

¿Viva la Libertad? A Critical Analysis of Javier Milei's Political Discourse & Rhetoric

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1. Introduction

The election of Javier Gerardo Milei on the 22nd of October 2023 as the President of Argentina represents a major shakeup of the country's political system, after winning with the largest margin since the reestablishment of democracy in Argentina, in 1983¹. Born on the 22nd of October 1970 to a middle-class family in Buenos Aires, Milei studied economics and evolved as a University professor. During the pandemic, he became a regular guest on different TV shows and gained increased popularity through mass media². Consequently, he decided to enter the political arena in 2021 by becoming a National Deputy for the constituency of Buenos Aires with his Party *La Libertad Avanza*. Two years later, he won the second round of the Presidential elections against Peronist candidate Sergio Massa, achieving a 55.69%³ majority and winning in 21 of the country's 24 electoral districts⁴.

The election of Milei represents an important tectonic shift in Argentina's history⁵. The President initially gained notoriety and public attention by taking on the Argentine elite, promising to end interventionist policies⁶. His political views have been described as a significant rupture with how Argentina has been governed in the past⁷. Moreover, Milei became a new political figure who emerged from voter frustration, pledging radical changes to the political and economic status quo⁸.

Therefore, the current debate among pundits about the relevance of this political event has been fierce, acknowledging that this election symbolized a milestone in the country's recent

¹ Messari (2024)

² Palmer (2024)

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1424354/distribution-votes-cast-presidential-elections-argentina/>

⁴ Zilla (2024)

⁵ Rojas (2024)

⁶ Heinisch et al. (2024)

⁷ Messari (2024)

⁸ Belgrano (2023)

political history⁹. First, only the country's founder of populism, Juan Domingo Perón, gained a higher vote share in the 1951 elections¹⁰. Second, Milei is not a traditional politician from one of the political parties that have dominated Argentina's politics since the mid-twentieth century¹¹. Instead, he managed to break the traditional dispute between Peronism and anti-Peronism that divided Argentina's political landscape for decades, positioning himself against both¹².

However, the current academic *état d'art* suffers from a lack of depth in their analysis. As will be described in the next section, the existing literature overwhelmingly attempts to fit the discourse of Milei into existing theoretic labels, preventing it from fully capturing the nuances of the employed rhetoric. By creating various "ideological niches", authors fragment the current academic assessment of Milei's discourse. Therefore, an in-depth analysis detached from any value judgment that solely focuses on the distinct complexities of the President's speeches is currently missing. As a result, this research paper will attempt to answer the following Research Question (RQ):

What are the defining elements of Javier Milei's discourse and rhetoric?

The goal is to conduct an analysis that will focus on content and discourse, considering the success of Javier Milei as a context-related result of the historical and socio-political environment of Argentina. In addition, taking into consideration that scholars have regarded Milei as an 'unclassifiable politician'¹³, this paper will aim to develop the research problem without creating new terminology or struggling to fit the discourse into an existing category, but recognizing the complexity of this specific political subject. The employed methodology will focus on qualitative content and critical discourse analysis, adopting the works of Heinisch et al. (2024), Sendra et al. (2024) and Tarullo et al. (2024) as main sources, together with an array of public speeches by Milei himself.

Hence, this paper will adopt the following structure. First, an extensive Literature Review of the current state of affairs will expose the results and fragmentation of conclusions

⁹ Messari (2024)

¹⁰ Rojas (2024)

¹¹ Messari, 2024

¹² Belgrano (2023)

¹³ Sendra et al. (2024)

on Milei's political figure and its peculiarities. Second, to understand the rise of Javier Milei, it is crucial to understand Argentina's recent economic history¹⁴. As a result, a complete historical contextualization will be outlined to understand the root causes that conditioned the President's discourse. Third, developing and investigating the research problem will allow us to obtain some fundamental instruments that are key to answering the RQ. Finally, preliminary conclusions will "connect the dots" of the findings, highlighting how the evidence demonstrates how current theoretical labels only partially account for a complete and honest assessment of Milei's views. In addition, suggestions for enhanced methodology and scope, together with a brief exposition of this paper's displayed limitations will offer a prospect for future research on the issue.

2. Literature Review

Investigating the discourse behind the success of Milei represents an important and interesting challenge. In particular, the majority of scholars have conducted extensive analysis trying to categorize the content of Milei's rhetoric by employing various labels.

Belgrano (2023) uses the work of Steven Levitsky "How Democracy Die" as a theoretical basis to label Milei as a *populist*. First, the Argentinian President is described as a messianic leader who boosts the anger and frustration of the population and channels such sentiments against the establishment (*la Casta*). Furthermore, on multiple occasions, he committed to destroying the existing political system: "*For me, the state is an enemy, as the politicians who live off it*"¹⁵. Second, the Party's importance is limited and the political leadership is shaped by overreliance on its leaders. Furthermore, the author identifies the employment of empty signifiers which count as further evidence of populist rhetoric. However, this paper will later demonstrate how the label "populist" can't fully account for the totality of Milei's discourse. In failing to identify the concept of "the people", the rhetoric employed is only partially populist¹⁶.

