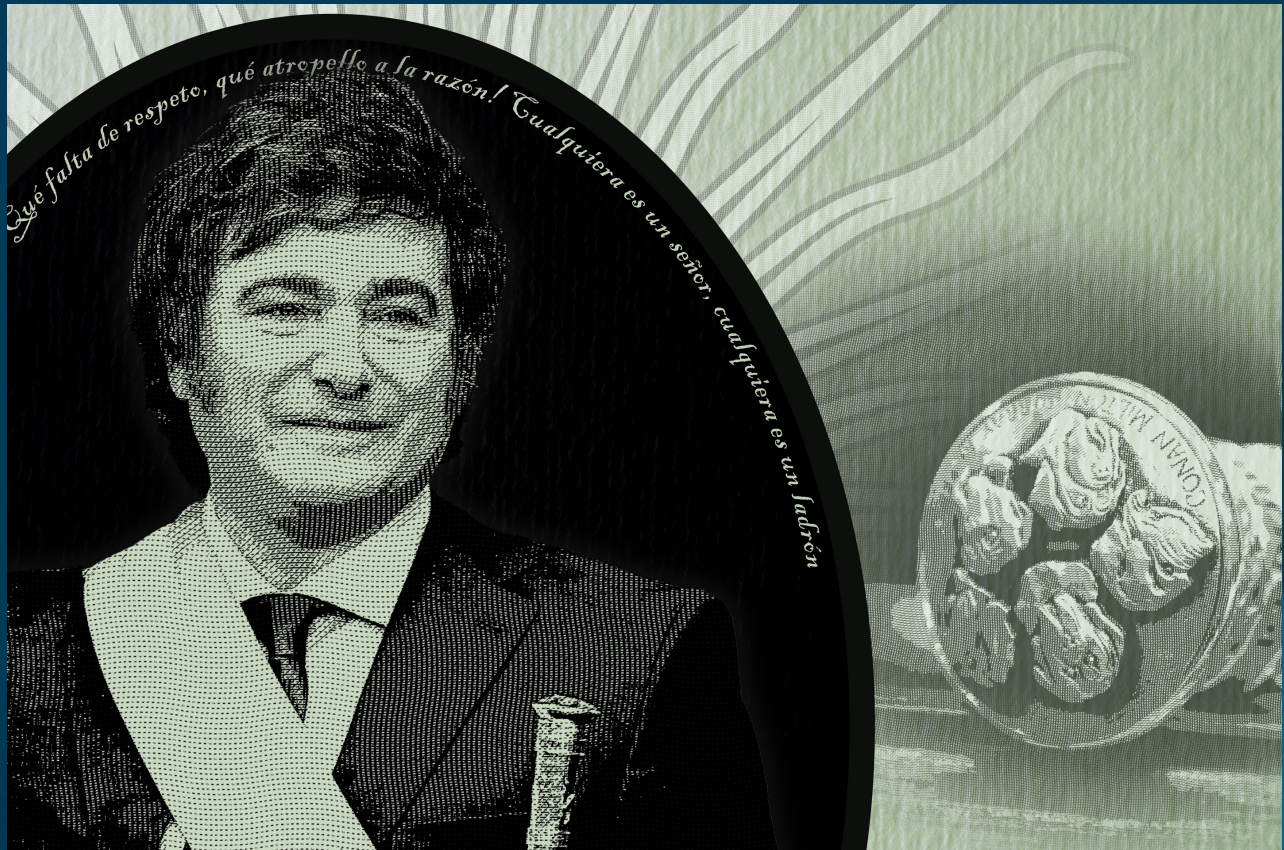


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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

¡Che, Milei!
**Argentina, the Far Right, and the
Politics of anti-Peronism**



Max Zweig

IERES Occasional Papers, no. 20, February 2024
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TransHistFarRight

Transnational History of the Far Right
A Collective Research Project led by Marlene Laruelle

At a time when global political dynamics seem to be moving in favor of illiberal regimes around the world, this research project seeks to fill in some of the blank pages in the contemporary history of the far right, with a particular focus on the transnational dimensions of far-right movements in the broader Europe/Eurasia region.

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On November 19, 2023, Javier Milei, a then one-term congressman representing the City of Buenos Aires, won a surprise victory in the final vote of that country's presidential election. Milei's victory represents a significant signal on behalf of an Argentinean electorate that is at once as reactionary as it is jaded by the Peronist status quo that has prioritized a centrist political philosophy, albeit with left and right camps, that is best understood as a kind of national populism, with some economic redistributive policies, and which has formed the backbone of the country's political culture since the end of World War II. To fully understand the situation in Argentina, several factors must be considered.

First, why did Milei win? And secondly, does Milei's victory signal lasting changes in the Argentinean political landscape, or is it a pang of reactionary catharsis? To analyze the causes of Milei's victory, this paper will look at both supply- and demand-side forces that made Milei's candidacy viable. When it comes to the implications of Milei's presidency, there is little one can do beyond offering conjecture, but by considering some of the demographic factors of Milei's victory it is possible to understand the potential avenues of political development in Argentina.

Milei's victory is the latest example of the global surge in reactionary electoral success that also includes Europeans such as Orbán and Meloni and others from Latin America like Nayib Bukele and Jair Bolsonaro. Behind Milei, however, is an ever-growing network of internationally-connected right-wing powerbrokers. It speaks to their organizing capability and their ability to find talented individuals that Milei made several appearances at American Conservative Union (ACU)-backed Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) events.¹ While the CPAC connection is an important piece of the construction of an Atlanticist reactionary,² it is by no means the only linkage of Milei to a global right-wing alliance, whose center of gravity is located in the United States.

