

BUILDING A BETTER CITIZEN

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(With Ingrid Baumann)

The study of democratization in Latin America has undergone several phases. Originally, scholars tried to explain what variables trigger the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes. Then, as democracy was re-established in most countries of the region, the consolidation of these regimes became the focus of analysis, especially the circumstances that could produce a return to authoritarianism. This new interest led to a focus on the quality of the established democracies, and several adjectives began to be added to the term “democracy” to qualify its distinctive nature. “Delegative,” “restrictive,” “exclusionary,” “limited,” and “low intensity,” are just a few descriptors among dozens of terms. Even though all types meet the accepted standards of democracy in procedural terms, they are far from being full-fledged democracies.

In any case, most of the research has examined the quality of democracy from the point of view of the regime, observing the rules of the game and the management styles imposed by the government. Very few studies have been concerned with the quality of democracy from the perspective of the citizens, focusing upon their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour with regard to the political framework in which they live. From this angle, the question becomes: how democratic are the citizens? Or even better: can a democracy exist if citizens are not entirely democratic?

In this article, I reflect upon these questions on the basis of the preliminary results of an ongoing research project dealing with the quality of democracy in Argentina. Guillermo O’Donnell has characterized the Argentine regime as “delegative,” meaning that, once elected, presidents feel that they are entitled to govern as they see fit. He also characterized Argentina as a country with “brown areas,” namely territorially based systems of domination barely reached by state law. My study reveals that, just as a country may have “brown areas” where democracy is weak, citizens may also exhibit quite different profiles in terms of adherence to democracy.

Between 2003 and 2009, the national government of Argentina launched the so called Programa de Auditoría Ciudadana (Citizens Audit Program), known as PAC. As part of the program, citizens of 47 municipalities were surveyed to learn about their expectations, values, beliefs, and opinions on the quality of democratic practices in their neighborhood. Also, focus groups were organized to obtain a similar diagnosis.

As director of a consulting team, I carried out an evaluation of PAC at the request of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) — the funding agency. In the course of this evaluation, I noticed that the results of the 47 surveys differed strongly in terms of the quality of democratic practices. After obtaining the surveys and focus group records, I started a separate research project aimed at analyzing the variation among citizens’ perceptions about the quality of democratic practices, including commitment to democratic values, extent of citizen participation, treatment received by citizens from public officials, and degree of accountability of public officials. The data was classified

on the basis of socioeconomic level, degree of education, and type of occupation of the citizens.

The 47 surveys were integrated into a single database of about 18,000 individual questionnaires containing over 104 questions each. Large, medium, and small municipalities governed by Peronist, Radical/Socialist, and local (grassroots) political parties were included, involving a total population of over 10 million inhabitants, one-fourth of the entire population of Argentina. All geographical regions were present in the aggregate database, and the distribution of the municipalities in terms of size and incumbent political parties was quite representative of the country as a whole.

Among other goals, our project aimed to determine the ways and the extent to which citizen perception of the quality of democratic practices is affected by their personal traits, the prevailing economic situation, the existing system of political domination, the size of the municipality, the culture of civic participation, or other particular local conditions.

To evaluate the possible association between the socioeconomic situation and the indicators of democratic culture, we distributed the 47 surveys according to the year in which the data was gathered. In 2004, when the first surveys were conducted, the country was still emerging from its deepest economic crisis, whereas in the following years, the situation had improved noticeably. We hypothesized that the satisfaction with democracy would increase with the improvement in the economy. In 2004, just above half of the total surveyed population (58.9 percent) considered democracy to be preferable to any other form of government, 17.9 percent believed that, under certain circumstances, an authoritarian regime may be preferable, and 23.2 percent were indifferent. Five years later, when the effects of the crisis had receded, the first group comprised 70.7 percent of the total; the second, 19.1 percent; and the third, only 10.2 percent.

Answers to other questions also supported our hypothesis. In 2004, when surveys asked citizens whether democracy can function without a legislature or political parties, 32.8 percent of the citizens said yes. But three years later, the percentage went down to 27.2 percent (no legislature) and 30.3 percent (no parties), while in 2009, the corresponding figures were just 14.4 percent and 26.5 percent. Citizens were also asked whether the president may adopt extraordinary measures in the case of a socioeconomic crisis, including 1) exerting violence against certain social groups, 2) controlling the media, or 3) violating the law. In 2004, 42.5, 47.2 and 40.3 percent of those surveyed favored these possibilities. In 2006, the respective percentages went down to 37.9 percent, 32.6 percent, and 28.1 percent; and in 2009, figures went further down to 23.8 percent, 21.7 percent, and 18.7 percent. Even though the procedure of randomly comparing surveys made at different times is not entirely valid in statistical terms, the data does suggest that the hypothesis was correct: satisfaction with democracy increases with improvements in the economy.

