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# The Politics of Argentina

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## Introduction

Argentina is a country with a rich and dynamic political history. Located at the southern tip of South America, its political system has been shaped by centuries of struggle, ideological contestation, and social movements. The purpose of this book, *The Politics of Argentina: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Argentina*, is to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of how Argentina's political institutions work, how its history has influenced current structures, and how politics continues to shape the lives of its citizens today.

Argentina's political landscape is defined by its federal system of government, the separation of powers, and a vibrant tradition of civic engagement. Since its independence from Spain in 1816, the country has alternated between moments of democratic promise and periods of authoritarian rule. The 20th century, in particular, saw numerous military coups, which deeply affected the nation's democratic development and left a legacy that still resonates in contemporary politics.

Throughout its history, pivotal movements and leaders have left their mark. The rise of Juan Perón in the mid-20th century revolutionized Argentine politics by centering labor and social justice, creating a broad populist movement known as Peronism. This movement, with its advocates and detractors, continues to be a fundamental pillar of the country's political life. Military regimes, in contrast, brought periods of repression and systemic human rights abuses, the most infamous being the "Dirty War" of the 1970s and early 1980s.

With the restoration of democracy in 1983, Argentina began to reestablish and consolidate its political institutions. Yet, issues such as corruption, political polarization, and economic crises have posed persistent challenges. The tensions between tradition and innovation, centralism and federalism, and populism and liberalism continue to animate public debate and affect policy choices. Argentina's robust party system, competitive elections, and active civil society reflect both its democratic aspirations and the enduring "grieta," or rift, that divides its electorate.

Today, Argentina faces a new set of challenges and opportunities. Recent political developments, including the rise of third parties and outsider candidates, have reconfigured the political arena. Economic instability, gender-based social movements, and shifts in foreign policy all play a role in this evolving context. The ascendancy of leaders like Javier Milei signals both discontent with the status quo and a search for alternative solutions to longstanding problems.

This book aims to be an accessible yet thorough guide for students, researchers, and

anyone interested in the political life of Argentina. Each chapter explores a different facet of the country's political system, offering historical context, institutional analysis, and a look toward the future. Through understanding Argentina's politics, we gain insight into the broader dynamics of democracy, development, and social justice in Latin America.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Formation of the Argentine State

The story of Argentine politics is a long and winding road, beginning not in grand halls of power or with fiery pronouncements of independence, but with the slow, sometimes haphazard process of colonial settlement. Before Argentina was Argentina, it was a collection of territories under the vast umbrella of the Spanish Empire. The Spanish arrived in the region of the Río de la Plata in the early 16th century, with Juan Díaz de Solís making an initial landing in 1516. While early attempts at settlement, like the one led by Pedro de Mendoza in 1536 near modern-day Buenos Aires, were often short-lived, the Spanish gradually established a presence, primarily from the north.

For centuries, the territories that would eventually form Argentina were a somewhat overlooked part of the Spanish colonial project, particularly compared to the mineral-rich areas of Peru and Mexico. Initially, these southern lands were administered as part of the Viceroyalty of Peru, with its capital in far-off Lima. This meant that decisions affecting life in, say, Córdoba or Buenos Aires, were made by officials hundreds or even thousands of miles away, a situation that would later fuel local resentments and a desire for greater autonomy.

A significant shift occurred in 1776 when the Spanish Crown, in an effort to better administer and defend its South American possessions, created the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. This new administrative entity encompassed territories that would later become Argentina, as well as parts of modern-day Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Buenos Aires was designated as the capital of this new viceroyalty, a move that significantly elevated the city's importance and set the stage for its future dominance, much to the chagrin of other regions.

Life under Spanish colonial rule was structured by a rigid social hierarchy and a mercantilist economic system. The Spanish Crown sought to control trade, primarily for its own benefit, which often meant restricting direct trade between the colonies and other European powers. This system, while designed to enrich Spain, also fostered smuggling and a sense of grievance among colonists who felt their economic potential was being stifled. The *cabildos*, or municipal councils, were the only real taste of self-governance the colonists had, and their powers were limited. However, in times of emergency, these could be converted into "open" *cabildos*, allowing for broader participation from prominent members of the community.

