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Argentina

Milei's Far-Right Project, Between Opportunism and Innovation

Gabriel Vommaro

December 10, 2023. On the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of the current democratic cycle in Argentina, Javier Milei, libertarian influencer and economist, took office as president. After receiving the attributes of command from the outgoing president, Peronist Alberto Fernández, according to custom and tradition he was supposed to deliver a speech to the legislative assembly – the meeting of deputies and senators in the National Congress. Instead, Milei decided to deliver a speech to his supporters on the esplanade of the Congress building, with his back to the chamber where he had just been applauded by congresspeople. His decision to speak to his followers shows the centrality of the anti-establishment dimension in his persona: criticism of the political elite, a "caste" (*la casta*) opposed to "well-bred Argentines" (*los argentinos de bien*), was a key resource for Milei to represent the dissatisfaction of a large part of voters with the two coalitions that until then had dominated the Argentine electoral scene. In fact, Milei became president after displacing in the first round the center-right coalition Juntos por el Cambio (Together for Change, JxC), led by the Republican Proposal party (PRO party), as the main opposition force, and after contesting the second round with Peronism, which he defeated by a wide margin (55.7% vs. 44.3%).[1] Just two years earlier, in the 2021 legislative elections, he had run for the first time in elections and was elected national deputy for the city of Buenos Aires, after coming in third place with a surprising 17 percent of the votes. What does Milei represent in terms of programmatic offer? What explains his rapid rise in Argentine politics? This chapter aims to answer those questions.

I am grateful for the collaboration of Mariana Bonazzi in the research on which this text is based

[1] The electoral data presented in this chapter come from the Dirección Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Directorate). www.argentina.gob.ar/elecciones-2023

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Milei is a case of a far-right leader with populist radical components. The main elements of his discourse are: (a) defense of a libertarian program of radical criticism of state intervention and strong criticism of the left's distributive programs; (b) anti-establishment criticism of *la casta*, as opposed to the *argentinos de bien*, which is expressed both in the violence of his discourse and in corporal and aesthetic elements associated with anger against the political establishment; and (c) an opportunistic approach toward both morally conservative and "iron fist" positions regarding crime. Some elements typical of the European populist radical right are absent in Milei, such as anti-immigration positions. Others, such as climate-skeptic positions, take a very secondary place in his appeal. In sum, Milei's case fits the usual definition of far right but does not fully fit the definitions of the extreme right (Mudde, 2002), or of the populist radical right as defined in the introduction of this volume.

Milei's rise to power was a surprise, with a weak electoral vehicle, La Libertad Avanza (Liberty Moves Forward, LLA), a coalition formed by the new Libertario (Libertarian) and Unidos por la Libertad y la Dignidad (Unite for Freedom and Dignity) parties, and long-standing small conservative parties such as the Partido Demócrata (Democratic Party) and the Partido Renovador Federal (Federal Renewal Party). The coalition has an enthusiastic if small militant base made up of young libertarians who entered the public scene through demonstrations against restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, conservative groups active since the 2018 and 2020 anti-abortion demonstrations (Vázquez, 2023), as well as small groups defending the military accused of crimes against humanity (Salvi, 2023). These groups form part of the growing grassroots of the political right in Latin America (Mayka & Smith, 2021). Added to this is the significant presence of conservative digital influencers and activists, highly engaged within the digital public sphere, who rose to prominence by disseminating messages and framing narratives linked to Milei beyond traditional media outlets (Kessler et al., 2022). However, the political structure is weak. In the subnational elections that took place in 2023, the candidates supported by Milei obtained poor results. In some cases, Milei allied with small or declining subnational conservative forces. In other cases, he placed on the electoral lists leaders of Peronism or the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) who were marginalized in their parties (Morresi & Ramos, 2023). Certainly, starting in 2024, LLA began to benefit from the defection of PRO leaders who joined its ranks, as well as from the establishment of electoral coalitions with the PRO in some districts. Additionally, in the 2025 midterm elections, a team of political mediators associated with conservative Peronism was set in motion. This team maintained the strategy of creating local candidate lists by incorporating second- and third-tier leaders from traditional parties. None of the strategies implied a centralized control of the party discourse and program, a strategy that the mainstream right – the PRO party – used successfully in its territorial expansion in Argentina (Vommaro, 2023a).

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The reasons for Milei's rise must be looked for elsewhere, especially in the historical context and in the content and form of his ideational strategy. In the following pages I maintain that the rise of Milei is based in the successful strategy of connecting a libertarian discourse against the state – not very popular in Argentina according to most opinion polls – with his criticism of the political elites.[2] The *anticasta* discourse, as well as his positions against the state, placed Milei as a spokesman for the discontent of a section of voters toward the two coalitions that had ruled Argentina in the previous two decades: the center-left Peronist coalition, led by Kirchnerism, and the center-right coalition JxC, led by the PRO. This is consistent with Stefanoni's (2021) argument about the capacity of the global radical right to express social discontent in our time. The discontent grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the restrictions that the government placed on the movement of people and economic activity, and with the prolongation of an economic crisis that began in 2018, during the government of PRO leader Mauricio Macri, and continued to 2023, with rising inflation rates (Oliveros & Vommaro, 2022). It should be added that Milei emerged with the support of a center-right electoral base that was previously channeled by PRO and JxC, but which later showed itself willing to support more openly right-wing options (Gené & Vommaro, 2023).

