



ITSS
International Team
For the Study of Security
Verona

Milei, Argentina's Alt Right Populist Leader

by Tobias Belgrano

ITSS Verona Magazine, Vol. 2, n. 2

Fall/Winter 2023

Milei, Argentina's Alt Right Populist Leader

Tobias Belgrano

To cite this article: Tobias Belgrano, *Milei, Argentina's Alt Right Populist Leader*, ITSS Verona Magazine, Vol. 2, no. 2, Fall/Winter 2023.

Keywords: Argentinian Politics, Populism in Latin America, Libertarian Movement, Economic Crisis, Political Change

ITSS Verona website: <https://www.itssverona.it/itss-magazine>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/itss-verona/>

Instagram: https://instagram.com/itss_verona?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=

Published online: December 29th, 2023

Abstract: The Argentine economy is once again on the brink, with pervasive economic instability inciting widespread discontent among its populace. This article delves into the current economic plight of Argentina, exploring the historical context, policy missteps, and external factors that have contributed to the nation's precarious financial situation. As voter frustration reaches a boiling point, a new political figure has emerged, promising radical changes to both the political and economic status quo. This paper analyzes the potential implications of a potential political shift, examining the candidate's proposed policies, public reception, and what possible challenges would lie ahead.

The Argentinian economy has hit a definitive impasse due to the political class's consistent inability to foster economic stability. Overwhelming inflation rates,¹ coupled with relentless devaluation of the local currency,² have led to a dire scenario where citizen's capacity to make ends meet erodes on a daily basis. This distress has driven Argentinians to despair, upon which voters have elected a man that the political class does not fully understand.

Javier Milei is an economist and the prominent leader of “La libertad Avanza”, the Alternative Right (Alt-Right) Libertarian party. He achieved an unexpected victory in the August 13 primaries in Argentina defeating the incumbent Peronist leader, and Minister of Economy, Sergio Massa and the Macrist coalition “Juntos por el Cambio”³. The Minister was endorsed by the vice president Cristina Kirchner as the best candidate for this Presidential election. However, his administration has struggled to rein in inflation rates so as to enhance the spending capacity of citizens' salaries, which had led many analysts to anticipate Massa's defeat prior to the primaries.

What truly broke the political status quo is that Peronist defeat didn't come from the center-right coalition PRO as expected. The party led by Mauricio Macri, presented a competitive primary with Patricia Bullrich (former Minister of Security) and the incumbent governor of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta.⁴ Bullrich defeated Rodríguez-Larreta by 5%. Despite this riveting competition, the first place of the election was taken by a

¹ Martín Kanenguiser, “La Argentina Registró En Julio La Tercera Inflación Más Alta Del Mundo Después de Venezuela y El Líbano,” infobae, August 16, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/economia/2023/08/16/la-argentina-registro-en-julio-la-tercera-inflacion-mas-alta-del-mundo-despues-de-venezuela-y-el-libano/#:~:text=En%20cambio%2C%20el%20registro%20de.Guzm%C3%A1n%2D%20al%20115%25%20actual.>

² Clarín “El dólar blue no se frena: Llegó a \$ 780 y con las importaciones paradas el Banco Central logró comprar US\$ 117 millones” https://www.clarin.com/economia/vuela-dolar-blue-unica-cotizacion-sigue-subiendo-fuerte-devaluacion_0_SgoRTgQj8N.html

³ “Milei, el gran ganador de las PASO” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47A9K-zhyc4>

⁴ Sebastian Aulicino, “La Interna Del Pro Arrastró a Sus Socios de Jxc: Larreta y Bullrich Se Medirán En Una Paso de Pura Competencia,” Ir a la página principal, June 25, 2023, <https://tn.com.ar/politica/2023/06/25/la-interna-del-pro-arrastro-a-sus-socios-de-jxc-larreta-y-bullrich-se-mediran-en-una-paso-de-pura-competencia/>.

candidate from a different quarter. Javier Milei, the third contender, achieved an unexpected triumph in the primaries defeating the two coalitions that have ruled the country for almost a quarter century. This unanticipated challenger, akin to a "black swan" event, asserted himself with forceful declarations against the political elites and the prevailing status quo. Central to his political rhetoric is the objective of dismantling the state and its institutions, such as the Central Bank,⁵ also challenging established political groups that have been profiting from it; both strands, the peronist and the macrist.

