

Cycles of Crisis: A Narrative Review of Changes in Interpersonal, Institutional, and Political Trust in Argentina, 1983–2025

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Abstract

Argentina occupies a paradoxical position in the comparative literature on trust: a country with one of Latin America's oldest continuous democratic periods since 1983, yet one whose citizens report chronically low confidence in one another and in the state. This article presents a narrative literature review of empirical and theoretical scholarship on interpersonal, institutional, and political trust in Argentina, drawing on Latinobarómetro survey data, World Values Survey findings, and peer-reviewed studies indexed on Google Scholar. The review traces four interlocking patterns. First, generalized interpersonal trust in Argentina, while comparatively higher than the regional Latin American average in recent survey rounds, remains low by global standards and has been shaped by decades of recurrent economic crisis. Second, institutional and political trust has followed a long-run downward trajectory punctuated by short-lived recoveries around new administrations, with a persistent gap between broad normative support for democracy and specific satisfaction with its performance. Third, this erosion is driven by an interacting cluster of factors: entrenched corruption and high-profile prosecutions of political elites, recurrent monetary and economic crises that have produced a durable narrative of monetary distrust, income inequality, and a closed political elite characterized by high incumbency and family-based succession. Fourth, Argentina's deep political polarization, commonly referred to as "la grieta" (the crack), both reflects and reinforces the erosion of generalized institutional trust. The review also considers how the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2023 election of Javier Milei illustrate the practical stakes of this trust deficit, and it identifies gaps in the literature that future longitudinal and comparative research should address.

Keywords: trust, Argentina, institutional trust, political trust, social capital, Latinobarómetro, corruption, democracy, polarization

1. Introduction

Trust, understood as the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will behave in a predictable and benevolent manner, occupies a central

place in theories of democratic governance, economic development, and social cohesion. Scholars in the Putnam tradition have long argued that generalized trust and dense networks of civic association constitute a form of social capital that underwrites cooperation, lowers transaction costs, and sustains democratic institutions (Putnam, 1993). Where such trust is absent or confined to narrow personal circles, collective action problems multiply, institutions struggle to gain legitimacy, and citizens turn to informal or particularistic arrangements to manage risk and uncertainty.

Argentina offers a particularly rich, if sobering, case for examining these dynamics. Since the restoration of civilian rule in 1983 after a brutal military dictatorship, Argentina has held regular competitive elections and built one of the region's longest unbroken democratic records, yet its economic and political history over the same period has been punctuated by hyperinflation in the late 1980s, a currency-board experiment and catastrophic default and devaluation in 2001–2002, repeated corruption scandals implicating former presidents, and, more recently, a sharp political realignment culminating in the 2023 election of the self-described libertarian outsider Javier Milei (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Argentina is also a founding and consistently surveyed member of the Latinobarómetro project, which has tracked public attitudes toward institutions, democracy, and fellow citizens across Latin America since 1995, making it possible to situate Argentine trends within a broader regional context (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017).

This article synthesizes the empirical literature on trust in Argentina in order to answer three interrelated questions. First, how has interpersonal (generalized) trust among Argentines changed since the return to democracy, and how does it compare with regional Latin American patterns? Second, how has institutional and political trust, trust in the presidency, the Congress, the judiciary, and other formal bodies, evolved over the same period? Third, what factors do researchers identify as the principal drivers of change in these forms of trust, and what are the consequences for democratic legitimacy and social cohesion? In addressing these questions, the review also highlights methodological and thematic gaps in the existing literature and proposes directions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework: Dimensions of Trust

The literature on trust distinguishes several analytically separable, if empirically related, dimensions. Interpersonal or generalized trust, typically measured through variants of the classic "most people can be trusted" survey item, captures a diffuse disposition toward strangers, in contrast to the narrower trust extended to family, friends, and close acquaintances. Political or institutional trust, by contrast, refers to citizens' confidence that specific public institutions and office-holders will act competently, fairly, and in the public interest, and is commonly disaggregated into trust in the presidency, the national Congress, the judiciary, political parties, and the police (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017).

Volosin's (2019) institutional analysis of Argentine corruption usefully distinguishes generalized, particular, and institutional trust, noting that while some forms of particular trust, for example, the trust that binds public officials to friends and family, can actively sustain corrupt practices, institutional trust in the impartial behavior of public bodies is what makes honest and competent government possible in the first place. This distinction echoes a long-standing observation in Argentine political culture, captured by legal scholar Carlos Nino and cited in Volosin's account, that corruption is frequently underpinned by a moral order that privileges family and personal loyalty over the public interest.