In the next sections, I proceed as follows. First, I briefly develop the characteristics of the dominant political offer and the socioeconomic situation that led to Milei's rise. Then I present the figure of Milei and his party. Third, I develop his ideational building in relation to his opportunistic strategy of political growth and anti-establishment performance. I also show how this strategy encountered two propitious junctures – the COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged social and economic crisis in Argentina – that allowed him to intersect an anti-establishment discourse with a libertarian program. In order to account for the adjustment of Milei's ideological strategy, I also provide some indications of the positions of Argentine voters in general and Milei voters in particular regarding the issues that the libertarian leader included in his political appeal. I conclude with some final remarks concerning the relationship Milei has maintained with democracy and the mainstream right since coming to power.

2.1 RISE AND DECLINE OF ARGENTINE BI-COALITIONISM

After the 2001–2002 crisis, the Argentine political system was significantly reorganized. The crisis of the UCR and the dissolution of forces that had tried to make their way into Argentine politics in the 1990s from the center left

[2] See, for instance, "Una encuesta revela el mayor peligro para Javier Milei en caso de llegar al balotaje," *El Cronista*, June 12, 2023. www.cronista.com/economia-politica/una-encuesta-revela-el-mayor-peligro-para-javier-milei-en-caso-de-llegar-al-balotaje/

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(Frepaso) and the center right (Acción por la República) created an opportunity for the emergence of new parties and the reorganization of others.

With the arrival of Néstor Kirchner to power in 2003, Peronism, after the neoliberal turn of the 1990s, again made a programmatic shift, this time to the left. Not only did it recover part of its traditional program in favor of the development of the internal market through industrial protection and wage growth, but it also incorporated into its coalition three key sectors in the development of that movement in the years that followed: the popular organizations of the urban poor that had proliferated in the second half of the 1990s and consolidated in the following decade, after establishing a close relationship with the state; the human rights movement, key to the democratization process in the 1980s, which participated in the opposition to Carlos Menem's conservative Peronism in the following decade; and the movements associated with gender demands (feminist and LGBTQ+), which were part of the regional wave of demands for advances in that field. These three sectors gained from the governments of Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) policies that sealed their incorporation into the Peronist coalition. In all three cases, moreover, leaders of these movements held positions on electoral lists and in government offices. Peronism in the 2000s was the Argentine version of the left turn that took place in Latin America (Etchemendy & Garay, 2011).

In the context of the 2001–2002 crisis in Argentina, a new center-right political force was formed. Businessman Mauricio Macri and a small group of long-standing political leaders from conservative parties, as well as UCR and Peronist leaders who had been sidelined from internal politics in their parties of origin, created the PRO party. The party also welcomed newcomers from the business world, foundations, and NGOs close to the economic elites (Vommaro et al., 2015).

The new party initially focused on the subnational level and gained power in the city of Buenos Aires in 2007. It then consolidated organizationally and programmatically. The party's strategy involved expanding to other districts of the country, tightly controlled by the party's dominant coalition. It also extended a network of close-to-the-party organizations, such as foundations that recruited businessmen and upper-middle sectors in elite universities (Vommaro, 2023a).

However, it wasn't until 2015, when the party established JxC, a coalition with the weakened UCR, that it became competitive at the national level. In that same year, the party won the presidency, making it the first center-right party to come to power through electoral means in Argentina. The party's moderate economic program and lack of clear cultural conservatism were among the factors that contributed to its success (Vommaro, 2023a).

The center-left Peronism, on the one hand, and the center-right JxC coalition, on the other, organized the electoral competition in the following years. They achieved important activist support and a significant national electoral reach: together they captured between 60 percent (with Peronism divided in the

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2017 legislative elections) and almost 90 percent (with Peronism united in the 2019 presidential elections) of the votes in successive elections from 2015 to 2021. However, these coalitions had feet of clay: the economic performance of the governments of both coalitions was poor, particularly after the end of the commodities boom. Macri's government (2015–2019), despite its promise of pro-market economic rationality, only intensified most of the inherited macroeconomic problems. His successor, the Peronist Alberto Fernández (2019–2023), performed even more poorly, due to the external indebtedness incurred by his predecessor, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the deterioration of the international context (Oliveros & Vommaro, 2022). The result, in one case, was a failed market-oriented reformism and, in the other, a Peronism that, for the first time in its history since 1974–1975, was unable to offer society either political and social order or consumption capacity.