How is Populism born?

a) The people against the "Breed"

Political scenarios like this are not new in Latin America, the region has a history of perpetual stage for messianic leaders who amplify the anger and frustration of the population, channeling such sentiments against the establishment. Nowadays, the significant difference between Latin American and European democracies relies on the varying rates of success that these leaders have to effectively dismantle the status quo.

The Libertarian movement initiated by Javier Milei claims to promote individual freedom. However, some of its activists have been observed engaging in aggressive censorship of journalists over platforms like Twitter, labeling any opposition as "leftists" united on what they call the "political breed," which they also believe to be detrimental to the nation. Notably, journalists who initially aligned with Milei's perspectives - such as Viviana Canosa an ultra-conservative TV presenter at La Nación⁶ - and celebrities like Carolina

⁵ "Eliminamos el Banco Central y dolarizamos o vamos a seguir con la inflación"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K15HHyISBdM>

⁶ Infocielo, "Impensado: Viviana Canosa SE Puso Del Lado de Lali Espósito Ante Milei,"
www.infocielo.com, August 16, 2023,
<https://infocielo.com/politica-y-economia/impensado-viviana-canosa-se-puso-del-lado-lali-esposito-milei-n769633>.

Andorhain, model and wife of a Macrist legislator⁷ - have experienced significant backlash and cancellations on Twitter due to their criticisms of Milei's ideas.

Steven Levitsky, distinguished political scientist renowned for his book "How Democracies Die," discusses in his other book "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism"⁸ the three key characteristics that help identify populism: Firstly, populism often involves wielding an anti-establishment discourse and making promises to dismantle the existing political system. This strategy has been consistently applied by the Libertarian leader who successfully divided society into two groups: on one side the "state parasites," which includes inhabitants receiving social welfare benefits, public employees, and politicians for a welfare state. On the other side, workers of the informal economy, entrepreneurs and low-middle classes who do not receive benefits from the state whatsoever yet see their income destroyed by inflation. Milei managed to break the traditional dispute between Peronism and anti-Peronism that fractured Argentina's political landscape for decades, connecting the two sides together as one front, while positioning himself on the other front.

Additionally, Milei has identified feminism, gay rights and human rights activists as part of the "political breed". Reminiscing alt-righters Jahir Bolsonaro (former Brazilian president) and Georgia Meloni (Italy's prime minister), Milei promises to eliminate the Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity and run a referendum to repeal the abortion law: *"It's not a right that has been won. How can it be considered a right to be able to kill other human beings?"*⁹ Milei also made reference to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, as narrated

⁷ La Nacion, "Javier Milei Cruzó a Pampita Y Apuntó Contra Roberto García Moritán: 'Creer Que Ella Es Neutral Es Una Tontería,'" LA NACION, August 16, 2023, <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/espectaculos/javier-milei-cruzo-a-pampita-y-apunto-contra-roberto-garcia-moritan-creer-que-ella-es-neutral-es-una-nid16082023/>.

⁸ Steven Levitsky & James Loxton (2013) Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes, Democratization, 20:1, 107-136, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2013.738864

⁹ El Cronista, "Javier Milei Dijo Que Piensa En Un Plebiscito Para Anular El Aborto: 'No Es Un Derecho Ganado,'" Edici, August 15, 2023, <https://www.cronista.com/economia-politica/javier-milei-dijo-que-piensa-en-un-plebiscito-para-anular-el-aborto-no-es-un-derecho-ganado/>.

in the Bible, where certain practices were accepted, such as homosexuality ultimately led to its decline. The candidate emphasized the importance of building upon “moral” and “righteous” principles to avoid such detrimental outcomes.

