, and unequal protection under the law prevail in the workings of public institutions. It comes, then, as no surprise that observance of the law along with honesty and accountability on the part of politicians are what Argentines consider the most crucial factors in building a stronger democracy.

To evaluate this variable, one of our poll questions asked: *“What is the most important factor for strengthening democracy?”*

Most of the responses given were: enforcement and observance of the law (40%); honesty on the part of the government (33%); citizen insistence that their rulers be accountable to society (22%); only 5%, however, made the assertion that the president and legislators must maintain a good working relationship with one another.

Clearly, honest law enforcement and more transparent governments seem to be the people’s chief essential demands for strengthening democracy, followed by accountability, which is closely linked with honest rulers and controlling functions. In Argentina, civilian oversight of the work performed by civil-society organizations has most likely exerted a positive influence on public opinion concerning their need to hold their elected officials accountable.

³⁶ Data in the 2004 Latinobarometer show that 81% of the Argentine people believe in the concept of Churchillian democracy: best government system, albeit still with its problems.

II. VALUES OF DEMOCRACY

Trust

In recent years, different academic sectors have once again focused their attention on the importance of trust between individuals and “social capital” for governments to work effectively, and for economic and social development.³⁷ The efficient operation of markets, state institutions and other types of social rapport demand the existence of the possibility of having, on a regular basis, mutually beneficial transactions between individuals and groups without the need to rely on outside agents excessively. Hopefully, higher levels of trust will breed greater cooperation on social projects and stimulate civic organization and participation in community activities. Also, more trust should not only facilitate the participation of citizens in politics and in community social and economic activities, but trigger greater cooperation within bureaucratic and representative institutions as well, thus enabling them to do a better job of working in the public interest.

Trust is, then, crucial for institutionalizing social relations, because it ensures safety and the ability to predict the actions of others. In this sense, trust in others has become a key factor for the analysis of socialization processes and the creation of social networks, that is to say, for building stable day-to-day relationships and a sense of safety around others.

Something similar occurs with the relationship between citizens and institutions. Institutions become trustworthy by instituting stable, predictable and fair rules. By observing them, citizens help improve institutional efficiency all the more.

The results of the poll show that the Argentine people tend to have a great deal of faith in groups close to home, but little in institutions and social groups operating in organized society.

A. Interpersonal trust

When asked about the degree of interpersonal trust at a micro level (place of residence), six out of every ten Argentines (60%) say they trust people. This degree of trust and view of companionship is directly proportional to social standing, age, and education level.

However, 34% disagree, and 4% adamantly disagree about whether people can be trusted. Results in this group are quite uniform when analyzed from the standpoint of socioeconomic level, education, gender or geographic location. Where a definite difference appears is in analysis based on age in that the youngest populations are the least trusting of others.

As for levels of solidarity, 78% agreed with the statement: “here where... lives, if a person is in trouble, someone is always willing to help.”

Analysis of this variable also shows that sectors with the most schooling and better financial situation are the ones that largely agree with this statement. However, variations were insignificant among the various segments polled.

Gender-based analysis shows that women agree more than men that, when they are in trouble, someone is always there to help.

³⁷ Putnam, Robert D., *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton University Press, 1998, pp. 686 -693.

Deep-rooted community values were detected among the population polled, because seven out of every ten (70%) professed sharing the values of their community and stressed a personal need for recognition by their community as a mainstay of their identity (69%). This perception was more commonly held among adults than young people, and is notably more important in middle-class sectors with an intermediate-level education. Moreover, the importance of belonging to a community for building individual identity is more prevalent in the country's provincial cities.

B. Trust in politicians and social actors

Trust in institutions depends, first of all, on one political asset: equal treatment for all. Public trust in institutions grows to the same extent that democracy produces political assets. Other trust-inspiring factors are keeping promises and accountability.

In Argentina, institutions and politicians exhibit low levels of confidence, underscoring the lack of credibility enjoyed there by political parties and Congress.

When ascertaining levels of public trust in a number of social actors and institutions, those associated with knowledge and learning stand out: public universities and teachers (71 and 72% trust, scoring 7 and above on a scale of 1 to 10). Figuring in second group are the president of Argentina, followed by the organizations and institutions that in some way function as mediators (non-government organizations, the media, ombudsman), registering between 41 and 45% trust (scores of 7 and above on a scale of 1 to 10). In a third group, with values ranging from 20 to 38% are merchants, the Church, industrialists, the army, the Judiciary in general, and Electoral Judiciary in particular.

Registering trust levels of 11 to 14% are institutions such as Congress, the police, unions, public administration, and the Supreme Court (scores of 7 and above). Finally, at the rock bottom with a 4% trust level, are the political parties.

Meager levels of trust in the parties are nothing new in Argentina. Several studies have revealed that political parties are seen as institutions rather indifferent to the common good, dishonest, aloof, closed off from society and out of touch with reality.³⁸ This pitiful measure of credibility is not limited to Argentine political parties alone, since its last-place ranking for trust in institutions is consistent with recent trends in Latin America, i.e., 18% region-wide in 2004, according to data from the Latinobarometer.

Trust in Institutions

	Average	Mentions of 7 and more
	X	%
Public universities	7.33	72
Teachers	7.28	71

³⁸ Report mentioned on p. 32.