Since 2011, GDP in Argentina has had little significant growth and, after reaching its peak in millions of constant pesos (base 2004) in 2015, it began a slow decline in some years and accelerated in others, especially during the financial crisis of 2018 and during the pandemic of 2020. Thus, GDP in 2022 was, in millions of constant pesos, lower than seven years earlier. Likewise, starting in 2014, a cycle of accelerating inflation began, which had its first peak above 50 points in the last year of Macri's government (53.9%), reaching 94.8 percent in 2022 and over 200 percent in 2023. Income poverty, accordingly, rose from 30.3 percent in 2016 to 39.2 percent in 2022 and, although unemployment did not grow significantly, jobs created between 2012 and 2023 were located mostly in the self-employed, formal, and informal sectors.[3]

Argentina arrived at the 2023 presidential elections with an economy in crisis and a society in disarray due to high inflation. Far from being able to respond to these challenges, the two main coalitions were embroiled in a strong internal dispute: Peronism, due to its inability to coordinate between the different factions reunified in 2019; JxC, due to its difficulties in dealing with the internal dispute between the candidates for Macri's succession.

2.2 FROM TELEVISION TO THE ELECTORAL ARENA: MILEI'S METEORIC RISE

Milei is an economist and libertarian influencer who gained popularity in political variety shows on television, starting in 2018. His intense media exposure since then allowed him to establish a relationship of relative closeness with depoliticized audiences. Their radical positions on economic matters, his histrionics and aggressiveness, and his connection with mass audiences became marks of his public behavior, which constitutes what I call an anti-establishment performance capable of transferring the anti-establishment

[3] All data are from the Argentine National Institute of Statistics and Census (Indec).

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TABLE 2.1 *LLA election performances (national level)*

	2021 legislative elections	2023 primaries	2023 first round	2023 second round
LLA	5.55% (17.03% in the city of Buenos Aires)	29.86%	29.99%	55.65%

Source: Dirección Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Directorate).

discourse to the level of a corporal truth. With this style, unlike the previous Argentine extreme right (McGee Deutsch, 1999), Milei managed to transcend the audience of the elites. In fact, Milei comes from a middle-class home and is linked to popular culture: he was a goalkeeper in a soccer club, he had a rock band, and, since his appearance on television variety shows, he has had affairs with a popular singer and, later, with an impersonator of celebrities and politicians.[4] In 2018, he transformed an economics column into a cable television show, called "El consultorio de Milei" (Milei's office), and into a play directed by a well-known comedian and director. He toured this play around Argentina's summer resorts in 2019.

Milei competed for the first time in the 2021 midterm elections in the city of Buenos Aires and obtained third place with 17 percent of the votes (see Table 2.1). Since then, LLA has been the third force at the local level and began its expansion at the national level, threatening the bi-coalitional structure of electoral competition that had existed for almost a decade in Argentina (Oliveros & Vommaro, 2022). Convinced of the power of that direct contact with the public, the power of a "celebrity" (West & Orman, 2002), Milei chose not to invest in building a political organization, even with the prospect of running in the 2023 presidential election. Instead, he launched a personal vehicle that maintained an aggressive communication strategy, run by his sister, a handful of young digital activists, and specialists in the management of social media. To build electoral lists at the subnational level, instead of promoting the formation of local support committees, a few second-line political brokers negotiated the establishment of a national coverage for LLA with local conservative leaders or with leaders marginalized by the traditional parties (González, 2023). The weakness of this structure was demonstrated by its poor performance in the 2023 elections for provincial governor. At the end of the round of

[4] On the website of LLA, he presents himself both as a son of the middle class and as an expert economist, with a history of success and self-improvement: "I am the son of working-class parents, my father was a bus driver and my mother was a housewife [...] when I was young, I dabbled in soccer and music, but my true vocation was still waiting for me. After the hyperinflation of 1989 I decided to study economics to understand the monetary and social phenomenon that affected Argentina [...] I am the author of fifty-two academic articles, sixteen books and more than five hundred articles in the print media" (see https://lalibertadavanza.com.ar/).

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provincial elections, despite Milei's ever-increasing popularity and voting intentions, LLA did not win a single governorship.

Unlike Trump, who was a long-time businessman and managed to be nominated by the Republican party, and Jair Bolsonaro, who had been a federal deputy for the state of Rio de Janeiro between 1991 and 2018 and had the support of a good part of the armed forces and the evangelical churches (see Chapter 3 in this volume), Milei is a personalistic leader with a weak organization and very few political cadres.

A series of militant groups of different types began to coalesce around his leadership. These groups appeared on the scene in Milei's various campaign events, and occupied the public space at the inauguration ceremony of the new president. About 35,000 people attended to listen to Milei's speech and showed their enthusiasm for the arrival to power of a leader whose main resource is his public performance. Among those present was a sample of Milei's support base, in line with what studies are beginning to show about the right-wing grassroots in Latin America (Mayka & Smith, 2021): small conservative anti-abortion groups (*pañuelos celestes*, light-blue scarfs), defenders of the military associated with the authoritarian past, young libertarians, and politically unaffiliated families, whose support for Milei is based on disenchantment and anger against the established political elites.[5] Likewise, a very active and well-organized group of conservative influencers and activists managed to coordinate the dissemination of messages and framing associated with Milei.