Recently, that assault on the establishment has extended to the scientific community. The Libertarian leader declared that, should he win the presidential election, he would advocate for the privatization of the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), a prestigious government agency responsible for overseeing and coordinating most of the scientific and technical research conducted in universities and institutes. Its first director was Nobel Laureate Bernardo A. Houssay. The Alt Right leader has criticized researchers, by stating: *"Let them earn their money by serving others, just as decent people do."*¹⁰

Consistent with discrediting the validity of scientific truth, the candidate denies the existence of climate change. In an interview showcased live over video platform Twitch Milei stated: *"Global warming is another lie of socialism. 10 or 15 years ago, they were discussing that the planet was going to freeze. Now, they argue that it's getting warmer. Those who understand how these simulations are done will see that the functions are intentionally oversaturated in certain parameters to generate fear."*¹¹

b) Power to the “Amateurs”

Levitsky identifies as the second hallmark of populism the notable amateurism exhibited by both the leadership and their associated partisans in politics and public administration. Essential political skills such as negotiation and coalition-building, required for effectively navigating and functioning within political institutions, remain to be found

¹⁰ Ambitocom, “Javier Milei Prometió Eliminar El Conicet Si Gana La Presidencia,” ámbito.com | Portada, August 16, 2023, <https://www.ambito.com/politica/javier-milei-prometio-eliminar-el-conicet-si-gana-la-presidencia-n5796458>.

¹¹ Lucía Gardel, “Javier Milei: ‘El Calentamiento Global Es Una Mentira,’” Chequeado, August 4, 2023, <https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/milei-el-calentamiento-global-es-una-mentira/?fbclid=IwAR0bFzUEuD Mgy2UUv-YcmUVDVXY5-sYMhWU5Fzovek3LXZG9G8WiP6sdrE>.

amongst them. Moreover, given that political careers are intertwined with democratic institutions, career politicians inherently possess a vested interest in the survival and functionality of these systems, which outsiders and newcomers to politics disregard, akin to Trump, Bolsonaro, and Meloni.

Populist outsiders, like Javier Milei, lack the practical experience necessary for day-to-day public policy negotiation. The absence of these skills, as well as an evident deficit of composure and dedication, can bolster Libertarians to pursue their partisan objectives ignoring the established democratic framework in Argentina. In addition, since he and his Libertarian fellows have not been immersed in the political culture of democracy, they might not share the same commitment to these institutions.

Consequently, this matching of vertical authority with the inexperience of populists, akin Javier Milei, often extends to other elected officials from the same party, who generally lack relevant backgrounds to serve in office. Also, populist parties, such as the Libertarian, frequently lack horizontal accountability and meaningful political debate performance. All this results in a dynamic where the party's importance is limited and elected officials heavily rely on their leaders to make statecraft decisions.

In Argentina, it is particularly noteworthy that Libertarianism is spearheaded by politicians who appeal as amateurs, as 'rookies' emerging from the bottom leagues. One of the most prominent examples is the mayoral candidate for La Matanza county, the largest and poorest area in Buenos Aires province, a former cumbia singer known as El Dipy who lacks any political experience whatsoever.¹² Nonetheless, he secured the second position in the August primaries, running against the Peronist incumbent Fernando Espinoza.

¹² Leonardo Torresi, "Ganó Espinoza, Pero 'El Dipy' Pegó Fuerte En La Matanza y Salió Segundo," Perfil, August 14, 2023, <https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/gano-espinoza-pero-el-dipy-pego-fuerte-en-la-matanza-y-salio-segundo.phtml>.

c) *"We" the people*

Finally, Levitsky affirms that populism establishes direct, plebiscitary connections with voters, side-stepping traditional political parties and other forms of institutional mediation. This characteristic is notable in Libertarianism, where the leader seeks to directly engage with the electorate, often using social media and public appearances to communicate their message without relying extensively on established party structures or traditional intermediaries.