A further useful distinction, applied extensively in the Latin American survey literature, separates diffuse support for democracy as a system of government from specific support reflecting evaluations of the concrete performance of incumbent institutions and leaders. As in other Latin American cases, this distinction helps explain why aggregate support for democracy as an ideal in Argentina has remained comparatively resilient even as satisfaction with its actual functioning, and trust in the institutions that operate it, has declined (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

3. Method: Review Approach and Search Strategy

This article adopts a narrative, integrative review methodology rather than a formal systematic review with meta-analysis, reflecting the heterogeneity of designs, measures, and time frames used across the source literature. Sources were identified through structured searches of Google Scholar and adjacent academic repositories using combinations of the terms "trust," "political trust," "institutional trust," "social capital," "Argentina," "corruption," "Latinobarómetro," and "democracy." The search was supplemented by direct retrieval of Latinobarómetro-based working

papers, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) publications, and internationally recognized comparative reports (such as the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index), since Latinobarómetro constitutes the most extensive time series of public-opinion data on trust available for Argentina and is extensively cited within the peer-reviewed literature itself.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, IDB and university-affiliated working papers, and internationally recognized comparative country reports that report original survey analysis or synthesize multiple Latinobarómetro survey rounds. Sources were included if they reported empirical findings on interpersonal, institutional, or political trust in Argentina specifically, or if they provided a comparative Latin American benchmark that illuminated patterns specific to Argentina. Because Latinobarómetro survey rounds span from the mid-1990s through 2024, the review is able to describe change over roughly three decades, although, as discussed in the limitations section, the underlying studies vary considerably in question wording, sampling frames, and analytical technique, which complicates strict longitudinal comparison.

4. Findings

4.1 Interpersonal (Generalized) Trust

Comparative evidence situates Argentina as a moderately low-trust society within an already low-trust region. Latin America as a whole recorded its lowest level of generalized interpersonal trust since Latinobarómetro began asking the "most people can be trusted" question in 1996, with only about 12% of respondents across the region agreeing with the statement in the 2022 survey round, meaning that roughly 88% of Latin Americans reported that most people cannot be trusted (Universidad de Navarra Global Affairs, 2024, summarizing Latinobarómetro data). Within this low-trust regional context, Argentina performs comparatively well: in the 2024 Latinobarómetro survey, 24% of Argentine respondents agreed that most people can be trusted, the second-highest level among the 17 countries surveyed, trailing only Mexico at 26% (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

This relatively favorable regional standing should not obscure the fact that, by global comparative standards, a generalized trust level in the low-to-mid twenties remains modest, and the literature attributes part of this pattern to Argentina's specific historical trajectory. Historical accounts emphasize a "see-saw" pattern of economic and institutional volatility dating to the Great Depression of the 1930s, when a military coup coincided with the end of a period of sustained

economic progress, inaugurating recurring cycles of military rule, weak democratic governments, and economic crisis that scholars link to the erosion of interpersonal as well as institutional trust over the subsequent decades. The ISPI (2023) assessment of Argentina's institutional instability similarly notes that interpersonal trust has declined in recent years in a pattern that runs alongside, and reinforces, a longer-standing erosion of trust in both public and private institutions, with mistrust threatening long-term agreements, reducing civic engagement, and weakening democratic resilience more broadly.

4.2 Institutional and Political Trust: Long-Term Trends

The clearest empirical finding in the literature on Argentine political trust is a long-run downward trend, punctuated by short-lived recoveries that typically coincide with the inauguration of new administrations. Analysis of Latinobarómetro data compiled by regional observers finds that public satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Argentina has tracked a long-term downward trajectory over the past two decades, falling well below the levels recorded during the early years of the post-dictatorship transition in the 1980s (EPIS, 2026). At the level of Latin America as a whole, trust in institutions declined steadily between 2009 and 2018, reaching levels close to 20%, meaning that only about one in five respondents across the region expressed trust in their governments, before improving somewhat between 2018 and 2020, a shift some analysts attribute to the electoral success of political outsiders who displaced traditional party systems and temporarily renewed a sense of hope in political institutions (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

Despite this erosion in specific institutional trust, normative support for democracy as a system of government has remained comparatively resilient in Argentina: in the 2024 Latinobarómetro survey, 75% of Argentine respondents said that democracy was preferable to any other form of political regime, a figure that places Argentina among the leading countries in Latin America on this measure (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The persistence of this gap between diffuse support for democracy in the abstract and specific dissatisfaction with its concrete institutional performance is attributed by the same source to the compounding effects of inflation, corruption, unemployment, poverty, rising insecurity, and the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Bargsted, Somma, and Castillo (2017), analyzing Latinobarómetro data since 1996 across eleven Latin American countries, similarly emphasize that

political trust in the region evolves substantially within countries over time rather than remaining a fixed, purely cultural trait, and that Latin American societies as a whole register markedly lower political trust than societies in other world regions.