Before we can understand the electoral factors that resulted in Milei's victory over former Minister of the Economy Sergio Massa, and their wider implications, it is necessary to understand who Milei is and what he offers. And while the somewhat sensational reports of his oddities are entertaining and even important, they do not get to the heart of what Milei represents in both Argentinean and international contexts. It could be worrying to the Argentinean electorate that he receives counsel

¹ Nick Burns, "Latin America's 'CPAC Right' Still Has Big Ambitions," *Americas Quarterly*, November 15, 2022, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/latin-americas-cpac-right-still-has-big-ambitions/>.

² The Atlanticist reactionary, or "reactionary Atlanticism," is a growing trend to view Atlantic international relations through a right-wing lens. It is typified by the CPAC phenomenon, which has seen multiple international editions, and by the Foro de Madrid's namesake charter. In this case, the Atlantic world in question should be understood as broadly as possible, with important interplay between North and South. In this new worldview and political strategy, its adherents seek to confront their enemies on strategic, economic, and cultural terms.

from his dead dogs but not worrying enough to prevent his election.³ Milei's antics abound in stories reproduced in North America from his rallies, featuring conspicuous chainsaws brandished as a symbol of all that he would cut from the federal budget,⁴ to his meltdown during an América 24 interview that was widely shared on Twitter.⁵ The more eccentric aspects of Milei's character are therefore a footnote within the context of this paper, which will focus on the social, political, and cultural conditions that made Milei not just a viable candidate, but one who claimed victory with 56% of the vote.⁶

Behind the political theater is a serious political actor who should have always been regarded with seriousness by journalists, commentators, and observers of Argentinean politics and society. It is widely reported that Milei is an outsider by nature of his public service amounting to a single term as a congressman in the Argentinean Congress representing the city of Buenos Aires; however, this is not quite the full picture.

After studying for a bachelor's in economics at the Universidad de Belgrano and two master's degrees at the Universidad Torcuato Di Tella and CEDES/IDES respectively, he went to work as an advisor for Antonio Bussi,⁷ the governor of Tucumán Province in Northwest Argentina. Bussi was the governor of Tucumán from 1995 to 1999, but importantly also during the early years of the under the military dictatorship of Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla, when Bussi oversaw the operations of prison camps which were the sites of detention and torture of enemies of the junta.⁸ Bussi was eventually convicted and sentenced to prison for the 1976 abduction, torture, and murder of Senator Guillermo Vargas Aignasse.⁹ For Milei, working with a criminal associated with the junta not only served as a clever opening career move, but during his recent campaign for president he worked with Bussi's son Ricardo, still based in Tucumán, to extend his reach in that province.

Historical Context: Peronism

In Argentina, the Peronism label offers an almost unthinkable big tent for members of both the left and right ends of the political spectrum to call home. Alberto Fernández represented a return to Peronism from the years of anti-Peronist (but still establishment conservative) leadership under President Mauricio Macri (2015–2019).¹⁰ Milei's foray into presidential politics has been marked by a necessary amount of compromise for both practical domestic reasons as well as the external factors of international relations and business that cannot be ignored, no matter how dearly Milei might

³ Jack Nicas, "Argentina Elects Javier Milei in Victory for Far Right." *The New York Times*, November 19, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/19/world/americas/argentina-electionjavier-milei.html>

⁴ Daniel Politi and David Biller, "A Man, a Plan, a Chainsaw: How a Power Tool Took Center Stage in Argentina's Presidential Race." *AP News*, October 21, 2023 <https://apnews.com/article/mileiargentina-chainsaw-fed35a37c6137b951e4adada3d866436>

⁵ At the time of publication, one such tweet had received 15 million views, 27,000 shares, and 71,000 likes; Juan Francisco Albert, "Javier Milei ha colapsado en directo esta noche en la televisión argentina." Twitter, October 27, 2023 <https://twitter.com/JFranAlbert/status/1717824110292562265>

⁶ Nicas, "Argentina Elects Javier Milei in Victory for Far Right."

⁷ The exact dates of Milei's employment with Antonio Bussi are difficult to track down, but based on Bussi's tenure as governor of Tucumán, it can be assumed that the position was one of Milei's first jobs after graduating during the same period when Bussi was governor (1994–1999).

⁸ Marcela Valente, "Life in Prison for Two Retired Generals." August 28, 2008 Inter Press Service <https://web.archive.org/web/20120305064717/http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=43719>

⁹ Valente, "Life in Prison for Two Retired Generals."

¹⁰ María Victoria Murillo and S. J. Rodrigo Zarazaga "Argentina: Peronism Returns." *Journal of Democracy*, no. 31 (2020) 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0026>

wish to cling to a sense of ideological purity along his “anarcho-capitalist” (to use Milei’s own word) lines.¹¹ Media in North America made generous use of this term, and it is important to understand that, rather than any kind of popular liberatory policy program, anarcho-capitalism simply means an unregulated anarchy for businesses and their proponents, more properly thought of as a form of economic tyranny. Milei has already enacted some policies that hew closely to this vision. In December, he announced labor reforms that saw probationary periods for new workers increase from three months to eight months, the reduction of severance payment requirements, and the ability for businesses to fire striking workers. These policies have been initially blocked by the courts.¹²

Historical memory is important when considering the myriad legacies of Peronism. When Juan Perón was thrown out of office by a civil coup d’état in 1955, the political apparatus he built was suppressed—and yet despite this, Peronism has remained a force within Argentinean politics even without its charismatic leader.¹³ Even the military incorporated elements of Peronism over time, and little by little this created a political environment that would also exert tremendous pressure on the wider political culture of the second half of the 20th century.¹⁴ The result has been that Peronism is impossible to ignore in Argentina, and while it comes and goes, its flexibility gives Peronist candidates tremendous ability to operate laterally within the space of what is still considered Peronism. Its prevalence in Argentina means that it represents the center modalities of Argentinean political life with both left- and right-wing Peronists. Within this paradigm, Milei is representing the radical-right opposition to Peronism.

