

PERIOD OF NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

1862-1880

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ARGENTINA

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The battle of Pavón (17 September 1861) marked the beginning of a new stage of Argentine history. The retreat of Justo José de Urquiza from the battlefield left Bartolomé Mitre in a position to assume the political leadership of the country and paved the way towards national unification under the hegemony of Buenos Aires. After almost a decade of coexistence between the Confederation and the State of Buenos Aires, Argentina was entering a period of organization that, with complexities and conflicts, would lay the foundations of the modern state. Between 1862 and 1880, the governments of Mitre, Sarmiento and Avellaneda followed one another in a period marked by institutional centralization, the enactment of fundamental laws, the expansion of infrastructure and education, and the efforts to integrate a vast and diverse territory.

On 12 October 1862, Bartolomé Mitre became the first constitutional president of the unified country. With the support of the National Party, he sought to consolidate political unity and to guarantee Buenos Aires' predominance in the new federal scheme. His administration faced immediate tensions with the provinces, wary of the centralization that the capital was imposing. The resistance of caudillos such as Ángel Vicente Peñaloza in La Rioja or Felipe Varela in the northwest evidenced that integration was not secured and that national unity was achieved both through military force and consensus and negotiation. Even so, Mitre managed to uphold a plan that placed the Congress and the executive power in the center of the political life, while the Supreme Court—created in 1863—began to consolidate federal justice as the ultimate arbiter of constitutional legality.

The period was also marked by an event of continental significance: the war of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay. The war started in 1865, when Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay faced the government of Francisco Solano Lopez. The conflict, which lasted until 1870, had a steep human and economic cost for Argentina. Thousands of soldiers, most of them drafted in the provinces of the interior, took part in the campaigns while tensions within the country intensified due to the war efforts. The Congress played a central role in authorizing the resources and in the political debates that split public opinion. The war caused protests, uprisings and resistance, but at the same time, it consolidated the power of the central government, which managed to sustain the campaign until it came to an end.

Domestically, during these decades, the foundations of the national State were laid: the bases of the fiscal and monetary administration were established by instituting

a single currency throughout the territory, the first works on the railway, roads and telegraph as tools for integration were promoted and a decisive step towards the codification of national laws was taken—a process which would culminate in the civil, criminal, commercial and mining codes, legal works that would provide a normative cohesion to the country. These initiatives reflected the spirit of a time in which institutional organization was a priority: the goal was to unify standards, to provide legal certainty and to consolidate the authority of the State in every corner of the territory.

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's administration, which began in 1868, meant the continuity of this process with special emphasis on education and modernization. Sarmiento viewed the school as the basis for the republic and promoted an unprecedented educational policy. Hundreds of primary schools were created, teacher training was encouraged and the arrival of American female teachers was promoted, based on the conviction that progress depended on literacy and the spread of knowledge. The Congress supported these initiatives with education funding laws and with the creation of institutions to sustain the school system. Argentina, which recorded a population of nearly 2 million inhabitants in its first census carried out in 1869, was starting to experience profound demographic and social changes. Immigration, though still in its early stages, was becoming a transformative force for the future.

In 1874 Nicolás Avellaneda took office and his administration would be marked by two major challenges: on the one hand, to face one of the most severe economic crises of the 19th century—caused by the fall of international prices and the dependence on foreign loans; and on the other hand, to definitively resolve the matter of the federal capital, which had been left unsettled by the 1853 Constitution. In this connection, the problem was that the city of Buenos Aires had naturally become seat of the national authorities due to historical reasons and the province of Buenos Aires was unwilling to hand it over unconditionally. Not only the political prestige was at stake, but also the control of the Buenos Aires customs office, which was the main source of income of the country. For two decades, the debate on the federalization of Buenos Aires was a constant struggle between the provinces' plans and the Buenos Aires' elite, which sought to keep its economic privileges. The outcome came in 1880, after an armed clash between the national forces and the troops of Carlos Tejedor, the governor of Buenos Aires. The military defeat of Buenos Aires, the last province that rebelled against the constitutional order, sealed national unity forever. The city of Buenos Aires was declared federal capital, separated from the province jurisdiction and the customs

office came under the control of the national State. With this decision, one of the country's longest-standing tensions came to an end and the centralized model, which would set the course towards a modern Argentina, was consolidated.

Another key aspect of those years was the policy of territorial occupation, carried out through military campaigns aimed at expanding the productive borders and at incorporating lands to meet the new demands of a consolidating world market. These actions, seen at the time as necessary for progress, also meant the displacement of indigenous peoples who inhabited the Pampas plains, the Patagonian steppe and the Chaco woodlands. The Congress passed laws to fund these expeditions, to establish new internal borders and to sell public lands, reaffirming its role as the driving force of state policy.

With regard to the institutional aspect, from 1862 to 1880, the Congress consolidated as the central body of the Republic. Laws that marked the national life were debated and passed there: the Supreme Court was created, legal codes were approved, the fiscal system was organized, and railways and the expansion of education were regulated. The Parliament became the arena where the tensions between the provinces and the Nation, federalism and centralism, austerity and modernization were expressed. The fact that it kept working and producing legislation showed that, in spite of the difficulties, republican life was taking root.

Historical assessment of this period shows an Argentina under a process of transformation. A fragmented country became a centralized state with working national institutions and a modernization plan underway. International recognition of the country was almost fully achieved at the end of this period, with treaties signed with the overwhelming majority of the countries in the world. The Congress supported and often led this process, which gave legal and political form to the decisions that defined the direction of the nation. Between 1862 and 1880, the foundations of modern Argentina were laid: a country that sought to integrate into the world through exports, that expanded its territorial borders, that was starting to receive massive migration and that saw in education and the law the path towards progress.

The evolution of the electoral system in Argentina (1862 – 1880)

After the unification of the country in 1862, during this period, even though there was a continuity of the electoral system, laws were passed that gradually regulated all the aspects of the system, with greater emphasis on electoral administration.

The national law of 1863 established electoral sections that corresponded to the parishes in cities and to the magistrate's courts, parishes and districts in rural areas. Each section was to be presided over by a magistrate, accompanied by four local residents chosen by lot among those present on election day, and two others appointed by the Legislature, also selected by lot from a list of twenty local residents. This composition was modified by the 1873 law, which established that each polling station was to be managed by five citizens and five alternates, selected by lot among twenty registered citizens chosen by a special board composed of the chair of the Legislature, the president of the Superior Court of Justice and a jurisdictional federal judge. The role of the magistrate was limited to handing over the list of voters to the polling station authorities, and political parties were authorized to appoint observers, who would act as poll watchers. Despite repeated requests from church authorities to stop holding elections in church atriums, these continued to be the designated location for polling stations, and in rural areas, the entrances of the courthouses were also used. The duration of the election was also modified as it was held in a single day from 9 o'clock in the morning to 4 o'clock in the afternoon, after which the vote counting took place.

Before each election, the electoral roll was compiled. Everyone entitled to vote was required to register, though in actuality there was no penalty for not doing so. Registration was held at the Qualification Boards located at municipal offices or parishes. In small towns without a municipal office, the Qualification Board was established in the parishes, and it was composed by the district judge, who acted as chairman, the parish priest and a notable local resident appointed by their peers.

With Law No. 75 of 1863, the minimum voting age was lowered to 18 years for Argentine-born or naturalized citizens. Foreigners were allowed to vote on municipal elections. They could only participate in national elections after residing for two years in the country and being granted citizenship. It is noteworthy that even under the laws of 1873 and 1877, those under 17 were excluded from the list of voters; this was further amended by Law No. 4161 of 1902, setting the minimum voting age at 18.