

AN ENLARGED PARLIAMENT

1912-1955

MUSEO
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DIPUTADOS
ARGENTINA

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The enactment of the Sáenz Peña Act in 1912 opened a decisive chapter in the history of the Argentine Congress. The mandatory and secret male suffrage undermined the foundations upon which the conservative regime stood for decades: electoral rules that promoted the political monopoly of the ruling party and the exclusion of the majorities. The entry of the middle classes into the political life was not a mere political shift but a cultural and social change that transformed the very nature of Parliament. Where once top hats marked the solemn stride of a closed elite, bowler hats, more modest headwear and less rigid suits and gestures from a new civic repertoire began to appear, turning Congress not only into the seat of the law but also into a symbol of a more open democracy.

In that context, the Radical Civic Union party emerged as a sweeping force and became the ruling party after the first elections held under the new voting rules. Hipólito Yrigoyen, president on two occasions (1916-1922 and 1928-1930), embodied the hopes of urban middle-class sectors, small merchants, small agricultural producers, professionals, employees and young people who, for the first time, saw voting as a tool for transformation. Congress was thus filled with voices speaking a different political language: one closer to the streets, the squares and the neighborhood circles where civic activism had taken root. At the same time, socialists found in the debating chamber an institutional echo for worker and popular demands that had previously been expressed through strikes, associations and newspapers with a strong internationalist orientation. Socialism, another party representing these urban middle-class sectors, brought rigor to the debates, submitted pioneering labor bills and sustained a moralizing discourse.

Parliamentary life during those years became vibrant and oftentimes tumultuous. The debates over the university reform, the working hours, labor union rights or foreign policy in the face of the First World War revealed a Congress far more connected to social passions. It was no longer just a matter of distributing customs revenues or organizing the territory as in earlier times, but of discussing the very meaning of democracy and the role of the State in relation to the new actors. Parliament became a sounding board for the changes sweeping Argentine society: rapid urbanization, immigration in the process of integration, the emergence of a culture of the masses with daily newspapers, theaters, incipient radios, and a working class increasingly organized in unions and mutual aid associations, and aware of its own powers.

This period cannot be separated from the architectural symbol that accompanied it: the construction of the palace of the national Congress. Designed at the end of the 19th century as an emblem of modernity, its completion coincided with the expansion of democracy. The building, monumental and inspired in classical architecture, rose at the heart of Buenos Aires as the stone embodiment of the republican promise: a vast and solemn place meant to house not only the representatives of an elite, but now also the voices of a society of growing diversity. Its dome, visible from multiple corners of the city, symbolized the aspiration that the law would rise above faction disputes to become the shared heritage of the nation.

The 1920s brought some tensions. Argentina was experiencing a period of economic prosperity that fostered urban consumption and allowed for a certain level of well-being, yet conflicts were also brewing beneath the surface. During the ruling of the Radical Civic Union, under the Yrigoyen and Alvear's (1922-1928) administrations, the main parties represented in Parliament—radicals, conservatives, democratic progressists and socialists—did not question the inherited economic and productive model of the previous period. They largely agreed on maintaining the agro-export model and free trade. On the streets, the ever more organized and inspired by anarchist and syndicalist ideas labor movement challenged certain rules of the model and voiced concrete concerns regarding the conditions under which the world of labor operated; concerns that oftentimes did not resonate very loudly in parliamentary debates. The events of the Tragic Week (1919) and the Patagonian strikes of 1920-1922 exposed the depth of the social unrest and the growing tensions in a world that would never be the same after the Russian Revolution of 1917, where political division and the creation of antagonisms led to the expulsion of the first national socialist senator from the Congress for his political beliefs.

The 1930 coup d'état not only brought a political cycle to an end but also marked the first time that parliamentary life was interrupted by military force, setting a tragic precedent for the decades to come. Electoral fraud, political proscriptions and the manipulation of elections reinstated a Congress with a strong conservative imprint, disconnected from much of the citizenry. Thus, began the period known as the "Infamous Decade" in the history of Parliament which would last until the democratic restoration in 1946.

The second major social upheaval that marked the expansion of representation in the history of Congress took place in 1946 with the rise of Peronism to power. Parliament then became an unprecedented arena: workers, organized in labor

unions and backed by the leadership of Juan Domingo Perón (1946-1955), gained direct political representation. It was a large-scale inclusion that disrupted traditional norms and infused Parliament with a different tone. There, where previously technical and legal language had prevailed, speeches full of emotion, appeals to social justice and stories of the working-class life began to be heard. Politics was no longer discussed solely in terms of material progress or institutional balance, but as a promise of dignity to millions of men and women who, until then, had remained on the sidelines.

The enactment of laws recognizing labor, social security and social rights shaped the parliamentary agenda of that period. The world was rapidly changing: cities were filling with electric streetcars and buses, which transformed the way people moved about and brought the peripheral neighborhoods closer to the urban center; coal stoves were giving way to gas ones, while iceboxes, a symbol of the first decades of the century, were being replaced by modern refrigerators that made it possible to preserve meat and dairy products longer. Parliamentary debates had to respond to this dynamic world. Laws on the annual bonus, paid vacations, professional statutes, expansion of the retirement system and the recognition of collective agreements transformed the daily life of workers. Each of these measures was the result of intense debates in both houses, where different visions on the country were confronted. Over the course of those years, the Congress, thus, gradually became a symbolic arena of an Argentina divided in two, with passions that overflowed the walls of the palace and expressed in squares, labor unions, universities and newspapers.