President of the Republic	6.05	45
Non-government organizations	5.94	45
The media	5.84	41
Ombudsman	5.68	42
Merchants	5.60	34
The Church	5.27	38
Industrialists	5.03	25
Army	4.80	29
The Judiciary	4.64	20
The Electoral judiciary	4.33	20
National Supreme Court	4.21	14
Public administration	4.14	14
Congress	4.80	12
Police	3.90	14
Unions	3.08	11
Political parties	2.86	4

III. RULES OF DEMOCRACY

Majority rule

Democratic systems are governed by majority rule. This rule assumes the citizens' ability to put the public interest before their own personal interests. Hence, it is essential to determine the extent to which the respondents polled believe in the importance of honoring the decisions of the majority rather than following their own interests, conduct conceivably construed as respect for the majority and, therefore, attributable to civic "virtue."

Analysis of the results indicates that 71% of the Argentine people are predisposed to obeying decisions made by the majority, even if they do not share them. This attitude tends to rise at the highest levels of social status and among adults, suggesting that advanced financial standing and age are pro-democracy factors. Another discovery relevant to the analysis is that men and residents of metropolitan areas are more willing to observe majority rule.

Twenty three percent said that if they do not agree with a decision, they will not obey it; young people constitute the sector most willing to disobey the law. In fact, 30% of the population between 18 and 29 years of age stated that if they disapprove of a decision made by the majority, they will refuse to obey it.

IV. POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Latin America has been routinely prone to strong heads of state that often promote personality cults regarding politics and government action. Nevertheless, democratic institutions require adherence to legislation and procedures over and above individual choice. The leader figure is restricted to the characteristics established in legislation. In other words, democracy consists largely of government by rule of law rather than by that of public figures.

The population polled has preferred legislation over charisma. In fact, the majority indicated its preference for a leader who abides by the law, even if not by an overwhelming majority (68%), against a minority (20%) stating a preference for a leader that would be powerful even if not very law abiding. 7% expressed no preference for either of the two options, and 4% gave no response at all, or professed not to know.

Further analysis of results again showed that the sectors with the most schooling and highest financial status were more pro legality. From the age standpoint, people of all age ranges uniformly expressed a reasonable degree of support for the rule of law.

Responses regarding leadership assigned priority to legality, which coincides with those of the model society yearned for by the Argentine people (69% favor a law-abiding model). It logically follows that a population longing for a law-abiding society respectful of the rule of law would seek out leaders who are accordingly law-abiding too. Thus, opinions on authority and its legitimacy go hand in hand with a rational view of a law-abiding power rather than of a charismatic leader.

To complement this view, the PNUD's *Aportes para el desarrollo humano de la Argentina* [Input for Human Development in Argentina] in 2002 indicates that the most privileged people, both financially and socially, are also the most inclined to defend democracy and reject the option of an authoritarian government, albeit more efficient.

V. LEVEL OF INFORMATION: MEDIA USAGE

In the process of developing values, elements of a people's immediate environment and social codes are not the only ones that are important. The media too has become a means for acquiring knowledge and forming ideas and opinions.

The media, with their ability to broadcast and instill values, have entered into direct competition with traditional socializing institutions such as the family, school and the Church. Today, the media are cultural shrines to informing, entertaining, educating, manipulating and molding public opinion. Consequently, they have somewhat undermined the preeminence of traditional institutions as the sole means of dictating norms and socially desirable standards.³⁹

The level of information available to the public is a fundamental variable in social and political analysis. Access to information allows an individual to compare his reality with that of others (including those that are remote geographically and culturally), and critically

³⁹ Concha Cantú, H. et al., *Cultura de la Constitución en México. Una encuesta nacional de actitudes, percepciones y valores* [Constitutional Culture in Mexico. A national poll on attitudes, perceptions and values], Mexico, Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación-Comisión Federal de Mejora Regulatoria-UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 2004, p. 18.

evaluate them. This is essential to finding out what society knows and thinks, and to determine levels of consumption and public exposure to the media.

In Argentina, television is the most popular medium when it comes to informing oneself about political topics. 87% of citizens prefer television, 51% prefer radio and 47% prefer newspapers.

Television has penetrated the entire population fairly evenly, with no great distinctions for gender, educational level, socioeconomic situation or age. The analysis of how much time people spend in front of a TV set shows that 82% of TV watchers do so frequently.

Older people with more schooling and better financial status appear to be radio listeners, but the differences shown are not very significant. 81% of listeners stated that they tune in frequently.

On the other hand, reading newspapers and logging on to the Internet do indeed register big differences among the Argentine people. These differences are not due to age, geographic location or gender, but to education level and socioeconomic status. The data we obtained about newspaper readers indicate that the sectors with most schooling and better financial status turn frequently to this source of information (63%).

The younger sectors, in metropolitan areas and with higher levels of schooling and socioeconomic status, are the principal users of the Internet for information, although such use is much lower (10%) than television, radio and newspapers. 67% of the people who said they log on to the Internet for information claimed to do so frequently.

A study of people's trust in the media indicates that television is the information source that enjoys the most credibility among the Argentine people (52%), followed by radio (21%) and newspapers (15%).

Television ranks unquestionably as the most popular medium for information, without underestimating a relatively strong presence by radio. This confirms a universal reality: the media are today vital socializing agencies. The media tend to substitute traditional public forums of discussion and formation, and Argentina is no exception in this socialization process.