For Milei, considerations of Peronism are important because he defined himself in an antagonistic role. Widespread dissatisfaction with the Fernández administration helped bring Milei to power, but it may not be enough to keep him there, as we will see. These factors are vital to understanding the reactionary nature of Milei’s political program, and the structures that he must now work with—or against—as he charts a course through the next four years of his presidency. Peronism also has significant bearings on the rhetorical and cultural style he has adopted, given that it was Isabel Perón who preceded the 1976–1983 military junta. Milei clearly has some affinity for the dictatorship of General Videla, exemplified by Milei’s use of the propagandistic term “crimes of excess” in reference to the crimes committed by the Videla dictatorship; his choice of vice president, Victoria Villarruel; as well as other cabinet members with links to far-right nationalism who will be discussed in this article.¹⁵ Milei is himself hostile towards the memory politics that Argentina constructed during its transition to democracy.¹⁶ This is especially apparent when considering his use of rhetoric that describes the so-called Dirty War of Videla’s time as an equal conflict between the dictatorship and

¹¹ CNN Radio Argentina. “Javier Milei: ‘El Dólar No Tiene Techo Porque El Peso No Tiene Piso.’” CNN, October 30, 2021. <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/radio/2021/10/30/javier-milei-el-dolar-no-tiene-techo-porque-el-peso-no-tiene-piso/>.

¹² Associated Press, “Argentine Court Suspends Labor Changes in a blow to President Milei’s economic plan” January 3, 2023 *AP News*, <https://apnews.com/article/argentina-milei-labor-reform-d17fab69daacdecda91a8dc37a1a9782>

¹³ Martha Ruffini, “Políticas de la memoria: El Estado y la construcción identitaria durante los primeros gobiernos electivos: Río Negro, 1955–1976,” 2016. *Boletín americanista*, no. 72 (2016): 109-

¹⁴ Ruffini “Políticas de la memoria: El Estado y la construcción identitaria durante los primeros gobiernos electivos: Río Negro, 1955—1976.”

¹⁵ Luciana Bertoia, “La ‘teoría de los excesos’ del dictador Videla que ahora ha resucitado Milei.” Público.es (news site), October 6, 2023, <https://www.publico.es/internacional/milei-emula-videla-califica-excesos-crimenes-cometidos-militares-dictadura-argentina.html>.

¹⁶ Bertoia, “La ‘teoría de los excesos’ de dictador Videla que ahora ha resucitado Milei.”

its leftist enemies.¹⁷ This revisionism is built on a myth used by the likes of Villarruel to whitewash the dictatorship that overthrew Isabel Perón.

What Milei Offers

While it might be too early to define *mileísmo*, we can balance the promises that he made during the campaign with the political reality he inherited when he moved into the Casa Rosada on December 10, 2023. His initial promises included slashing the budgets of—if not outright eliminating—the ministries of: Tourism and Sport; Culture; Environment and Sustainable Development; Women, Gender, and Diversity; Public Works; Science and Innovation; Labor, Employment, and Social Security; Education; Transportation; Health; and Social Development.¹⁸

For a man who takes inspiration from American economists like Murray Rothbard, who was a proponent of the Austrian school of economics, the prospect of such cuts threatens to do serious damage to the lives of Argentines from the lower social strata, who necessarily will not be able to pay for the services if the ministries listed are cut. Milei's victory lies in a reaction to the material conditions of Argentina's economy and social society, whether out of vindictiveness or a misguided understanding of what the realities of Milei's "shock therapy" entails makes little difference, because the result is the same.¹⁹ It is this end result that makes both Javier Milei the president as well as the wave that swept him into office fundamentally reactionary. Like Rothbard, Milei's idea of proper governance is clearly that of a state that functions on the tightest budget possible because, "nothing good comes out of the public sector."²⁰ In some respects, this mirrors Rothbard's quip in his *Libertarian Manifesto* when he asserted, "If anyone *but* the government proceeded to 'tax,' this would clearly be considered coercion and thinly disguised banditry. Yet the mystical trappings of 'sovereignty' have so veiled the process that only libertarians are prepared to call taxation what it is: legalized and organized theft on a grand scale."²¹ It is fitting, then, though not accurate, that Milei is often hailed as an anarcho-capitalist, a term he has claimed since devouring the writings of Austrian school economists like Rothbard, Ludwig von Mises, and Frederick von Hayek.²² Considering how Rothbard viewed state intervention as inherently perilous because, according to anarcho-capitalist logic, this cannot improve social or political realities for the people affected by the intervention.²³

Milei's economic program, despite its framing as economic anarchy, should be duly understood as the unrestrained ability for business interests and capital to dominate society. This necessarily also

¹⁷ Lautaro Grinspan, "Will Milei Rewrite Argentina's History?" *Foreign Policy*, December 27, 2023.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/14/argentina-milei-dictatorship-junta-memory-human-rights/>

¹⁸ Javier Milei, "¿Qué ministerios planea eliminar Milei si llega a la presidencia?" YouTube, August 14, 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjFqjiB0GWO>

¹⁹ Valentine Hilarie, "Explainer: What does Argentina's 'shock therapy' economic package involve?" *Reuters*.

December 13, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/what-does-argentinasshock-therapy-economic-package-involve-2023-12-13/> <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/what-does-argentinasshock-therapy-economic-package-involve-2023-12-13/>

²⁰ Milei, "¿Qué ministerios planea eliminar Milei si llega a la presidencia?"

²¹ Murray Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto*. Auburn, Alabama, Ludwig von Mises Institute 1973 p. 30 .

https://cdn.mises.org/For%20a%20New%20Liberty%20The%20Libertarian%20Manifesto_3.pdf

²² Pablo Sefanoni, "Javier Milei, el libertario peinado por el mercado," *Revista Anfibia* (website), February 19, 2022, <https://www.revistaanfibia.com/javier-milei-el-libertario-peinado-por-el-mercado/>.