In 1947, another milestone permanently transformed the composition of Parliament: the establishment of women's suffrage, law No. 13,010, passed by a wide majority, included millions of women as political citizens and made it possible, four years later in the 1951 elections, for a group of female legislators to occupy seats for the first time in the Senate and the House of Deputies, marking a clear before and after in Parliament history. The debating chamber, which for a century had been exclusively inhabited by men, was beginning to reflect the diversity of the Argentine society. Congress expanded not only socially and economically, but also symbolically, making it clear that political representation should include the other half of the population silenced until then. Simultaneously, the provincialization of the national territories of La Pampa and Chaco (1951), Misiones (1953) and Formosa, Neuquén, Río Negro, Chubut and Patagonia (1955) allowed the residents of all these regions to elect national male and female legislators for the first time, thereby establishing their legal equality

with the rest of the nation's inhabitants. Parliament thus became a sounding board for voices from every corner of Argentina.

The 1955 coup once again brought the democratic cycle to an end and ushered a period of continuous interruptions to parliamentary life, which would last until 1983. However, what had been sown in those decades could not be undone: from 1912 onward, political representation had been irreversibly expanded. First came the middle classes, then workers and women; the Congress would never again be the exclusive domain of an elite. The republic of the top hats had been left behind; the Argentina of bowler hats, overall and working women were here to stay.

The evolution of the electoral system in Argentina

With the Sáenz Peña Act (law No. 8871) a major step was taken in the process of democratization and change in voting rights, introducing the mandatory, universal and secret vote for men over 18, along with the automatic registration in the electoral roll.

With these measures, broad sectors of the population were incorporated into political citizenship, as voting became easier and by being secret, it guaranteed the possibility of expression free from any pressure.

To advance democratization, it was essential to replace voluntary registration with automatic registration, initially in charge of the armed forces through the conscription process and later on placed under the authority of federal judges, which reduced the chances of any kind of manipulation. The goal was to give legitimacy to the elections and to guarantee transparency. To make all this possible, secret and mandatory voting was fundamental, encouraging the participation of men between 18 and 70 years old.

Another important advance was the promotion of minority representation through the incomplete list system, where the first party got two thirds and the second got one third of the seats at stake. Although this is also a majority voting system, it led to a broader representation because the first minority got a 33.33% of the seats. However, this did not translate directly into the composition of the House since it was determined by the number of seats assigned to each province and the city of Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, progress was significant.

Each party could present a list of candidates with two thirds of the seats at stake. Voters could choose the candidates individually and then the counting was done based on the most voted candidates until the list of elected representatives was completed. In practice, much like with the winner-take-all system, most voters would vote the list presented by one of the parties without making any changes.

Only argentine-born and naturalized citizens who legally resided in the provinces were entitled to vote. Those who lived in national territories did not have this right.

The period that began with the 1912 legislative elections in April reached its full significance in the 1916 presidential elections, as these affected not only the renewal of half of the House of Deputies, but also the composition of the electoral college for the election of the presidential ticket through the application of the incomplete list system. It came to an end in 1930 with the military coup, marking the beginning of a period of fraud and political instability.

Starting in 1945, major electoral reforms were introduced. The first came in 1947 with the enactment of law No. 13,010, through which the universalization of political rights was achieved. This law crowned a long process of demands by women who had been fighting for those rights. The precedent in our country is to be found in 1927, when the Constitution of the province of San Juan was amended to extend political rights to women, and the first elections under this system were held at the end of 1928. In Argentina, movements demanding this right began in the early 20th century, accompanying the processes of expansion that were taking place in other countries such as New Zealand in 1893, the United States in 1920, the United Kingdom in 1928, among others.

In 1949, the Constitution was amended and so was the statute of political parties. Furthermore, the inhabitants of national territories were granted political rights and progress was even made toward granting province status to most of them. In this regard, through law No. 14,032, they were given representation by electing delegates, who enjoyed the same immunities and received the same compensation, by the same procedure as that of deputies. As for their role in Parliament, they had the right to speak in the debates, except in impeachment proceedings, but not the right to vote and were not considered to meet quorum. However, they could submit bills and take part in House committees, where they did have voice and vote.

In 1951, prior to the elections, law No. 14,032 of single-member constituencies was passed, which established the election of one deputy per constituency (an electoral

division of a territory). While one might think that this law simply reinstated the law of 1902, that was not entirely the case. That year, as many constituencies were established in each electoral district (provinces and the Federal Capital) as seats were to be filled and since the House was renewed by halves, elections were only held where deputies' terms ended. In this case, however, constituencies were established according to the number of seats to be renewed. This system was implemented in the provinces of Catamarca, Corrientes, Jujuy, La Rioja, Mendoza, Salta, San Juan, San Luis, Santiago del Estero and Tucumán. On the other hand, in the Federal Capital and the provinces of Buenos Aires, Córdoba, Entre Ríos and Santa Fe, the number of constituencies was equal to the number of deputies assigned to them minus two. These seats were awarded to the candidates who received the highest number of votes but had not been elected. In this way, the system allowed for an increased representation of minorities. In 1953, through law No. 14,292, the number of these seats was reduced to one.

Another important difference was that in order to prevent the personalization of the vote, the party's list prevailed, and voters casted their ballot for one that included all the candidates from all the constituencies within each electoral district (provinces and the city of Buenos Aires), rather than just those from their own constituency.

The 1949 Constitution established that national deputies would serve a six-year term and be renewed by halves. The first election under this system was held in 1951, when the entire House was elected and the renewal of the first half took place in the 1954 elections.