The context of Milei's emergence offered a propitious opportunity structure for his programmatic proposal and for his public performance. At the same time, JxC and the PRO had left two important legacies that favored a radical right-wing appeal: first, after the failure of Macri's administration, a current had grown inside the PRO that promoted radicalization of the program and discourse (Gené & Vommaro, 2023); second, the JxC structure had organized and channeled the expansion of voters who identified with right-wing positions on both economic and security issues, which largely explains why JxC voters overwhelmingly supported Milei in the second round of the 2023 election (Calvo et al., 2024; Kessler et al., 2025).

In the following section I deal with the programmatic strategy and its interaction with this situation that favored Milei's surprising rise.

2.3 AN OPPORTUNISTIC FAR-RIGHT PROJECT

At Milei's inauguration ceremony, his speech had foundational components: "Today a new era begins in Argentina. Today we end a long and sad history of decadence and decline and we begin the road to the reconstruction of our

[5] S. Morresi, E. Saferstein, P. Semán, M. Vázquez, M. Vicente, and N. Welschinger, "El pueblo mileísta," *Anfibia*, December 13, 2023. www.revistaanfibia.com/el-pueblo-mileista/

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country. Argentines, in a resounding manner, have expressed a will for change that has no return. There is no turning back." And it was almost exclusively based on a gloomy economic diagnosis supporting a proposed shock economic program: "The conclusion is that there is no alternative to austerity and there is no alternative to shock. Naturally, this will have a negative impact on the level of activity, employment, real wages, the number of poor and indigent [...] this is the last straw to begin the reconstruction of Argentina." A good part of his followers applauded passages of Milei's speech where a severe austerity program with negative social consequences was announced. T-shirts with the inscription "No hay plata" (There is no money) were sold in the Congress square. Milei's supporters wore them proudly. In his speech, Milei stated that there was no alternative, or rather that, "in the alternative case, the progressive mushy proposal, whose only source of financing is the issuance of money, will lead to a hyperinflation that will take the country to the worst crisis in its history." At the same time, he promised that the austerity measures would affect the public sector and not the private sector, in an imprecise formula that echoed one of his main campaigns claiming: "the austerity program will be paid by *la casta*." The speech ended with appeals to God and with the Argentine libertarians' battle cry: "Viva la libertad, carajo!" (Long live damn liberty!).

Milei's anti-establishment performance is based on an ideational strategy with two central and permanent elements, to which other elements mobilized opportunistically must be added. The first is a libertarian discourse with a strong anti-state bias and explicit theoretical references to the founding fathers of the Austrian School of Economics. From his first interventions in the media, Milei defined himself as a short-term "minarchist" – that is, an advocate of a minimal state in charge of only security and justice. In the long term, on the other hand, he claimed to support anarcho-capitalism, which implies the elimination of the state. During an interview on a political television program, Diario Popular, in July 2018 he stated:

> The State is taxing you to death all year long and ... what does it tell you that it gives you – security? The country is a bloodbath. It tells you it gives you education and we are in the seventh place in the Pisa [Program for International Student Assessment] tests in Latin America after being the first country to eliminate illiteracy. Health? 75% [of the population] in a sanitary emergency. Roads? Not even Superman dares to drive in [...] But yes, we have rich politicians.[6]

In 2021, the criticism of the state found an advertising image in line with Milei's anti-establishment performance: the chainsaw. The chainsaw embodies anti-establishment rage in a tool for the destruction of the "privileges" of those who live at the expense of the state. In the campaign for the legislative elections of

[6] Diario Popular, "Milei, recargadísimo: 'El Papa Francisco es nefasto y es comunista,'" July 5, 2018. www.diariopopular.com.ar/economia/milei-recargadisimo-el-papafrancisco-es-nefasto-y-comunista-n357943, p. 6.

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that year, Milei presented a libertarian plan of radical pro-market reforms called the "chainsaw plan," which would be the platform of his presidential candidacy. It included the total elimination of public works, the flexibilization of the labor market, and charging fees for attending public universities.[7] According to Milei, in thirty-five years Argentina would again become a power – a nod to Donald Trump' slogan: "Make America Great Again." It was argued that for this plan to work it was necessary to continue the "cultural battle," not defined in relation to cultural issues (abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, etc.), but in an anti-establishment version: as part of a "moral revolution" against the "parasitic, slutty, useless political caste that is sinking this country."[8]

Drastic cuts in public spending as a form of restorative justice against the privileges of the political establishment shaped most of the government's positions on different agendas and has been the most systematic and permanent aspect of its program. In fact, according to research, the anti-state rhetoric is the common ground for Milei's voters. (Gené et al., 2024; Nazareno & Brusco, 2023).