²³ David. L. Prychitko, "Expanding the Anarchist Range: A Critical Reappraisal of Rothbard's Contribution to the Contemporary Theory of Anarchism." *Review of Political Economy* 9, no. 4 (1997): 433–455, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259700000041>

means wholesale disenfranchisement of working-class Argentines. Milei's erosion of working-class power lies in the material and real-world effects of his labor policy, as well as the cultural battles he wages regarding issues such as abortion and historical memory of the junta. Because in this formulation democracy is eroded from the top, ordinary Argentines accordingly have fewer options for recourse to protect their interests and democratic institutions.

Beyond the economic reforms disguised as a free-wheeling business anarchy, Milei comes with serious cultural considerations. Within the scope of cultural issues, there are numerous examples of Milei's positions including gun rights and rollbacks of abortion rights.²⁴

Milei's Cabinet

Observers of Argentina's political development under Milei will also want to watch his cabinet. The highest-profile example in this regard is his vice president, Victoria Villarruel. Villarruel's father was an instrument of repression during the last military junta's rule, which saw him stationed in the Tucumán operational zone, specifically in the field of combatting "subversive crime."²⁵ Naturally, the sins of the father are not the responsibility of his daughter, but rather than work towards reconciliation and justice, Victoria Villarruel has spent her career attempting to whitewash the crimes of the dictatorship.²⁶

In addition to Villarruel, Milei appointed Rodolfo Barra as the *Procurador del Tesoro*.²⁷ Barra was involved with the former neo-Nazi Tacuara Nationalist Movement in his youth and was forced to resign from a ministerial position in 1996 after his involvement was exposed.²⁸ His appointment to the Milei cabinet represents his first ministerial position since 2002. His professional background is in law, and he will be an important player, as his role will include representing the Argentinean government in contested legal matters. This move is seemingly ironic, given the excitement over Milei's previous suggestion that he would convert to Judaism, and Jewish groups in Argentina have condemned the appointment.²⁹ Barra was a lead investigator of unsolved antisemitic bombings

²⁴ Zachariah Sippy, "Why Young People in Argentina Backed Far-Right President-Elect Javier Milei," *The Nation* November 30, 2023, https://www.thenation.com/?post_type=article&p=474361.

²⁵ Luciana Bertoia, "Quién era el padre de Victoria Villarruel: un militar que se jactaba de su role n la repression" *Página 12* September 22, 2023 <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/590312-quien-era-el-padre-de-victoria-villarruel-un-militar-que-se->

²⁶ Mar Centenera "Victoria Villarruel, Javier Milei's running mate who vindicates the dictatorship and opposes abortion and gay marriage." *El País*, September 25, 2023 <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-09-25/victoria-villarruel-javier-mileis-running-mate-who-vindicates-the-dictatorship-and-opposes-abortion-and-gay-marriage.html>

²⁷ Coming up with a direct translation of this position is difficult. It is best to think of the position as an in-house chief legal counsel for the president, along with the duties of a solicitor general, inspector general, and head of the national attorneys' office. The position is organized under the umbrella of the Ministry of Justice, but in a horizontal rather than a subordinate relationship to other cabinet-level officials.

²⁸ José Pablo Ciales, "Javier Milei: The Ultra-Right Libertarian and 'Anarcho-Capitalist' Who Represents Angry Argentina." *El País* English, August 14, 2023. <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-14/javier-milei-the-ultra-right-libertarian-and-anarcho-capitalist-who-represents-angry-argentina.html>.

²⁹ Adam Taylor, "Analysis: Javier Milei's Study of Judaism Sets Him apart from Far-Right Leaders" *Washington Post*, December 14, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/14/milei-judaism-torah-religion-argentina-israel-jewish/>; "Argentina's Milei Appoints Former Neo-Nazi [spelling in original?] as Head of National Top Legal Office," *Haaretz*, December 3, 2023. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-03/ty-article/argentinas-meiei-appoints-former-neo-nazi-as-head-of-national-top-legal-office/0000018c-3023-da74-afce-b5fb4d9d0000>

during the late 1990s, before the scandal broke that revealed his affiliations with the Tacuara group.³⁰ The concerns raised by Jewish Argentineans are justified, and since antisemitism can be used as an organizing principle for far-right political actors, the concern is about both the safety of Jews in Argentina as well as the health of Argentina's democracy.

Based on the preceding examples, it is easy to conclude that there is a certain disdain for the democratic institutions that have been in place since 1984. Milei is content to appoint and work with individuals who have a track record of working to undermine democracy or contest widely-accepted historical analysis of the crimes of the Videla junta—and yet despite this (or perhaps because of it), he has been propelled to the presidency. After years of monetary problems, it is possible that the Argentinean electorate does not see the value in neoliberal economics that is often sold as a kind of proxy for democracy—and, when the contradictions inherent in this political economy become apparent, the linkages between democracy and that economic system.

Milei's International Context

The chants of “Milei, Milei, Milei, Milei” following the old soccer chant went on seemingly endlessly. Was this in Buenos Aires following the election in which this supposedly outside candidate clinched a victory over establishment parties? No. It was in Mexico City, and at a November 2022 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), no less. This was more than a full year before his surprise victory. Milei's victory stands in opposition to the previously held notion of a new “pink tide” in Latin America. An article by Zacharia Sippy in the American news magazine *The Nation* called Milei's victory evidence of “self-loathing,” as voters in Latin America, exemplified by the Milei victory, have abandoned the precepts of “Third World nationalism” in favor of a turn towards the United States.³¹ Sippy's analysis seems like something of an overreaction, especially considering the electoral successes of the left in Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.