Analyses focused specifically on public approval of national administrations reinforce this picture of volatility layered onto long-run decline. A comparative report on presidential and prime-ministerial approval across sixteen countries in Western Europe, North America, and Latin America between 2020 and 2024 found that Latin American governments, including Argentina's, exhibited sharp fluctuations between approval highs and lows, with pronounced upticks at the start of new presidential terms followed by steep declines, reaching the lowest troughs in the historical series before leveling off at an average approval of around 35%, still trailing the region's pandemic-era peak (Rodríguez Nardi, 2025, summarizing PULSAR–Konrad Adenauer Foundation data). The 2023 election of Javier Milei, whose campaign explicitly targeted the traditional political class as corrupt and self-serving, has itself been interpreted in this literature as a symptom of deep domestic discontent with established institutions rather than as an isolated electoral event (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

4.3 Drivers of Trust Erosion

The literature converges on a small number of interacting factors that scholars identify as primary drivers of declining trust in Argentina: corruption and the politics of accountability, recurrent monetary and economic crises, income inequality, and the closure of the political elite.

Corruption and accountability. Corruption occupies a central place in the Argentine trust literature. Volosin's (2019) institutional history of Argentine corruption traces a structural pattern extending across roughly two hundred years, from early state-building through what she terms a period of "state capture" and a 2003–2015 phase she labels "modern kleptocracy," arguing that anti-corruption efforts limited to prosecutions and sanctions, without deeper institutional reform to reduce opportunities for corruption and strengthen monitoring capacity, are unlikely to durably rebuild public trust. Empirical work by Poertner and Zhang (2023) offers direct causal evidence on this point: exploiting the coincidence between nationally representative Latinobarómetro fieldwork and the unprecedented criminal sentencing of former president Carlos Menem in Argentina and former president Rafael Ángel Calderón Fournier in Costa Rica, the authors find

that citizens interviewed after these prosecutions expressed lower institutional trust, particularly lower trust in the judiciary, and were less willing to vote or participate in collective demonstrations, along with greater pessimism specifically among Argentine respondents about the prospects for anti-corruption efforts succeeding. This finding suggests that even ostensibly positive accountability events, such as the successful prosecution of a corrupt former leader, can paradoxically depress public trust in the short term by making the scale of past wrongdoing newly salient.

Monetary and economic crises. A distinctive strand of the Argentine trust literature examines how decades of monetary instability have shaped a durable narrative of distrust toward the state's capacity to manage the economy. Moreno's (2026) analysis of "monetary distrust" in Argentina argues that the collective memory of repeated bouts of monetary turmoil, including the hyperinflation episodes of the late 1980s and the 2001–2002 default and currency devaluation, has crystallized into a widespread belief that neither the state nor the domestic financial system can reliably safeguard the value of the national currency or of individual savings over time. Importantly, Moreno (2026) contends that this distrust narrative is not simply a rational, real-time response to elite credibility signals but a socially embedded imaginary of past failure that is transmitted across generations through collective memory, and that itself constrains the capacity of the central bank to manage public expectations in the present. This helps explain why measures of monetary and institutional distrust in Argentina have proven remarkably persistent even during periods of relative macroeconomic stability.

Inequality. Comparative quantitative research links income inequality directly to depressed political trust across Latin America, a relationship with clear relevance to Argentina given the country's own history of economic volatility and uneven income distribution. Zmerli and Castillo (2015), analyzing regional survey data, find that higher Gini coefficients, reflecting greater income inequality, are associated with lower political trust, with an increase in inequality from the 25th to the 75th percentile of the regional distribution associated with a measurable decline in trust. This inequality-trust relationship is theorized to operate partly through perceptions of distributive unfairness, which erode citizens' sense that political and economic institutions serve the interests of the population as a whole rather than a narrow elite (Zmerli & Castillo, 2015).

Elite closure and representation. A further driver identified in recent comparative research concerns the degree of social closure among political elites, that is, the extent to which political power is concentrated among long-serving incumbents and family-based political dynasties rather than being open to broader societal participation. Ortiz-Inostroza and Bargsted (2026), combining Latin American Public Opinion Project survey data from 2004–2018 with elite-composition indicators, find that elite closure, captured through legislative re-election rates and family ties in politics, significantly reduces mass-level political trust across the region, with the effect being particularly pronounced in contexts, such as Argentina, characterized by historically high and persistent elite closure. The ISPI (2023) assessment of Argentine institutional instability offers a complementary qualitative account of this dynamic, noting that the national Congress is no longer regarded as the primary arena for policy debate and negotiation, that legislative turnover undermines the development of specialized state capacity, that the executive branch tends to overshadow the legislature in practice despite Argentina's formally federal and presidential structure, and that provincial governors play an outsized role in candidate selection and the administration of national resources for local social policy, arrangements that frequently give rise to patronage and pork-barrel practices that further undermine the perceived fairness and accountability of political institutions.