The second permanent component of his strategy is the anti-establishment dimension: a Manichean discourse –accompanied by a physical performance – that accuses the political elites of being largely responsible for the country's problems, proposing their displacement as the solution. In the same way as in the economic field, criticism of the political elites allowed him to gain a greater audience when social discontent grew with the prolonged social and political crisis experienced by Argentina from 2018 (Murillo & Oliveros, 2024). Coinciding with the 2021 midterm elections, Milei began to systematically use the idea of a political caste, as suggested to him by a political consultant, imitating the experience of the Italian Five Star movement (González, 2023), although the term had also been used by the leftist party Podemos in Spain. Before the stabilization of the "anti-casta" discourse, Milei had already used this term sporadically, to criticize the political class through libertarian arguments. In 2016, in a column published in a digital newspaper, he argued that Trump's triumph in the US elections implied a defeat of the "*casta* that constitutes the political corporation,"[9] (para. 1), which he defined as "parasites" (para. 3). The following year, in the conservative newspaper *La Nación*, Milei published a column explaining libertarian thought in which he argued that "state collection" is theft carried out by the only authority empowered to obtain its revenues through coercion: the government. This explains, in his

[7] La Libertad Avanza, "Bases de acción política y Plataforma electoral nacional," Dirección Nacional Electoral, 2023. www.electoral.gob.ar/nuevo/paginas/pdf/plataformas/2023/PASO/JUJUY%2079%20PARTIDO%20RENOVADOR%20FEDERAL%20PLATAFORMA%20LA%20LIBERTAD%20AVANZA.pdf

[8] Eltrece, "Milei: 'Daremos fin a la casta política parasitaria, chorra, inútil que hunde a este país'" [Video], August 14, 2023. www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1NL3yrCClI

[9] J. Milei, "Trump y la derrota de la corporación política," Infobae, November 11, 2016. www.infobae.com/opinion/2016/11/11/trump-y-la-derrota-de-la-corporacionpolitica/

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view, the creation of a "parasitic *casta*."[10] As his public awareness grew, Milei accentuated the deployment of this anti-establishment discourse in his public appearances, with aggressive speeches and aimed at the political elites, embodied in expressions such as "You may see the SHITS of politicians fighting hard but they will always agree on one thing instantly: raise taxes on us. LITTLE SHITS LOWER PUBLIC SPENDING THEIR FUCKING MOTHERFUCKERS. THEY ARE SHIT. LONG LIVE LIBERTY DAMNED!"[11]

In this vein, one of Milei's 2021 campaign ads said: "the political class always puts itself ahead of you [...] You come first."[12] He also announced that if he was elected he would work pro bono. Fulfilling his promise, in January 2022 he staged an *anti-casta* show that consisted in donating his allowance as national deputy in a raffle among those who signed up to it. The first raffle was held in Mar del Plata, Argentina's main seaside resort city, during the summer vacation period. It was replicated on his social media and allowed him to reach a million followers on his Instagram account. Although these performances did not include direct attacks on representative democracy, they were disloyal to representatives and always advanced the idea that all money destined to representative institutions was a form of theft. At this point, anti-state libertarianism became a kind of populism against the institutions of representative democracy. Over time, moreover, he began to use a term to refer to citizens as *argentinos de bien*, a formula that reinforced the binary division of society.

Why did the COVID-19 pandemic become a political opportunity for Milei's ideological stance, as well as for making libertarian discourse a popular mode of expression of the discontent that proliferated among voters? First, because, especially during the first stage of restrictions, JxC leaders cooperated with the Peronist administration, leaving a vacancy for the expression of discontent against the government-imposed restrictions on the movement of people and commercial activity. As is well known, the growth tactic of radical right-wingers – both in the digital public sphere and in political competition in general – is largely based on occupying the space left vacant by moderate mainstream right-wingers (Borges et al., 2024; Madariaga & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2020). Second, because the discontent during the pandemic had as its main target the state, which took on an unusually central role in regulating people's daily lives, and which was perceived by some as responsible for the

[10] J. Milei, "Por qué, para los libertarios el Estado no debería existir," *La Nación*, December 17, 2017. www.lanacion.com.ar/economia/por-que-para-los-libertarios-el-estado-no-deberiaexistir-nid2091976/

[11] J. Milei, [@Jmilei], "Podrás ver a las MIERDAS de los políticos pelear fuertemente pero siempre se pondrán de acuerdo en una sola cosa" [Tuit]. Twitter, October 17, 2018. https://twitter.com/JMilei/status/1052563795049177088

[12] J. Milei, "La clase política se pone siempre por delante tuyo... Hoy nosotros venimos a proponerte una nueva consiga: ¡Primero estás vos!" Facebook, September 3, 2021. www.facebook.com/watch/?v=433204853021837 7

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negative economic and social consequences of the pandemic (Balsa, 2024; Semán, 2023). This was especially true among young people, a segment where discontent proliferated and which Milei managed to penetrate with particular intensity (Nazareno & Brusco, 2023; Vázquez, 2023). In this context, the "lion" logo associated with the figure of Milei was born. It symbolized fury, but also fierceness. It gave back to his followers an image of strength in contexts in which the crisis made them particularly vulnerable. To the image of the lion, Milei added a slogan that went in the same direction: "I do not come to lead lambs, but to awaken lions."[13] A well-coordinated group of conservative digital activists and influencers produced images and disseminated narratives and messages that helped spread the idea that Milei was the great challenger of the political establishment.