The evolution of Milei's engagement with his voters sparked during the pandemic. Alongside other economists, like Jose Luis Espert, and alt-right influencers, such as Agustin Laje, Milei started interactions with his audience over platforms like Twitch and YouTube, which played a pivotal role in the emergence and growth of Libertarianism in Argentina.

This usage of social networks like Twitch also enabled the populist economist to reach out to young voters who felt neglected during the pandemic. This age group found in Milei and in Libertarianism a discourse that resonated with their anger and frustration towards the prevailing political landscape.

The populist concept of the "people" that Milei has rallied around is rooted in the concept of the *"demand of the chain of equivalence,"* articulated by Ernesto Laclau in his book *On Populist Reason*. During the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the absence of effective state intervention led to the accumulation of unmet demands within a significant portion of society. People began to feel that they lacked representation in traditional political spaces, whether in the realm of peronism or the one of Macrism.

In this context, Milei was the one who could connect and unify these diverse demands within his political discourse. He achieved this employing 'empty signifiers,' which are words and ideas that convey a universal notion of justice and symbolically structure the unmet demands. In traditional populism, this is often framed as "the people." In Milei's case,

it's centered around concepts like “*La Casta*” (the breed) and "Freedom" from what is perceived as an oppressive and ineffective state. According to Laclau, Populism often arises in social scenarios where there is a collective sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled demands. While this shared feeling of discontent is a key catalyst, noteworthy it is not the sole contributing factor that explains the emergence of populism in the political landscape.¹³



Source: Infobae

How do democracies die?

Levitsky asserts that populism increases the likelihood of fragile democracies descending into competitive authoritarianism. When a populist movement includes one or two of the elements mentioned previously, it may be considered a diminished subtype of populism. However, when all three of those traits converge, it escalates into a "full-blown populism." This threatening scenario can foster institutional crises, which could unfold in a

¹³ Martín Retamozo “Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism: An introduction” published in Estudios Políticos, (41), 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.espol.2017.02.002>.

confrontation between the outsider, empowered by a popular mandate, against the traditional political establishment. In this conflict the populist leader has a larger incentive to dismantle the existing elite and division of power in a republic.

Argentina is a country that has lived through numerous institutional crises. A voluntary destruction of state capabilities, built over years through experience and effort, may provide immediate satisfaction to the unsatisfied population and serve as a vessel of validation for their anger and frustration. However, it is crucial to recognize that self-inflicted attacks on state capacities can have long-lasting consequences, and such capacities are often challenging to recover once diminished.

One of the main policies the Libertarian party promotes, related to the destruction of state capacities, is dollarization of the economy. Despite the country's inability to tackle inflation, there is a symbolic significance in self-destroying the local currency. Many economists argue that for the dollarization to be effectively executed, the country may have to endure another painful phase of hyperinflation¹⁴, a process that would gravely impact the income and budget of the most vulnerable citizens, and that of the middle class as well. It would also erode political stability, as more frustration and social unrest could overheat the social tissue.

This is particularly dangerous in societies marked by high levels of inequality, as is often the case in Latin American countries, the risk increases in postmodern societies where there is a strong desire for the immediate satisfaction of demands. In such contexts, it is essential to weigh the short-term gains against the potential long-term costs of undermining state capacities, which is essentially the power of democracy to effectively address the concerns and needs of its citizens.

¹⁴ María O'Donnell and Ernesto Tenenbaum, "La Dolarización Es Instantáneamente Una Hiperinflación", Dice El Historiador Económico Argentino Pablo Gerchunoff," Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, June 16, 2023, https://www.utdt.edu/ver_notas_prensa.php?id_notas_prensa=21377&id_item_menu=6.

Democracy is under siege on a global scale, and Argentina has now found itself embroiled in a battle for its survival. The elections of 2023 will be a testament to the resilience of a democracy that has reached its 40th anniversary. Only time will reveal the outcome and the path for Argentina's future.