4.4 "La Grieta": Polarization and the Structure of Trust

A distinctive feature of the Argentine case, relative to many other Latin American countries, is the degree to which institutional distrust is entangled with deep and durable political polarization. Analysts of Argentine democratic backsliding describe this cleavage using the popular term "la grieta" (the crack), denoting a deeply entrenched sociological division that splits the political landscape into two largely mutually exclusive camps: an economic-nationalist, populist paradigm associated primarily with Kirchnerist Peronism, and an anti-populist, market-oriented or conservative paradigm (EPIS, 2026). This polarized structure has implications for how institutional trust is distributed and interpreted: rather than reflecting a single national trajectory of rising or falling confidence in, for example, the presidency or the judiciary, evaluations of these institutions in Argentina are strongly conditioned by which side of the cleavage a given citizen occupies, with each camp tending to trust institutions when its own political allies control them and to distrust the same institutions when they are controlled by opponents.

This dynamic helps to contextualize some of the sharper short-term fluctuations documented in the approval-rating literature discussed above, including the initial surge and subsequent softening of support for the Milei administration following its 2023 election (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026; Rodríguez Nardi, 2025). It also aligns with the broader theoretical point, noted in the ISPI (2023) assessment, that persistent instability and institutional mistrust can foster political polarization and, in turn, create openings for the emergence of authoritarian-leaning leaders and movements, particularly when combined with poor economic outcomes such as social exclusion, rising inequality, and reduced social mobility.

4.5 Comparative Regional Context and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Argentina's trust trajectory is best understood in comparative regional perspective. Cross-national analyses using the Latin American Distrust Index, built from Latinobarómetro data spanning 2008–2018, document a generalized increase in institutional distrust across several Latin American countries in 2017 and 2018, with better perceptions of democratic functioning concentrated in countries where the rule of law is comparatively more consolidated (as summarized in comparative distrust-index research drawing on Latinobarómetro, 2008–2018). Argentina's own experience of volatility, alternating between periods of relatively higher approval around electoral transitions and deep troughs during periods of economic adjustment, fits this broader regional pattern of "sharp fluctuations" rather than steady decline or steady improvement (Rodríguez Nardi, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an important natural test of the resilience of political trust under acute crisis conditions. Using panel survey data collected before and during the pandemic in Argentina and Uruguay, Bonvecchi, Calvo, Otálvaro-Ramírez, and Scartascini (2022) find that trust in the president increased over the course of the pandemic in Uruguay but declined in Argentina among the population at large, even though there was no clear evidence that direct personal exposure to COVID-19, that is, an individual's own health being compromised by the virus, was itself associated with a further decline in trust. The same study finds mixed evidence regarding citizens' willingness to accept the higher personal economic sacrifices associated with fiscal reform intended to help the country exit the crisis, with those whose own health or that of family members was affected by the virus showing somewhat greater willingness to accept such sacrifices than the population at large. This divergence between Argentina and Uruguay during a shared regional shock underscores that pre-existing trust trajectories, shaped by each country's

distinct institutional and economic history, continue to condition how citizens respond to comparable crises.

5. Discussion: Synthesizing Four Decades of Change

Reading across the studies reviewed above, several broad conclusions emerge about how trust in Argentina has changed since the return to democratic rule in 1983. First, generalized interpersonal trust, while comparatively higher in Argentina than in most other Latin American countries in recent Latinobarómetro rounds, remains modest by global standards and is embedded within a regional context of historically low and, by some measures, still-declining generalized trust (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026; Universidad de Navarra Global Affairs, 2024). Second, institutional and political trust follows a long-run downward trajectory that is nonetheless punctuated by short-term recoveries tied to electoral cycles and the arrival of new administrations, a pattern documented consistently from regional Latinobarómetro-based analyses (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017; United Nations Development Programme, 2021) through country-specific assessments of Argentine democratic backsliding (EPIS, 2026) and comparative approval-rating research (Rodríguez Nardi, 2025).

