
PASO in Argentina: Abstentionism, Protests and Inflation

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The primary elections in Argentina are taking place today under the expectant gaze of world public opinion. More than 35 million Argentines will elect this Sunday those who will run for office on October 22nd. This is an election year for Argentines. Since the middle of the year, all kinds of elections have been taking place in the country, to reach general terms on October 22, 2023. On October 22 they will elect the president, vice-president, 130 deputies and 24 national senators, which will not exclude continuing of other processes on a smaller regional scale.

These elections will take place in a context where economic issues, democracies and political stability will be of utmost importance, all major challenges for the party that succeeds in winning the presidency of Argentina. Even so, abstentionism has returned this election year with large numbers. Already in the elections at the provincial level in search of governor, primaries and even legislative elections the level of abstentionism has increased by 5 percent in many of these municipalities and territories, a data that becomes symptomatological when it occurs in a context such as that of Argentina where voting is mandatory. The Research Center for Democratic Quality predicts that abstentionism in the general elections could reach levels a little higher than in previous years.

According to data disclosed by the institution, there were 1.5% more blank and null votes, with striking results such as in Tierra del Fuego, where the blank vote took second place in the results, and in Patagonia with 20.97% of null or blank votes. According to several analysts, the recent abstentionism in the Argentine population is a reflection of the increasing loss of confidence of citizens in official politics and democratic governance processes. Nevertheless, there are criteria that question that there is no direct correlation between the provincial elections and the primaries, and therefore it should not be taken for granted that the primaries will be marked by a high abstention rate.

The director of the organization Poder Ciudadano, Pablo Secchi, said that the provincial elections have many calls to vote in a short period of time, which discourages the citizenship, but that the motivations and characteristics of the primary elections and those of October 22, have other deeper motivations, so it cannot be taken for sure what will happen. "We know that participation is dropping in a year in which at a national level we are going to vote three times. For instance, in [the city of] Córdoba, the governor and mayor were elected, so they can vote up to five times during the year. All of this is a bit of a disincentive. But at the national level, we don't know," Secchi notes.

This August 13 is the beginning of the general term election period, which will define the names of the candidates who will face each other on October 22 in the presidential elections. The candidates for the presidency will be defined in what in Argentina is called Primary, Open, Simultaneous, and Mandatory Elections 2023 (PASO, Spanish acronym). Created in 2009, the PASO is used to vote for the pre-candidates who will go on to the general elections in October. Lists obtaining less than 1.5 percent of the votes will not be allowed to participate in the October elections.

The tweet reads, "Today is the PASO in Argentina, a unique type of election in the world that defines ALL the candidacies of each political space and decides who will move on to the general election on 10/22."

There are 13 presidential candidates, among them Horacio Rodríguez Larreta of "Juntos por el Cambio", Patricia Bullrich of the same party, Sergio Massa of "Unión por la Patria," and Juan Schiaretti of "Hacemos por Nuestro País." Both Horacio Rodríguez and Patricia Bullrich come as candidates representing Macrismo and radicalism in Argentina, where Macri has not yet expressed his decision to participate or not in these elections. On the other hand, Alberto Fernández is one of the first presidents who will not run for reelection since the 1994 reform. The leading party of the Argentine official left, the Left and Workers Front (FIT), has presented two presidential formulas: Myriam Bregman accompanied by Nicolás del Caño, and on the other hand, Gabriel Solano with Vilma Ripoll. In this list Sergio Massa, for the alliance Unión por la Patria of the Peronist sector, and the conservatives Horacio Rodríguez Larreta and Patricia Bullrich, who will dispute the internal contest of Juntos por el Cambio, are the ones that the polls are giving the best chances of becoming President of Argentina.

The primaries of August 13, in addition to being under the threat of abstentionism, will be held in the midst of an atmosphere of deep social unrest, due to the death of a social activist in the middle of a popular demonstration at the hands of State agents. The victim is Facundo Morales who died after being arrested by the police while he was demonstrating, together with other activists, against the primary elections that are being held today, 13th. Since last Friday, protests have been taking place to denounce Morales' death. The blocking of main avenues and rallies around the obelisk have taken place up to the eve of the primaries, where demonstrators blame the government for the death of the activist. Despite this, it is believed that the event will not significantly influence the good performance of the primaries and that it will not influence the attendance at the polls either. The strong political polarization that Argentina is experiencing means that events like this do not change the correlation of forces between progressive and conservative sectors. The repressive action of the police (strong-handed) in the face of popular protests is in fact one of the demands made by the conservative and right-wing sectors of Argentine society to their political representatives. And from the left, it is to be expected that a significant and solitary assistance from the right will not be allowed to affect their expectations of keeping Peronism in front of the presidency of the country.

Regardless of the results and characteristics of the election process of these primaries and the presidential elections of October 22, the challenge for the newly elected candidate will be to lead Argentina out of the serious economic crisis affecting it. Today, its economy is the one with the highest risk in the entire Latin American region. Intra-annual inflation is at 116 percent, which means that the quality of life of Argentines has fallen significantly and with it popular anguish grows in the face of hyperinflation. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census, there is a strong decrease in the purchasing power of the population in the country, causing 4 out of 10 people to live in poverty today. The number of poor people in Argentina rose to 18 million in the first half of the year, one million more than in mid-2022.

In this regard, economy has been the central axis around which the election days have revolved since the beginning of April until August 13, and it is expected that this will be the trend until October 22. According to the Argentine political scientist Luciana Manfredi, the centrality of economy in the Argentine political imaginary is present and has not changed since 2001.

The government that takes office on December 10 will have the enormous challenge of balancing the country's finances in such a way that inflation decreases to minimum levels, to resolve reserve shortages and tensions in the parallel markets. Argentina has been considered an economy incapable of paying its foreign debt, which today exceeds 30 percent of its GDP.