The political landscape of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Europe had a profound impact on the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Napoleon Bonaparte's intervention in Spain, beginning in 1808, and his placement of his brother Joseph Bonaparte on the Spanish throne, plunged Spain into a crisis of legitimacy. This crisis

provided the perfect opportunity for independence movements to gain momentum in the colonies. The idea took hold that, with the legitimate Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, overthrown, the colonies had the right to govern themselves in his name until his restoration.

In the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, this led to the pivotal events of the May Revolution in 1810. In Buenos Aires, an assembly of prominent citizens overthrew the Spanish viceroy and established a local government, known as the *Primera Junta*. This act, while initially framed as an autonomous government ruling in the name of the imprisoned King Ferdinand VII, was the effective start of the move towards independence. The May Revolution was also significant because just a few years earlier, local militias had repelled British invasions in 1806, largely without assistance from Spain, demonstrating a nascent capacity for self-defense and organization.

The path from the May Revolution to a fully independent and unified state was far from smooth. The *Primera Junta* in Buenos Aires struggled to assert its authority over the vast territory of the former viceroyalty. Regions like Paraguay, Uruguay, and parts of what is now Bolivia, which had been part of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata, had their own distinct interests and leaders, and they were not keen on simply trading one distant master (Spain) for another (Buenos Aires). This led to the disintegration of the viceroyalty into smaller power units and a series of civil wars that would plague the region for decades.

The formal declaration of independence from Spain came on July 9, 1816, at the Congress of Tucumán. The declaration was made in the name of the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata, a name that suggested a desire for a unified entity, perhaps along the lines of the United States. However, the reality on the ground was a complex and often violent struggle between competing visions for the future of the newly independent territories.

The primary political conflict in the years following independence was between two main factions: the Unitarians and the Federalists. The Unitarians, largely based in Buenos Aires, advocated for a strong, centralized government with authority concentrated in the capital. They believed that Buenos Aires, with its port and economic advantages, should lead the way and that a centralized system was necessary for progress and stability.

The Federalists, on the other hand, championed the autonomy of the provinces. They were often led by regional strongmen, or *caudillos*, who commanded local loyalties and resisted the centralizing ambitions of Buenos Aires. The Federalists argued that each province should have significant control over its own affairs and that the wealth generated by the port of Buenos Aires, particularly through customs duties, should be shared among all the provinces. This fundamental disagreement over the structure of the state fueled a long and brutal period of civil wars.

Attempts to create a national constitution in these early years were repeatedly thwarted by the Unitarian-Federalist conflict. A constitution in 1819, favored by the Unitarians, failed to gain acceptance from the provinces. Another attempt in 1826, while trying to strike a balance between central authority and provincial power, was also ultimately rejected by the *caudillos*. The Battle of Cepeda in 1820 is often cited as a key moment when the Unitarians lost control, leading to a period of significant disunity and the rise of provincial governments.

Into this turbulent scene stepped figures like Juan Manuel de Rosas, a powerful Federalist *caudillo* from the province of Buenos Aires. Rosas dominated Argentine politics for a significant period, from 1829 to 1852. While a Federalist, his rule was often highly centralized and authoritarian, demonstrating the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these early political labels. He brought a degree of order, but at the cost of significant repression of his opponents. His era was marked by continued conflict with Unitarians and also by foreign interventions.

The mid-19th century saw continued struggles for national organization. It wasn't until after the overthrow of Rosas in 1852 that a more enduring framework for the Argentine state began to take shape. The Pact of San Nicolás in 1852 aimed to reinstate the federal agreement between the provinces and paved the way for a new constitutional convention.

Finally, in 1853, a national constitution was adopted that established a federal, republican, and representative system of government, a structure that has largely endured, despite numerous interruptions throughout history. This constitution, influenced by the U.S. model, provided for a separation of powers and recognized the autonomy of the provinces. However, even after the adoption of the constitution, the relationship between Buenos Aires and the other provinces remained a source of tension, and it wasn't until 1861, after further conflict, that the State of Buenos Aires fully reintegrated with the Argentine Confederation to form a united country. The period from 1862 onwards is often referred to as the era of "national organization," during which the state consolidated its authority and institutions across the territory. The formation of the Argentine state was a protracted and often violent process, shaped by colonial legacies, regional rivalries, and competing visions for the nation's future.

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