While most of the world was initially surprised by the success of Javier Milei in the first round of voting in November 2023, it is quite telling that he received such strong international right-wing support a year before the election. But Milei, whose tirade against socialism at the CPAC gathering in Mexico City was perfectly aligned with a growing cadre of international right-wing actors typified by the Madrid Charter (Carta de Madrid) as this generation's anti-Communist manifesto.³² From security types to economists, the international right looks at South America's enormous mineral deposits with rapacious eyes. For an example of this, we can look to the Heritage Foundation's visiting scholar, Joseph Humire, whose defense of Milei's democratic credentials relied upon the notion that because Milei had taken a harsh stance against leaders such as Xi Jinping and Lula da Silva, he was by default not a threat to democracy.³³ The positioning of security experts like Humire in the Milei camp is a clear indication that for right-wing thinkers that Milei offers an Argentinean balance against countries governed by leftist politicians.

Milei's bombastic flair fits perfectly within the rhetorical style of the American—and increasingly international—reactionary movement. What is more important than his style are his economic policies, which will facilitate the wholesale plunder of Argentina that made him even more appealing

³⁰ *Haaretz*

³¹ Sippy, “Why Young People in Argentina Backed Far-Right President-Elect Javier Milei.”

³² Fundación Disenso, Carta de Madrid. n.d. Accessed January 11, 2024. <https://fundaciondisenso.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CARTA-DE-MADRID-1.pdf>.

³³ Joseph Humire, “Argentina's Javier Milei Is Not a ‘Danger for Democracy,’” Heritage Foundation, November 8, 2023, <https://www.heritage.org/americas/commentary/argentinas-javier-milei-not-danger-democracy>.

likely put forward to enrich the wider economy. Of course, whether or not everyday Argentines will see any of the potential riches of such extractive policies remains doubtful to this author. If the CPAC crowd was looking for a “man in Argentina,” they may have struck lithium with Milei.

It is, however, important, to understand that Milei’s victory takes place within a global community of rising right-wing authoritarians. This is a key factor that is related to the economic distress that makes a candidate like Milei acceptable to some of the Argentinean electorate and preferable, even, to other sections of it. Argentina is not unique in electing a right-wing populist. Even within Latin America, the examples of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and the tremendously popular Nayib Bukele in El Salvador place Milei within the context of an international moment of reaction that can be traced back to the Brexit vote of the summer of 2016. The support for democracy, or democratic institutions, is a contested issue in Latin America, as it is globally, and while the example of Bukele is worrying because of his popularity, Argentina, in recent history, has maintained strong support for democracy.³⁴

Because globalization disrupted traditional social and economic rules, there has been a new set of winners and losers that correspond to these vast changes in the international social-political-cultural landscape. Argentinean firms were unable to compete with the entry of American products in the so-called liberalization wrought by Cold War policies that were part and parcel of the economic reforms of the 1976–1983 dictatorship designed to repress labor and incentivize foreign investment.³⁵ Quite telling in this case, is that the reforms were supported by state-legitimized and perpetrated violence.³⁶ These material changes often provoke reactionary political responses in those left behind in new systems.³⁷ Latin American publics, like those in much of the rest of the world, have shown a tendency to embrace political modes that fall outside their mainstream antecedents when faced with severe economic shocks.³⁸ While the article “Why Does Globalism Fuel Populism?” by Dani Rodrik does not mention any specific Latin American cases, the economies in Latin America warrant some comparison with the rest of the world when considering the international context of the rise of the far right. The temporal distance from the dictatorship combined with the efforts of those like Villarruel may have created a philosophical gap that allows the younger generations with no living memory of the dictatorship to view the anti-democratic policies of Milei as politically as politically salient, considering their lack of experience living under authoritarian rule. It is, therefore, a political issue, that the memory politics of Argentina have created the necessary conditions for someone like Milei to win the presidency. The coming months and years will demonstrate the degree to which he might undermine democratic institutions, but based on the promises he has made, the program Milei champions seems to be one in which capital will be able to dominate Argentinean society. Anarcho-capitalism in the Milei case, as it was for Rothbard, means anarchy only if you can afford it.

Noam Lupu and Elizabeth Zechmeister, LAPOP’s 2021 AmericasBarometer takes the Pulse of Democracy.” *LAPOP*, October 2021. p 41, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2021/2021_LAPOP_AmericasBarometer_2021_Pulse_of_Democracy.pdf.

³⁵ Michel Chossudovsky, “Legitimised Violence and Economic Policy in Argentina,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 12, no. 16 (1977): 631–633.

³⁶ Michel Chossudovsky, “Legitimised Violence and Economic Policy in Argentina,”

³⁷ Dani Rodrik, “Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism,” Cambridge, Mass.:National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper Series (2020),https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/files/dani-rodrik/files/why_does_globalization_fuel_populism.pdf

³⁸ David Doyle, “The Legitimacy of Political Institutions: Explaining Contemporary Populism in Latin America,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 11 (May 2011): 1447–1473.