Third, the drivers of this erosion are strikingly consistent across studies employing different methods, samples, and time periods: corruption and the (sometimes paradoxical) effects of anti-corruption prosecutions, recurrent monetary and economic crises that have produced a durable and intergenerationally transmitted narrative of monetary distrust, income inequality, and the closure of the political elite around long-serving incumbents and family-based dynasties all recur as robust correlates of low institutional trust, from Volosin's (2019) two-century institutional history through Poertner and Zhang's (2023) causal analysis of the Menem prosecution, Moreno's (2026) study of monetary distrust, Zmerli and Castillo's (2015) inequality analysis, and Ortiz-Inostroza and Bargsted's (2026) elite-closure study.

Fourth, Argentina's distinctive contribution to the comparative trust literature lies in the degree to which institutional distrust is refracted through the lens of deep political polarization, or "la grieta." This suggests that, unlike in some other national contexts where institutional trust might be treated as a relatively unified national attitude, in Argentina evaluations of specific institutions are often better understood as a function of partisan alignment, complicating simple narratives of uniform

national decline or recovery and helping to explain the sharp, cycle-dependent fluctuations documented in the approval-rating and satisfaction-with-democracy literature.

Finally, the COVID-19 case illustrates that these dynamics are not merely of academic interest: the divergent trajectories of presidential trust in Argentina and Uruguay during a shared pandemic shock (Bonvecchi et al., 2022) demonstrate that a country's accumulated stock, or deficit, of institutional trust materially shapes how its population responds to a common external crisis, with direct implications for governments' capacity to secure public cooperation with costly but necessary policy responses.

6. Limitations of the Reviewed Literature

Several limitations of the existing literature merit attention. First, although Latinobarómetro provides an unusually long and consistent regional time series, question wording and the set of countries surveyed have changed somewhat across rounds, and cross-national comparative analyses sometimes aggregate Argentina with other Latin American cases in ways that can obscure country-specific dynamics; single-country deep dives on Argentina remain comparatively less common than regional comparative studies (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017). Second, much of the causally oriented literature, for example, Poertner and Zhang's (2023) analysis of the Menem prosecution or Bonvecchi et al.'s (2022) panel study of pandemic-era trust, relies on relatively short observation windows around specific triggering events, which is well suited to identifying short-term causal effects but less well suited to establishing how such shocks accumulate or dissipate over longer horizons.

Third, the qualitative and historical-institutional literature, exemplified by Volosin (2019) and Moreno (2026), offers rich accounts of how collective memory and institutional structure shape trust over long historical periods but is more difficult to integrate quantitatively with the survey-based literature that dominates comparative political science approaches to trust; bridging these methodological traditions, for example, through mixed-methods designs that pair narrative or discourse analysis with panel survey data, represents an important opportunity for future research. Fourth, comparatively little of the reviewed literature disaggregates Argentine trust trends by province or region, despite well-documented disparities in economic conditions, security, and governance quality across Argentina's federal structure, leaving open important questions about

whether national-level trends mask sharply divergent local or provincial trajectories, particularly given the outsized role that provincial governors are argued to play in shaping patronage politics and institutional legitimacy (ISPI, 2023).

7. Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This review has traced a pattern of long-run erosion in institutional and political trust in Argentina since the country's return to democratic governance in 1983, a pattern punctuated by short-lived recoveries around electoral transitions but ultimately trending downward, and unfolding against a backdrop of comparatively higher, though still globally modest, generalized interpersonal trust relative to the wider Latin American region. Institutional and political trust in Argentina appears to be driven principally by corruption and the contested politics of holding elites accountable, by a durable narrative of monetary distrust rooted in decades of recurrent economic crisis, by income inequality, and by the closure of the political elite around incumbency and family-based succession, drivers that interact with, and are refracted through, the country's deep and persistent political polarization.

Future research would benefit from at least three developments. First, more granular subnational research, examining variation in trust across Argentina's provinces, which differ substantially in economic structure, security conditions, and the strength of provincial political machines, would help clarify whether the national-level drivers identified in the literature operate uniformly across the country or vary systematically by region. Second, longer-horizon panel studies extending beyond the relatively short windows used in current causal designs would help researchers distinguish genuinely durable shifts in trust from short-term fluctuations tied to specific political or economic events, including the ongoing Milei administration's economic adjustment program. Third, further integration of the historical-institutional and discourse-analytic literature on collective memory and monetary distrust (Moreno, 2026) with quantitative survey-based approaches would help clarify the precise mechanisms through which past crises continue to shape present-day trust, an area in which the existing literature remains more suggestive than definitive. Given the practical stakes illustrated by Argentina's COVID-19 experience and its recurrent economic crises, in which low institutional trust has repeatedly complicated governments' ability to secure public cooperation with necessary but costly reforms, closing these gaps represents an important priority for scholars and policymakers alike.

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