

How Delegative Argentine Democracy Has Become under Milei

Written by Tim Pires Alves

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TIM PIRES ALVES, JUN 22 2025

In 2024, Argentina was in the international spotlight like it hadn't been in a long time, first because of its high yearly inflation of nearly 300 percent, and second because of its new polarizing president, ultra-liberal and chainsaw-wielding economist Javier Milei, who has faced the economic crisis with a shock therapy that included a structural dismantling of the state apparatus to radically cut public costs and fight bureaucratic inefficiency. As a result, his cabinet now consists of nine ministries (including the Cabinet Chief), compared to 19 under his predecessor Alberto Fernández. This form of streamlining the government, and thus the general state corset, is a politically (and economically) controversial strategy, but from the perspective of democratic theory, it is not inherently problematic. Because in reducing the size of the executive branch and its subordinate agencies, the president is essentially acting within his constitutional authority.

Nevertheless, many scholars fear for democratic stability in Argentina these days, not primarily because Milei has cut 35.000 public sector jobs last year, but because his radical reforms seem to be permeating the separation of powers, creating a horizontal imbalance of political power. In particular, they point to Milei's dubious approach of bypassing Congress to implement his economic policy, as well as his authoritarian rhetoric, including populist attacks on "corrupt political elites" during his election campaign. All this is reminiscent of an old Argentine specter: so-called *delegative democracy*, in which a dysfunctional presidential democracy in times of (economic) struggles is tailored to a powerful charismatic leader who evades control by the legislature and the judiciary. And indeed, illegitimate executive dominance, or what is sometimes called "super-presidentialism," as a result of a misinterpreted delegation of political power seems to be in the DNA of Argentine electoral democracy, which is why for Guillermo O'Donnell, the intellectual father of delegative democracy, Argentina has always served as a prime example of his 1994 concept. But what is the empirical evidence when it comes to today's Argentina, precisely 20 years later? Is Javier Milei, however extreme his political agenda may be, really causing a "re-delegativation" of democracy?

Remarkably, and for a pragmatic reason, we have not been able to reliably assess the extent to which Milei's presidency, now more than a year old, has really damaged the institutional balance of power. Milei took office on December 10, 2023, and recent quantitative data on democratic quality (in Argentina and everywhere else) obviously refer to the entire year 2023, of which his presidential era consequently covers only three weeks. This has now changed, as the Swedish V-Dem Institute has just released its sophisticated 2024 data in March 2025, providing a broad quantitative look, the first of its kind, at what really happened to Argentina's horizontal separation of powers under Milei. Apart from their high quality, the exclusive consideration of V-Dem's expert-based data is also appropriate because the equally prominent Freedom in the World status by Freedom House does not explicitly refer to horizontal accountability, but to the general state of democracy, while the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, which would conceptually cover delegative democracy and temporally cover Milei's first year in office, will probably not appear until 2026.

I suggest that two V-Dem indices should be considered to assess whether Argentine democracy has become more delegative in 2024, and if so, by how much. The Horizontal Accountability Index basically refers to the control of the legislature and the judiciary over the government, with a lower score indicating an imbalance of power in favor of the executive branch. The Presidentialism Index refers to the horizontal distribution of political power between the

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president and other institutions, with a higher score indicating an illegitimately more powerful president. The two indices are highly correlated, but the latter is particularly useful for presidential and (mainly) majoritarian democracies such as Argentina (and most Latin American countries). Since I am interested in Milei's first year, and a serious weakening of political institutions usually takes longer and requires deep constitutional changes, I want to additionally look at how often Milei's government publicly attacked the integrity of the judiciary, representing a more "symbolic" or "less serious" category, as there are no real structural changes in the institutional equilibrium, just words that provide an idea of the government's view of it. As O'Donnell underlines the strong personalism in delegative democracy, with the paternal president as the heroic "embodiment of the nation [...] administering the unpleasant medicines that will restore [its] health," I ultimately want to include the extent to which Milei is associated with "extraordinary personal characteristics and/or leadership skills." Unfortunately, V-Dem does not provide data for this variable for 2024. However, I argue that the trend is rather clear, as past results have been evident for similar politicians, such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro.

With the two interval-scaled (0 to 1) indices and the complementary interval-scaled ordinal indicator(s) (0 to 4), delegative democracy (as a rather rare deviation from functioning representative democracy) should be conceptually well addressed. For my brief descriptive analysis, I rely on the linearized transformation of the V-Dem country-year point estimates for aggregated ratings of more than five experts for Argentina.