How Milei Won and His Victory's Signals for Democracy in Argentina

It is undeniable that Milei was carried to victory with the help of the youth vote, which went for him overwhelmingly.³⁹ With nearly 69% of the 16-to-24-year-old vote and 54% of the 25-to-34-year-old vote going to Milei, there is an interesting demographic trend at play, which is to say that the younger generations are more likely to embrace the reactionary cultural and staunchly neoliberal economic positions offered by Milei.⁴⁰

For voters of both Milei and Massa, dissatisfaction with the status quo was a core consideration when it came time to cast their ballots.⁴¹ At this juncture, it is vital to consider the role that negative partisanship likely played a role in Milei's victory. The construction of political identities can occur just as strongly around notions of what someone does not like as it can around what the observer does like.⁴² Anti-status quo protest votes cast for Milei could have accounted for a large portion of his electoral support. According to the Spanish daily *El País*, 97% of Milei voters were unhappy with the performance of the Peronist Fernández administration, 98% of them believed that corruption was increasing, and a staggering 99% of Milei voters believed that crime was on the rise.⁴³ Despite the evidence that negative partisanship is not correlated generally with feelings of antagonism toward democracy or democratic institutions, there is a slight correlation between negative partisans and anti-democratic sentiment when their party holds power.⁴⁴ In Milei's case, we already know that his overwhelmingly young and male voters hold some views that are quite handily categorized as antidemocratic, so this correlation holds.⁴⁵ Additionally, the overtly masculine dynamic of Milei's presidency and the constituency that helped him win the election means that he may try to use

³⁹ Borja Andrino Pérez and Hidalgo Montse, "Mapa | ¿Quién ha votado a Milei? Así son sus apoyos por edad, género o territorio." *El País Argentina*, November 21, 2023. <https://elpais.com/argentina/2023-11-21/mapa-quien-ha-votado-a-milei-asi-son-sus-apoyos-por-edad-genero-o-territorio.html>

⁴⁰ Borja Andrino Pérez and Hidalgo Montse, "Mapa | ¿Quién ha votado a Milei? Así son sus apoyos por edad, género o territorio."

⁴¹ It should be noted that Massa was viewed as the establishment candidate, but somewhat counterintuitively his voters were still dissatisfied by the status quo. It is difficult to know what may have driven someone to vote for Massa despite holding this belief. It could be that those voters still believed in the Peronist animating force of his policies, or it could have been a mistrust of Milei as a formulation of negative partisanship. Either way without further research done on this exact question it is impossible to say exactly why this contradiction was at play within the Massa camp, but nevertheless it was dissatisfaction that drove much of the campaigns of both Massa and Milei.

⁴² Augustina Haime and Francisco Cantú. "Negative Partisanship in Latin America. *Latin American Politics and Society*, no, 64 (2022), 72–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2021.54>

⁴³ Andrino and Hidalgo Pérez, "Mapa: ¿Quién ha votado a Milei? Así son sus apoyos por edad, género o territorio."; The perception that crime was a major problem for Massa's constituency as well, but in that case only 53% responded as such compared to the much higher number in Milei's case. Only 38% of Massa voters believed that there was an increase in corruption compared to the 98% of Milei voters.

⁴⁴ Haime and Cantú, "Negative Partisanship in Latin America."

⁴⁵ According to polls taken by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas ahead of the second-round of the election, 52% of the male electorate preferred Milei compared to only 40.6% of female voters (while around 10% of each demographic were unsure), demonstrating the gulf between men and women during the 2023 election. See

Americas Society/Council of the Americas, "Poll Tracker: Argentina's 2023 Presidential Election–AS/COA," [as-coa.org](https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-argentinas-2023-presidential-election), October 2, 2023. <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-argentinas-2023-presidential-election>.

gender politics to affect social and cultural realities around issues that might otherwise be difficult to challenge.

Reactionary sentiment among young voters (and mostly male within that cohort), along with the broad agreement in Argentinean society that the institutional parties falling under the Peronist label were ineffective, handed the election to Milei. Of course, if Milei and Villarruel and the rest of the recently inaugurated members of the administration get their way it would be one thing, but Milei must now contend with actually running the country. It is easy to make promises on the campaign trail to a rabid cadre of supporters seeking to enact the reactionary fever dream of the Chicago School of economics, but it is quite another thing when one realizes that Milei has almost no room to maneuver given his lack of support in congress. Here it is important to note that while Milei won by a large margin, his party did not perform as well in the congressional election and, accordingly, this will present major challenges to his legislative agenda, a topic that will be covered in greater depth in the following section. It is tempting to talk about how eccentric Milei is, and how genuinely frightening some of the company he keeps can be, but to fully appreciate the potential futures that lie ahead of Argentina we must contend with the fact that coalition-building will need to be a core part of Milei's governing strategy.

The National and International Realities of Milei's Presidency

For Milei, governing Argentina will be an immense challenge, because his party, La Libertad Avanza, only holds eight out of the 72 seats (11.1%) in the Senate, and 38 out of the 257 seats (14.8%) in the Chamber of Deputies. For Milei, this will make many of his more radical policy proposals politically infeasible. Domestically, this has included a reversal of his plans to dollarize the Argentinean economy.⁴⁶ As for his radical domestic policies, Milei will have to govern through a coalition, which while not historically a significant part of Argentinean political culture, has been the norm since at least the Fernández administration in 2015.⁴⁷ This is especially important when considering the Senate, where the provincial leaders have significant sway, and in this case, none of them are fellow members of Milei's Libertad Avanza.

On the international stage, Milei has been much more conciliatory towards left-oriented world leaders such as presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Xi Jinping of China than Milei's campaign rhetoric would lead one to expect. This demonstrates the "talk is cheap" factor of his campaign, in which bellicose rhetoric was a fixture to channel the anger of his voter base; now, he must navigate the very real and high-stakes environment of international affairs. Importantly, one of his policy shifts has been the decision for Argentina to remain a party to the Paris Climate Agreement despite his initial promises to withdraw.⁴⁸ Not only will Argentina remain a member of the Agreement, but it will also retain its commitments to lower emissions by 2050 as set by previous administrations.⁴⁹ This is an important policy to consider, given that much attention has been paid to Milei's pronouncements on climate, especially where the ability to expand or privatize the Argentinean economy is concerned.

⁴⁶ Martin Mühleisen, "Milei Is Backing Away from His Radical Dollarization Idea: What Options Does Argentina Have?" Atlantic Council, November 30, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/milei-is-backing-away-from-his-radical-dollarization-idea-what-options-does-argentina-have/>.