In other central issues of the public agenda and of the program of the far right, Milei displayed unpredictable – opportunistic – behavior, showing pragmatism in his public appeal. The debate around the legalization of abortion had a high profile in Argentina between 2018 and 2020. Milei chose to expose himself publicly on the issue only when he considered that there was an opportunity for gain. In a first stage of activity in traditional and digital media (2016–2018), cultural issues were not among the main topics of his discourse. While sexual allusions to criticize politicians or the state were frequent, the open debate on abortion and gender issues, such as inclusive language, were not seen as relevant.[14] In fact, in a newspaper article Milei defined libertarianism as a person with "no moral hang-ups," who "doesn't mess with who you trade with or who you get into bed with."[15]

From 2018 Milei began to position himself on gender and LGBTQ+ issues. In various interventions he took a position against inclusive language and the legalization of abortion. That same year, President Macri proposed that Congress deal with a Law on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (IVE, in Spanish). It was the first time the right to abortion was examined in Congress. Although the PRO did not support the measure in a unified way, the fact of promoting the debate caused a part of the conservative constituency to distance itself from the party. Social mobilization for and against the law increased during the first half of 2018. The pro-abortion movement consisted of a broad coalition of social movements that, following the National Women's

[13] Milei used this expression for the first time at the launch of his campaign in the 2021 legislative elections. See "Milei hizo ruido en Plaza Holanda: 'No vengo a guiar corderos, vengo a despertar leones,'" *Perfil*, August 7, 2021.

[14] Among other expressions in poor taste, there are the tweets in which Milei compared politicians to pedophiles, for example: "The political corporation is more dangerous for capital than an army of pedophiles with withdrawal syndrome in a kindergarten" (June 28, 2017. https://twitter.com/JMilei/status/879983444419375104).

[15] J. Milei, "Por qué, para los libertarios el Estado no debería existir," *La Nación*, December 17, 2017. www.lanacion.com.ar/economia/por-que-para-los-libertarios-el-estado-no-deberiaexistir-nid2091976/

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Conference in 2003, formed the Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito (National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe, and Free Abortion), established in 2005. The movement grew in terms of social support; the Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) movement against violence toward women was launched in 2015. Over the years, activists managed to influence most of the parties represented in Congress, and by 2018 they had built a multiparty coalition in favor of the IVE (Lopreite, 2023). The bill was approved in the Chamber of Deputies in June 2018 (129 votes in favor, 125 against), but rejected in the Senate in August (38 senators against, 31 in favor).

During those months, Milei maintained a position of open opposition to abortion, but his public interventions in the matter were scarce and were limited to answering questions when interviewed. In fact, there is no record that he participated in the marches called by "pro-life" groups during 2018 parliamentary debates. However, coinciding with the fact that the conservative mobilization against abortion lacked political representation, after that juncture moral issues began to occupy more space in Milei's discourse. In 2019 he began to respond to accusations that he was violent and offensive, claiming lack of political correctness. In turn, he increased the sharing of videos and quotes from conservative influencers. Imitating them, he adopted a more direct discourse against "gender ideology," "abortionists," and gender identity, and shared offensive political jokes about the LGBTQ+ community. The publications in which he aired his point of view through quotes from his public appearances were the ones with the highest number of "likes." At the end of 2020, during the Peronist government of Alberto Fernández, the IVE was again discussed in Congress. On this occasion, Milei took a more active position. He participated in the International Congress "Hope and Life" organized by Provida Latam between December 9 and 11 of that year; he denounced the JxC deputies who voted in favor of the bill, and shared poems and slogans against the legalization of abortion. In addition, unlike the 2018 vote, this time Milei participated in the calls and marches led by the anti-abortion movement. Finally, for the 2021 elections he recruited as a candidate for deputy a pro-life activist, Victoria Villarruel, who became his running mate in the 2023 presidential election.

The cultural agenda ceased to occupy an important place in their discourse once the conservative mobilization lost strength. As pointed out in Chapter 1 of this volume, cultural backlash is not among the main causes of the rise of the far right in Latin America. In fact, the evidence is against the existence of a cultural backlash at the societal level (Maia et al., 2023). Argentina is not an exception in this regard, as it has experienced a process of secularization in society's positions on cultural issues. As has been shown, since the end of the twentieth century, positions on the main issues on the moral agenda have shifted toward more progressive values (Kessler et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies show the low weight of cultural issues among the reasons for voting for Milei in 2023, as well as the fact that a large proportion of these voters, although more

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conservative than Kirchnerist Peronist voters, are not predominantly supporters of cultural backlash (Calvo et al., 2024; Gené et al., 2024; Nazareno & Brusco, 2023). However, while not standing still, resilient pockets of conservative positions remain (Kessler et al., 2023). These pockets explain why Milei managed to add supporters to his weak organizational structure due to his public support for the anti-abortion movement. The Celeste Party, a small group very active in the creation of iconographies in the 2020 pro-life mobilization, joined Milei's coalition. In short, there is no evidence that conservative positions have had a significant influence on the majority of Milei's voters, but qualitative evidence shows that anti-abortion activism is one of the sources nurturing the support of conservative groups for LLA (Vázquez, 2023), in line with what has been indicated for other Latin American cases (Borges et al., 2024).