Contrasting results among cases led us to classify the 47 municipalities surveyed in terms of size (small, medium, large) and incumbent political party at the time of the survey. The respondents were classified in terms of their socioeconomic level, occupation, and degree of education. The resulting distribution was quite representative of the Argentine population at large (12.4 percent upper class, 26.5 percent middle class, 41.8 percent lower class, and 19.3 percent marginal class). Citizens were asked about their preference to live in a democracy. The majority, 63.2 percent, preferred democracy to any other form of government. But 17.3 percent indicated that under certain circumstances, an authoritarian regime may be preferable to a democratic one, while 19.5 percent showed no preference between a democratic

and a non-democratic one. These results were consistent with the question about citizens' satisfaction with democracy as a form of government: while 47.2 percent were very satisfied, a high proportion (40.2 percent) was little satisfied, while 12.7 percent were not satisfied at all.

But when we examined these results in terms of the socioeconomic level and the degree of education of the respondents, we discovered that the higher the socioeconomic and education levels of the respondent, the higher the preference for democracy. We found that the preference for democracy was inversely proportional to socioeconomic level: municipalities with low percentages of the population at a low socioeconomic level exhibited a higher preference for democracy.

Among many other questions, the surveys asked whether democracy helps to improve the quality of life. Only 28.2 percent of the people were quite convinced of this; 34.0 percent was fairly convinced, 29.0 percent were less confident, and 7.9 percent were not convinced. People were also divided in their opinions regarding the contribution of educational institutions to democracy. Just 18.4 percent believed that they contributed very much; 35.3 percent, some; 37.9 percent, very little; and 8.4 percent, nothing. When the analysis was disaggregated by the socioeconomic level and education of the respondents, the results were consistently similar: lower and marginal income groups held more negative opinions of educational institutions, as we expected.

We also designed an index of the quality of democratic practices after selecting a bundle of variables and running the database to obtain a ranking. Citizens living in the two largest municipalities governed by the Peronist Party were lowest in the rankings. But those living in large cities governed by either the Radical or the Socialist parties fell in the upper 50 percent of all cases. In turn, no medium or small municipalities governed by the Radical party appeared within the worst quartile of the ranking. And in the case of neighborhood parties, the quality of democratic practices improved the smaller the size of the municipality. Hence, the quality of democratic practices seemed to be inversely correlated with populist (i.e. Peronist) governments, whereas citizens living in small municipalities governed by neighborhood parties appeared to uphold democracy more than their fellow citizens living in larger localities and governed by any of the national parties.

The level of civic participation was also explored as a factor contributing to the quality of democracy. We found that most respondents welcomed the participation of their fellow citizens in public affairs, but only 3 percent were active participants in community groups of some sort. Half of these were church goers, followed by members of school boards. A negligible number were affiliated with political parties. Asked about their reasons for not participating in public affairs, respondents were either unable or unwilling to act in this capacity. Free riding was the prevailing attitude

Up to this point, we had concluded that, according to the variables originally selected by the PAC, not all citizens appeared to be equally democratic. The economic cycle provided a partial explanation for this result. The size of the municipality and the governing party offered additional clues. The socioeconomic and educational levels of the population added another critical dimension to explain differences among citizens, while the culture of participation seemed to have a lower impact on democratic quality than other factors.

However, an in-depth analysis of the focus group meetings showed a recurrent grievance: the problem of social inequality, insistently introduced by the poorer participants in all focus groups. This issue had not even been considered in any of the survey questions. In order to explore it further, we organized field visits to take a closer

look at the local scene. Nine municipalities were selected after cross-tabulating size (small, medium, and large) and incumbent political party (Peronist, Radical/Socialist, or Provincial/Neighborhood Parties). We obtained a representative sample in regional terms, as well as in terms of the main economic activities. We also made sure that socioeconomic and educational levels, preference for democracy, interest in finding collective solutions to local problems, and other relevant variables were consistent with the universe of 47 cases.

The differences among the cases were quite remarkable. We found that social inequality had a very different importance according to the patterns of local political domination, economic structures, and size of the respective municipality. We also discovered that the belief that citizens' rights are not fully respected is directly proportional to the socioeconomic level of the population: the higher the percentage of the population of low socioeconomic status, the larger the percentage of people who believe that their rights are not respected.

Interest in creating associations to seek solutions to community problems was found to be directly proportional to the socioeconomic level of the population: the higher the percentage of the population with a low socioeconomic level, the larger the percentage of citizens showing great interest in associating with others. In turn, interest in creating associations to seek solutions to community problems was directly proportional to the respondents' belief that their rights were not respected. This particular finding was highly relevant, given the fact that the aggregate figures for the entire database showed very low levels of effective citizen participation, despite explicit recognition of its importance. Low-income and marginal groups seem to be more prone to getting actively involved in collective action, even though their participation takes place mainly through less institutionalized forms of organization.

Our project is still active, and we expect to publish a book that will offer a full report of the research process, findings, and conclusions about the reasons that seem to explain why some citizens are more democratic than others. The subject is important and should receive more attention from scholars interested in the quality of democratic practice. Democracy is not simply an institutional, procedural issue. Its quality also depends upon the culture, values, and behavior of its counterpart, the citizens.

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