⁴⁷ Murillo and Zarazaga, "Argentina: Peronism Returns."

⁴⁸ Jake Spring, "Argentina Will Stay in Paris Climate Agreement under Milei: Negotiator."

⁴⁹ Spring, "Argentina Will Stay in the Paris Climate Agreement under Milei: Negotiator."

As Milei finds his footing in the international system, both formal and informal institutions will figure into his ability to affect Argentina's national and international political standing. His recent appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, proves that despite his anti-elite rhetoric, Milei exists utterly within the ruling class structures of capital that produces the Davos conference each year. Demonstrating this was Klaus Schwab, who said that Milei was "introduc[ing] a new spirit to Argentina, making Argentina much more related to free enterprise, to entrepreneurial activities, also to bring Argentina back to the rule of law."⁵⁰ Milei's appearance and his own words at Davos leave little room for any other conclusion, that someone like Milei is only possible under a reactionary understanding of economic theory, and that he moves within the highest order of the neoliberalism. Despite his campaign bluster, Milei, without any hint of irony, has been quick to ingratiate himself within elite circles of business and politics at the international level. In turn, he has been openly embraced by these very same elites.

Within this same world of establishment liberal sensibility, Fareed Zakaria recently interviewed Shannon O'Neil, Council on Foreign Relations' (CFR) senior fellow on Latin America.⁵¹ The interview lacked nuance or even thoughtfulness when Zakaria stated that "some people say he's like Bolsonaro who is this kind of a right-wing populist, and then there are people who say 'his a bit like AMLO [Andrés Miguel López Obrador – President of Mexico]' the left-wing populist."⁵² He goes on to offer a misleading explanation of Peronism (in the way of an on-screen note) by calling it a "leftist political movement."⁵³ Zakaria and O'Neil then recognize Milei being welcomed at Davos because of his "smart advice."⁵⁴ In this demonstration the realities of right-wing rule in Argentina are slickly laundered through the credibility of CNN, Zakaria, and the CFR to the American public as being unthreatening, if eccentric. The result is that for Americans, the interview removes the specter of a right-wing authoritarian in a neighboring region as nothing more than a misunderstanding.

Another important example that straddles the international affairs and cultural line, Milei has softened his formerly bellicose rhetoric regarding the current pope, Francis, who previously headed the Jesuit Order in Argentina. Milei called the pope an "imbecile" while campaigning.⁵⁵ After having won, as he has done with so many others, Milei has been quick to reverse his initial position on the pope: Milei's office announced the phone call shared by the two leaders in diplomatic language, and spoke of a call for unity among Argentineans.⁵⁶ During the election, the Catholic Church in Argentina made it clear that it was opposed to Milei at the institutional level.⁵⁷ Just because Milei's interactions with the Catholic Church have been toned down does not necessarily indicate any kind of real

⁵⁰ Javier Milei, "Special Address by Javier Milei, President of Argentina" January 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pfcd0gWNIog>

⁵¹ Fareed Zakaria, "Can Javier Milei fix Argentina's broken Economy | CNN Business" CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/economy/2024/02/03/gps-0204-shannon-oneil-on-argentinas-economy-and-mileis-presidency.cnn> February 3, 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/videos/economy/2024/02/03/gps-0204-shannon-oneil-on-argentinas-economy-and-mileis-presidency.cnn>

⁵² Fareed Zakaria, "Can Javier Milei fix Argentina's broken Economy | CNN Business"

⁵³ Fareed Zakaria, "Can Javier Milei fix Argentina's broken Economy | CNN Business"

⁵⁴ Fareed Zakaria, "Can Javier Milei fix Argentina's broken Economy | CNN Business"

⁵⁵ Phillip Pulella "From 'Imbecile' to 'Your Holiness'—Argentina's Milei Changes Tone on Pope Francis," *Reuters*, November 21, 2023, sec. Americas. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/imbecile-your-holiness-argentinas-milei-changes-tone-pope-francis-2023-11-21/>.

⁵⁶ Pulella "From 'Imbecile' to 'Your Holiness'—Argentina's Milei Changes Tone on Pope Francis."

⁵⁷ Samantha Schmidt, "In Argentina Election, Anti-Milei Movement Includes Catholic Priests," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/11/17/argentinaelection-milei-no-catholic-priests/>

softening of his heartfelt positions, but because the Church is such an important cultural institution in Argentina, he likely feels that he needs to be conciliatory as a pragmatic matter.

Milei's new position regarding the Church is interesting because it recognizes the importance, if not centrality, of the Catholic Church in Argentina. If Milei wants to govern effectively on the cultural level, then some rapprochement with Church authorities becomes necessary. Furthermore, by having the support of the Church in Argentina, it is possible to make the longer-term investments in the cultural space that might open the door to a further undermining of democratic institutions based on the constituencies that the Church can bring to the table. This might not be an explicit concern for Milei, but given the social and cultural sides of his campaign focused on issues such as abortion and anti-Communism, the Catholic Church is an important ally to have in the cultural space.

Milei's failure to execute some of the more radical parts of his agenda may result in the attrition of his supporters and make a future career in politics for Milei difficult. It also means that any sense of *mileísmo* is almost certainly doomed to fail to pick up momentum as a salient force within Argentinean politics. Milei may stand against Peronism, as his predecessor Mauricio Macri (2015–2019) did, but the force of Peronist political culture provides an enormous challenge to any challenger. Peronism is a hegemonic force within the Argentinean political landscape: by combining nationalism, certain redistributive economic policies, and trade unionism, the ideology has a potent ability to engender feelings of camaraderie from diverse political actors that might not find common cause with one another in other countries.⁵⁸ As previously discussed, for Milei, anti-Peronism serves as a benefit because, in this moment of broad dissatisfaction with the performance of the Fernández government, enough of the Argentinean electorate saw it fit to break from Peronism to award Milei the presidency. At the same time, Peronism is a difficult obstacle to overcome precisely because it is a capacious political ideology that allows for future challengers of Milei—from any point on the political spectrum—to rally under the banner of Argentina's most famous political legacy.