Conclusion

At this point, it is quite clear that Javier Milei represents a danger to Argentinian democracy and institutions, due to the implications it may have on the nation's democratic processes and institutional integrity.

Over the past 40 years, Argentina's democracy has faced numerous challenges in building and maintaining a stable republic. The country has endured military sieges, economic crises, and political corruption. Despite that, there has been a concerted effort by the various political factions and civil society to work towards a basic consensus. This process has been a fragile one, and the progress achieved is at risk of being dismantled by the divisive and confrontational rhetoric employed by Milei.

The polarizing nature of Milei's rhetoric could potentially further divide an already fractured society. Argentina has long been characterized by its deep political and social divisions. A virtual government of Milei with its potential to marginalize certain groups and favor others, could exacerbate these divisions, leading to increased social unrest and instability.

While western democracy has been under siege through the XXI century, Argentina's democracy has been under siege for years. Its problems and internal discussions profoundly engage with the foundations of Western institutions. Time will tell if these institutions have become resilient after 40 years of challenges, or if they will succumb to populism and autocracy.

Bibliography

- Ambito.com. "Javier Milei Prometió Eliminar El Conicet Si Gana la Presidencia." ámbito.com | Portada, August 16, 2023.
<https://www.ambito.com/politica/javier-milei-prometio-eliminar-el-conicet-si-gana-la-presidencia-n5796458>.
- Aulicino Sebastian. "La Interna Del Pro Arrastró a Sus Socios de Jxc: Larreta y Bullrich Se Medirán En Una Paso de Pura Competencia." Ir a la página principal, June 25, 2023.
<https://tn.com.ar/politica/2023/06/25/la-interna-del-pro-arrastro-a-sus-socios-de-jxc-larreta-y-bullrich-se-mediran-en-una-paso-de-pura-competencia/>.
- El Cronista. "Javier Milei Dijo Que Piensa En Un Plebiscito Para Anular El Aborto: 'No Es Un Derecho Ganado.'" | Portada, August 15, 2023
<https://www.cronista.com/economia-politica/javier-milei-dijo-que-piensa-en-un-plebiscito-para-anular-el-aborto-no-es-un-derecho-ganado/>
- Gardel, Lucia. "Javier Milei: 'El Calentamiento Global Es Una Mentira.'" | Chequeado, August 4, 2023.
[https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/milei-el-calentamiento-global-es-una-mentira/?fbclid=IwAR0bFzUEuDMgy2UUv-YcmUVDDVXY5-sYMhWU5Fzovek3LXZG9G8WiP6sdrE\]\(https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/milei-el-calentamiento-global-es-una-mentira/?fbclid=IwAR0bFzUEuDMgy2UUv-YcmUVDDVXY5-sYMhWU5Fzovek3LXZG9G8WiP6sdrE\)](https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/milei-el-calentamiento-global-es-una-mentira/?fbclid=IwAR0bFzUEuDMgy2UUv-YcmUVDDVXY5-sYMhWU5Fzovek3LXZG9G8WiP6sdrE](https://chequeado.com/ultimas-noticias/milei-el-calentamiento-global-es-una-mentira/?fbclid=IwAR0bFzUEuDMgy2UUv-YcmUVDDVXY5-sYMhWU5Fzovek3LXZG9G8WiP6sdrE)
- Infocielo. "Impensado: Viviana Canosa SE Puso Del Lado de Lali Espósito Ante Milei." | Portada, August 16, 2023.
[https://infocielo.com/politica-y-economia/impensado-viviana-canosa-se-puso-del-lado-lali-esposito-milei-n769633\]\(https://infocielo.com/politica-y-economia/impensado-viviana-canosa-se-puso-del-lado-lali-esposito-milei-n769633\)](https://infocielo.com/politica-y-economia/impensado-viviana-canosa-se-puso-del-lado-lali-esposito-milei-n769633](https://infocielo.com/politica-y-economia/impensado-viviana-canosa-se-puso-del-lado-lali-esposito-milei-n769633)
- Kanenguiser, Martin "La Argentina Registró En Julio La Tercera Inflación Más Alta Del Mundo Después de Venezuela y El Líbano." | Infobae, August 16, 2023.
[https://www.infobae.com/economia/2023/08/16/la-argentina-registro-en-julio-la-tercera-inflacion-mas-alta-del-mundo-despues-de-venezuela-y-el-libano/#:~:text=En%20cambio%2C%20el%20registro%20de,Guzm%C3%A1n%2D%20al%20115%25%20actual\]\(https://www.infobae.com/economia/2023/08/16/la-argentina-registro-en-julio-la-tercera-inflacion-mas-alta-del-mundo-despues-de-venezuela-y-el-libano/#:~:text=En%20cambio%2C%20el%20registro%20de,Guzm%C3%A1n%2D%20al%20115%25%20actual\)](https://www.infobae.com/economia/2023/08/16/la-argentina-registro-en-julio-la-tercera-inflacion-mas-alta-del-mundo-despues-de-venezuela-y-el-libano/#:~:text=En%20cambio%2C%20el%20registro%20de,Guzm%C3%A1n%2D%20al%20115%25%20actual](https://www.infobae.com/economia/2023/08/16/la-argentina-registro-en-julio-la-tercera-inflacion-mas-alta-del-mundo-despues-de-venezuela-y-el-libano/#:~:text=En%20cambio%2C%20el%20registro%20de,Guzm%C3%A1n%2D%20al%20115%25%20actual)
- La Nacion. "Javier Milei Cruzó a Pampita Y Apuntó Contra Roberto García Moritán: 'Crear Que Ella Es Neutral Es Una Tontería.'" | Portada, August 16, 2023.
<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/espectaculos/javier-milei-cruzo-a-pampita-y-apunto-contr-roberto-garcia-moritan-crear-que-ella-es-neutral-es-una-nid16082023/>