First, the data show that horizontal accountability decreased from 0.81 in 2023 to 0.78 in 2024, meaning that monitoring the Argentine government (e.g., through deliberative evaluation of its decisions) became more difficult. At the same time, the president illegitimately gained more political power (the index score rose by 10 percentage points), representing a normatively worse and less democratic situation, to use the words of the V-Dem Codebook. This development is likely attributable to Milei's 50 emergency decrees (known as DNUs) in his first year, especially for his economic programme, which the constitution allows in "exceptional circumstances" (Art. 99, inc. 3) and which do not have to go through Congress, at least not at first. With these DNUs, Milei certainly keeps his promise to Congress from March 2024: "We are going to change the country for good, *with or without the support of political leaders*, with all the legal resources of the executive." The overuse of DNUs (combined with a drastic economic policy) has already been discussed as a typical delegative phenomenon.

Second, there was a sharp decline in government attacks on the judiciary from 2.16 in 2023 to 3.64 in 2024 (the scale is counterintuitive, a higher value means fewer attacks), indicating that the balance of power did not become more unstable. This is surprising because Milei is known for accusing public figures of "the caste" of elitism and corruption, but he has always been more reserved with the judiciary. However, in December 2024, his administration threatened to appoint two judges of the Supreme Court by decree, including Ariel Lijo, who was accused of misconduct, causing widespread outrage. This observation obliges me to look at the independence of the judiciary, which has fallen significantly from 0.78 in 2023 to 0.63 in 2024 (on scale of 0 to 1). As this V-Dem index contains dissimilar indicators that are only partially useful for the question at hand, I will not go into detail here. Incidentally, we now know that the government's threat became a reality. The executive order to appoint the two judges followed in February 2025, which will certainly be reflected in next year's data. For 2024, I conclude that the government's tone towards the courts has softened considerably, which does not indicate that the institutional equilibrium is likely to crumble.

Finally, there is no doubt that Milei is no ordinary politician. Whether he has charisma is a matter of taste, but his provocative and rebellious manner certainly fits the description of a political "enfant terrible." The president himself, whose government he has repeatedly declared, in Trumpian style, to be the best in Argentine history, is already convinced of his performance. As noted, there is a lack of data here, but if we look at other contexts, the trend in Argentina is quite obvious. In the U.S., the score rose from 0.89 in 2015 (Obama) to 3.26 (the highest score ever) in 2017 (Trump), while in Brazil it rose from 0.45 in 2018 (Temer) to 3.25 in 2019 (Bolsonaro), which is why I suspect that in the personality variable only Juan Perón, the Argentine political icon par excellence, would be considered more extraordinary than Milei. This does not necessarily mean that Milei is objectively a good leader, but that his appearance is perceived as exceptional. However, I want to emphasize that the element of a strong leader in times of crisis can only complement the core concept, because every delegative democracy is personalistic (e.g., Argentina under Perón or Menem), but not every personalistic democracy is delegative. Thus, Milei's eccentricity is an

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important piece of the puzzle, but only in combination with the other pieces does a more or less complete reality of delegative democracy emerge.

As bleak as the picture of generally autocratizing Argentina may be, it is necessary to put the impact of Milei's presidency into perspective, at least as far as the delegative sphere is concerned. First of all, his way of "dealing" with political institutions is unconventionally harsh, but it would be inappropriate from a scientific point of view to condemn it outright as problematic, at least without a broader normative analysis. Argentina *does have* a corruption problem (it is ranked 99 out of 180 in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, with rank 180 (South Sudan) having the worst score), so Milei's ambitions to restructure institutions could, but do not necessarily, stem from a desire to de-democratize the country. Second, the use of DNUs is not uncommon in Argentina; Néstor Kirchner, who holds the record, issued 236 DNUs during his four and a half years as president. This raises a key question: Did Milei really make Argentine democracy delegative, or just *more delegative*, meaning that the high number of DNUs, for example, reflect a now worsening Argentine normality of democratic dysfunctionality? In any case, some of the empirical results are alarming: The degree of "delegativeness" has increased in 2024, at least in terms of less horizontal accountability and a more powerful president, regardless of whether the pre-Milei era was already delegative. Thus, although the attacks on the judiciary decreased, there has been a growing convergence of Argentina's recent democratic reality with O'Donnell's concept, which can now finally be analyzed quantitatively for Milei's first year. The follow-up question is: what is to come?

Milei's term of office normally ends on December 10, 2027, after which he can be re-elected and could then serve until 2031, although a change in personnel does not necessarily mean a change in policy (or polity, in this case), of course. We must pay close attention to future data to assess whether the overall downward trend in democratic quality in the delegative dimension will continue and eventually lead to Argentina once again becoming the archetype of this variety of defective democracy. In my opinion, however, cautious optimism is in order. Although the 2024 data are partially sobering, Argentina's current 1994 constitution significantly limits presidential power, guarantees institutional resilience, and decentralizes political authority, both vertically and horizontally. Thus, in the "old era" of the late Caudillos and post-transitional Peronism, it was considerably easier to structurally undermine representative democracy, regardless of the prevailing political culture at the time. In this respect, we must hope that delegative democracy (in its pure defectiveness) will remain a specter of the past, and that not even Milei's chainsaw, intentionally or not, will liberate it again by destroying the imperfect but largely robust armor of contemporary Argentine democracy.

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