Villarruel also brought together other minority but historically active groups on the Argentine right: those associated with the defense of the authoritarian period. Born into a military family involved in the last dictatorship, she is an activist of revisionism regarding state terrorism, which grew from the new impetus given to human rights policy during the years of center-left Peronist governments (Salvi, 2023). Villarruel's importance in Milei's administration declined rapidly due to internal power struggles. Likewise, Milei's voters do not show majority support for the authoritarian past (unlike far-right voters in Chile, as shown in Chapter 5 of this volume). However, the low relevance of the human rights agenda among these voters (who prefer to "leave these issues in the past"), as well as the primacy of a *mano dura* approach to crime and a repressive stance toward social protest by Milei's government, reflects a shift in policies regarding the authoritarian past that should be closely examined (Gené et al., 2024).

Within a *mano dura* general approach to security issues, Milei also followed a trial-and-error strategy in this field. The organizing frame was "you do the crime, you do the time," openly opposed to the non-punitive approach identified with Kirchnerist Peronism.[16] Likewise, following the PRO's support for his candidacy in the second round of the 2023 presidential elections, Milei appointed the JxC presidential candidate, Patricia Bullrich, as minister of security. During Macri's administration, Bullrich had promoted *mano dura* policies, including supporting officers accused of abuse of force, as well as a repressive approach to social protest. This approach guided the Milei government's actions on security policy. However, on specific issues, such as the free carrying of guns, Milei's position was ambiguous and vacillating. During the 2021 campaign, he openly declared himself in favor of the open carrying of guns: "If honest people carried guns, there would be less delinquency [...] Criminals do not care if there is a permit or not, therefore they carry guns.

[16] J. Milei, "El que las hace, las paga" (Excerpt from Milei's speech in the debate during the second round of the presidential elections), YouTube (2023). www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXJQUxl7DMU

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If you say that guns are not allowed [...] you leave them [honest people] misaligned in terms of defense."[17] In 2022, Milei addressed the subject again, after a massacre in the state of Texas, in the United States, and this time he framed his defense of guns in the libertarian ideology: "I am in favor of the free bearing of guns, definitely. As a follower of Gary Becker [US economist], adherent to his theory and empirical evidence, when you lower the cost of an activity and increase the benefit, that activity expands."[18]

At the beginning of the 2023 presidential campaign, however, Milei's position became more ambiguous. His running mate, Villarruel, pointed out that he did not intend for everyone to arm themselves. "We never said that. This is not the Wild West. We want the good citizen to be able to defend himself."[19] Later, already the most voted-for candidate in the primaries, Milei argued that the free carrying of guns was not on the LLA platform, despite the fact that its treatment of the issue was ambiguous, with a proposal to deregulate the legal market and protect the "legitimate and responsible use of weapons by the citizenry."[20] This issue also reveals another strategic trait that Milei shares with other far-right leaders: the proliferation of "trial balloons" in seeking to impact public opinion and reinforcing the disruptive character of these leaders (Forti, 2021). After testing the support that these trial balloons receive, far-right leaders are willing to disavow them in the public sphere if the gains are less than the losses. In this case, qualitative evidence shows that Milei voters are not overwhelmingly in favor of the free carrying of guns, although their positions on security issues are far more punitive than those of Peronist voters (Gené et al., 2024).

Another important issue in radical-right leaders' appeals, migration, is not mentioned in LLA's manifesto for the 2023 presidential elections. When Milei referred to the issue, he did so in economic terms, indicating the need for foreigners to pay for public health and education services, and in terms of crime, promoting the expulsion of foreigners who commit crimes. Once in office, a reform of migration norms that Milei enacted by decree in May 2025, and was widely publicized by the pro-government media, promoted changes in the regulations governing the care of foreigners in the public health system and authorized national universities to charge tuition fees to students

[17] J. Milei, "Si los honestos portasen armas habría menos delincuencia," Ámbito Financiero, November 15, 2021. www.ambito.com/politica/elecciones-2021/javiermilei-si-los-honestos-portasen-armas-habria-menosdelincuencia-n5317518, paras. 3 and 4.

[18] Ambito Financiero, "Javier Milei: 'Estoy a favor de la libre portación de armas,'" May 27, 2022. www.ambito.com/politica/javiermilei/estoy-favor-la-libre-portacion-armas-n5449167, para. 2.

[19] Ambito Financiero, "Compañera de fórmula de Milei reconoció que tiene armas," May 18, 2023. www.ambito.com/politica/companera-formula-milei-reconocio-que-tienearmas-n5726256

[20] La Libertad Avanza, "Bases de acción política y Plataforma electoral nacional," Dirección Nacional Electoral (2023). www.electoral.gob.ar/nuevo/paginas/pdf/plataformas/2023/PASO/JUJUY%2079%20PARTIDO%20RENOVADOR%20FEDERAL%20PLATAFORMA%20LA%20LIBERTAD%20AVANZA.pdf, p. 11.