Levitsky, Steven “Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes” | Democratization, 2013.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738864>](<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738864>)

O'Donnell, Maria & Tenembaum, Ernesto. ““La Dolarización Es Instantáneamente Una Hiperinflación”, Dice El Historiador Económico Argentino Pablo Gerchunoff.” | Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, June 16, 2023.
https://www.utdt.edu/ver_noticia_prensa.php?id_noticia_prensa=21377&id_item_menu=6](https://www.utdt.edu/ver_noticia_prensa.php?id_noticia_prensa=21377&id_item_menu=)

Perfil, “Ganó Espinoza, Pero ‘El Dipy’ Pegó Fuerte En La Matanza y Salió Segundo” Portada | August 14, 2023.
<https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/gano-espinoza-pero-el-dipy-pegó-fuerte-en-la-matanza-y-salio-segundo.phtml>](<https://www.perfil.com/noticias/politica/gano-espinoza-pero-el-dipy-pegó-fuerte-en-la-matanza-y-salio-segundo.phtml>)

Quiroga, Anabella "El dólar blue no se frena: llegó a \$ 780 y con las importaciones paradas el Banco Central logró comprar US\$ 117 millones." | Clarin, August 16, 2023
https://www.clarin.com/economia/vuela-dolar-blue-unica-cotizacion-sigue-subiendo-fuerte-devaluacion_0_SgoRTgQj8N.html

Retamozo, Martin. “Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism: An introduction.” | Estudios Políticos, 2017.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.espol.2017.02.002>](<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.espol.2017.02.002>)

Televisión Pública Noticias. “Milei, El Gran Ganador de Las Paso” | YouTube Video, August 14, 2023.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47A9K-zhyc4>](<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47A9K-zhyc4>)

Todo Noticias. “Eliminamos el Banco Central y dolarizamos o vamos a seguir con la inflación” | YouTube Video, 2023
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI5HHyISBdM>](<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KI5HHyISBdM>)