The earliest stages of Milei's presidency are taking shape as this paper is being written. What the reports suggest is that a right-wing policy agenda can still exist, but only with significant compromise. The future therefore depends on the reaction of Milei's base. If his supporters assume an attitude of disaffection, then the program of right-wing populism could very well fizzle out. In such an instance, the reactionary impulse would remain while a new right-wing populist would rise to take center stage. On the other hand, it is possible that the same force that won Milei the Casa Rosada could remain a significant factor and undermine Argentinean democracy well into the future.

Despite Milei's party's lack of support in Congress, he still has a significant mandate to enact his preferred economic *à la* Rothbard through his cabinet. Milei's professed enemy is the very apparatus of the state itself, and so in his ideal world, anything that can be privatized, should. He has already eliminated nine government ministries (that is, half of the original 18) and has given the remaining offices the power to privatize public companies under their respective domains.⁵⁹ Milei thus, despite the difficulties he may have with Congress in the coming months and years of his presidency, can still send enormous shockwaves through Argentinean society. He will almost certainly enable predatory investors and industrial giants to pillage the Argentinean economy through his privatization efforts.

⁵⁸ Murillo and Zarazaga. "Argentina: Peronism Returns."

⁵⁹ Centenera, Mar. "Milei anuncia que revisará los contratos públicos y exigirá el 100% de presencialidad de los funcionarios." *El País Argentina*, December 11, 2023. <https://elpais.com/argentina/2023-12-11/javier-milei-arranca-su-mandato-con-la-promesa-de-eliminar-privilegios.html>.

This new reality will make life harder for many Argentines already suffering under the weight of the country's monetary woes.

Conclusion

As it turns out, imagining a libertarian paradise is easier than actually constructing one. Javier Milei has a difficult task ahead of him, and his opening moves as president signal what we can expect for the coming four years of his term in office. This can be broken down into the domestic and international arenas. For the former, we can understand Milei's domestic actions both along economic and cultural lines. The assault he proffers on democracy will occur on both fronts but will hopefully be tempered by the realities of the space within which he has to maneuver politically. Just because Milei has taken the Casa Rosada and finds that he must now act pragmatically, news of broken promises or changed hearts should not be confused for moderation on Milei's part. He will certainly take any opportunity he finds or creates to enact the most extreme version of his policy agenda. It is only a matter of whether his governing reality will ever allow for that opportunity.

In the economic arena, Milei has some ability to craft policy around the institutions that fall under the purview of his cabinet. It will be possible for him to duly begin the process of privatization of enormous swaths of the economy. This will address some of the campaign promises he made but may have lasting effects on the Argentinean public's social well-being, as it will put goods and services out of reach for everyone who cannot afford these necessities-cum-luxuries. Despite the triumphs of the Cold War era, it is a mistake to think that the so-called liberalization of Argentina's economy under Milei's various schemes are an exercise in democracy or liberty. The quality of life for normal Argentines will suffer as a result and economic disenfranchisement will necessarily also correlate with a loss in political power among those classes. We should consider, therefore, Milei's assault on the social safety net established over decades of social-democratic and Peronist reforms as a form of assault on social democracy.

Milei's economic program is, of course, in line with much of the internationalized context of reactionary Atlanticism that has taken hold of the developing alliance of far-right actors from the American Conservative Union all the way through the Danube Institute. Milei only represents the opportunity for such an intellectual and political movement to stop by, as it has previously on the continent, through the presidency of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. The reactionary leaders of the North Atlantic need allies in the South for access to markets and resources that are valuable, and this much has been discussed at conferences of conservative figures hailing from countries such as the United States, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Hungary.

Milei's assault on democracy exists not only as an implicit extension of his economic program of austerity, but also as a cultural artifact that in many ways seems to be a direct import of the reactionary cultural conversations had in the United States as well as neighboring Brazil. Because of Milei's slim majority in Congress, it may be difficult for him to enact real policies that address cultural issues such as abortion or education, but his rhetoric around male anxieties will weaken social norms around the issues he chooses to highlight. In this realm, the most notable aspect of Milei's presidency will likely be the activities of Victoria Villarruel, whose work in rehabilitating the dictatorship of 1976–1983 will be elevated to new prominence and accordingly be afforded new cultural cachet. More than a present danger to democratic institutions, Villarruel represents the long-term interests

of the increasingly anti-democratic tendencies of Argentina's youth. We, therefore, should be hesitant to make any pronouncements or predictions about the distant future of Argentina's democratic health, but it is something to watch and of which we should be wary.

As Milei sets about his dismantling of the Argentinean social state—to the extent that he can, given his lack of support in Congress—the international context around him will continue to evolve and exist. On one hand, this will mean he will necessarily interact with forces he has derided as Communists. If Argentina were to enact full isolationist policies, it would be a disaster akin to the one the country is currently facing, and at any rate, isolationism would be at odds with his professed love of free trade. Some level of cooperation with international forces will be necessary, even if Milei does not like the politics of potential trade partners. At the same time, Milei will have a bevy of right-wing and reactionary allies in North America and Europe (especially pending the outcome of the upcoming elections for the European Parliament), who will be all too willing to take advantage of a new sense of “openness” in Argentina to enrich themselves at the expense of working-class Argentineans. It is impossible to know exactly what awaits Argentina through the next four years of Milei's presidency and beyond, but by situating Argentina's flirtation with the far right in an international context we can establish a clear picture of what is possible, if not what is likely.