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without Argentine passports.[21] Meanwhile, xenophobic rhetoric is absent from the official narrative and has so far had little resonance among Milei's voters (Gené et al., 2024).

Finally, on issues with low salience in local public debate, such as climate change, Milei's opportunistic strategy has been, even since becoming president, to address the issue in international forums, advancing his affiliation with the positions of the global far right, but to avoid talking about it in the domestic public sphere. In this vein, at the United Nations Assembly in September 2024, Milei stated that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was "socialist" and announced that Argentina would no longer support it.[22] Then, in January 2025, at the Davos Forum, Milei linked the climate change policies with "wokism" and days later announced that Argentina would leave the World Health Organization, in line with Trump's policy.[23] Argentina's unconditional support for Trump's foreign policy is one of the main ways in which Milei's government expects to maintain the economic support Milei has enjoyed since Trump returned to power, particularly through International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid and even through direct financial aid from the United States to address the country's exchange rate instability, such as that received just before the midterm elections in 2025.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

Milei's victory in the second round of the 2023 presidential election put Argentine politics in shock. At least four elements fueled this. First, Milei's rapid rise broke the organization of the electoral competition between the two hitherto dominant coalitions. Just as Argentina was on track to channel electoral competition in a relatively programmatic manner, the failure of the two coalitions' political economy ultimately undermined this fledgling structure. Second, the new president is a true outsider who came to power with a weak electoral vehicle, without solid organizational resources or support at the subnational level. Milei's victory is also surprising because of the radical nature of his discourse, in both form and content. The combination of libertarian components – radical anti-state positions that had always been marginal in Argentina – with a violent criticism of the political establishment, produced a

[21] M. Centenera, "Milei anuncia una reforma migratoria para agilizar las deportaciones e impulsa el cobro por salud y educación," *El País*, May 15, 2025. https://elpais.com/argentina/2025-05-16/milei-anuncia-una-reforma-migratoria-para-agilizar-las-deportaciones-y-cobrar-por-salud-y-educacion.html

[22] C. Nugent, "Argentina's Javier Milei Denounces UN's 'Socialist' Agenda," *Financial Times*, September 24, 2024. http://ft.com/content/fb7221d4-dcd5-4528-b106-2f034cf59d35?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[23] F. Rivas Molina, "Milei sigue los pasos de Trump y retira a Argentina de la Organización Mundial de la Salud," *El País*, February 5, 2025. https://elpais.com/argentina/2025-02-05/milei-sigue-los-pasos-de-trump-y-retira-a-argentina-de-la-organizacion-mundial-de-la-salud.html

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combination that channeled much of the social discontent, also breaking with the moderation of the right that the PRO had initiated. The fourth surprise of Milei's rise is the geographical and social extension of his vote. The LLA displaced PRO and JxC in their strongholds in the country's productive center, showing that a large portion of mainstream right voters undermined this coalition "from below," while many of its leaders undermined it "from above" by openly supporting Milei's government and, in the case of the PRO, moving forward with the formation of an electoral coalition with LLA in the 2025 mid-term elections. In this sense, Milei represents a continuity but also a renewal of the electoral right in Argentina. Due to its popular features, it also represents a challenge to Peronism, which found itself in difficulties in some of its electoral strongholds, especially in the northwest of the country.

The combination of organizational weakness and programmatic ambition produced a paradox: Milei is the president with the most ambitious economic agenda of the current democratic cycle, yet he has the fewest political resources to implement it. This raises some questions regarding the future of his project. The collaboration between the mainstream right and the far right has so far had clear advantages for Milei's government, which has gained parliamentary support and territorial anchorage at the electoral level. But it is less clear whether the *affectio societatis* is strong enough to endure in less favorable times for LLA.

Milei's fate is largely tied almost exclusively to the economic success or failure of his government. Without the resilience of party building or the establishment of a solid government coalition, it depends on his political expertise to solve the economic Argentine crisis and show results to the sectors that voted for him. So far, its support is growing as the government manages to reduce inflation. The Milei government has shown a combination of pragmatism – tax increases instead of decreases – with orthodox components – drastic reduction of public spending and liberalization of domestic prices. At the same time, non-economic issues were displaced in its agenda, which reduces the risks for democratic coexistence. On the other hand, economic difficulties remain. The end of the crisis that helped Milei rise to power is still uncertain. Milei's voters' trust in him could weaken if the economic situation gets worse, or it could get stronger if people keep focusing their anger on the opposition, which they see as a barrier to libertarian reform. Milei's project was built on previous polarization and stirred up the anti-Kirchnerist Peronism sentiment that JxC had represented. Since coming to power, the president has not moderated his anti-establishment performance, which has kept alive the flame of anger against the political elites, and especially against Peronism, the main opposition. Furthermore, we know from the cases of Brazil and the United States that electoral support for the radical right, once established, can be resilient to failure in government. But we also know that radical-right leaders find it difficult to accept the failure of their projects, especially when these lead to defeats in the electoral arena.

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