Similarly, Gwartney et al. (2024) refer to Milei as an *ultra-conservative libertarian*, focusing in particular on the hybrid nature of his political views. They acknowledge the role of Argentina's severe economic problems in making populist rhetoric resonate strongly with

¹⁴ Rojas (2024)

¹⁵ Grainger (2023)

¹⁶ Heinisch et al. (2024)

voters. Although the authors recognize that the President “exemplifies many populist characteristics”, he is said to have the opportunity to exploit the potential of his libertarian agenda. Therefore, to bring lasting benefits to the Argentine economy, Milei needs to “temper his populist rhetoric” and focus on assembling broad support for his bold reforms. Thus, the authors consider the next four years as an “experiment”, suggesting that the President has the opportunity to rescue Argentina from its current crisis. In this case, the economic nature of the paper fails to properly analyze the political discourse employed by Milei, using broad definitions and being explicitly biased in favor of the economic measures that the President has been advocating for since the 2023 elections.

Forti (2024) fits Milei inside the bigger group of *Extreme Right 2.0*, highlighting the role played by social media in catalyzing the high levels of citizen distrust towards traditional political parties and institutions. The author then covers the common core contents exemplified by these politicians including nationalism, criticism of multilateralism and the liberal order, anti-globalism, a defense of conservative values, criticism of multiculturalism, anti-progressivism, anti-intellectualism, not rejecting references to authoritarian regimes of the past. Although some of these characteristics fairly represent the political rhetoric employed by Milei, they possess major shortcomings. For instance, it will be proved how the President incorporates elements of intellectualism, claiming his past as an economist and University professor. Therefore, this attempt to fit Milei inside the broader concept of Extreme Right leaders seems to fall short of its goal.

Furthermore, del Pino Díaz (2024) regards the President’s rhetoric as a notable example of *entrepreneurial populism*. He affirms how Milei’s objective is the construction of a populist ideology based on entrepreneurial elements, positioning the figure of the entrepreneur as the social benefactor and role model to follow. In a perfect Manichean fashion, the President associates politics with corruption, dysfunction, and disorder, while he presents the market as the orderly alternative where effort, intelligence, and courage embody the essence of social heroes. Thus, the aim is to embed in the popular imagination the image of the entrepreneur as a character of social success and the generator of common welfare. The author draws a parallel with other similar politicians such as Berlusconi and Trump. Noteworthy, del Pino Díaz identifies how thinkers like Mises, Hayek, and Rothbard are fundamental to understanding Milei’s discourse. Furthermore, the author cites the successful precedent of Margareth Thatcher

to highlight how the theoretical understanding offered by Rothbard accounts for the full ideological understanding of the first libertarian President in history.

3. Background

To understand how the “black swan” event of the 2023 elections brought President Milei to the presidency, it is fundamental to recap the complex history of Argentina, marked by political upheaval and perpetual economic instability¹⁷.

After the return of democracy (1983) the neoliberal, free-market order of the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America saw the abandonment of state-directed growth policies (ISI model), the commodification of social services, and the deregulation and flexibilization of labor relations¹⁸. Hyperinflation followed in 1985 and again in 1989, with stability only occurring by altering both the maturity and backing of government debt¹⁹. Under Carlos Menem (1989-1999) the economy stagnated, an unpayable foreign debt exploded with unemployment and poverty rising to unprecedented levels, triggering fierce opposition from the civil society (*piqueteros*).

The Argentinian great depression (1998-2002) that followed prompted the largest default announcement by that time in December 2001 together with wide debt restructuring, domestic demand stimulation, and industrial promotion, eventually leading to recovery only by the end of 2002²⁰. Under Nestor Kirchner (2003-2007) first and Cristina Fernandez (2007-2015) later, policies of “chameleonic Peronism” crafted a new model based on consolidating and expanding targeted welfare programs, incorporating informal workers into the formal sector, and restoring collective bargaining. However, institutional abuses such as unaccountable and politically motivated public spending, prompted the emergence of pro-market center-right opposition from the professional-managerial class.

Uniting around *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO), the soccer tycoon Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) reduced commodity tariffs and announced austerity²¹. However, Argentina’s debt

¹⁷ Belgrano (2023); Palmer (2024)

¹⁸ Rojas (2024)

¹⁹ Palmer (2024)

²⁰ Rojas (2024)

²¹ *Ibidem*

jumped from roughly 50% of the gross domestic product to almost 90% of its GDP. With the debt default looming, Macri secured an International Monetary Fund loan of over 50 billion dollars. Nevertheless, poverty and unemployment were at their highest point in over a decade and the President failed to change the main issues of previous administrations, namely the dependence on export revenues. As a result, despite Macri's efforts to stabilize the economy, his policies ultimately left the Argentinian government at the mercy of financing availability, with the strength of the US dollar prompting the withdrawal of FDI from Argentina²².

The return of the Peronist to power with Alberto Fernández (2019-2023) was shaped by further reliance on clientelism, increased debt and additional money printing to sustain expenditures, leading to surging inflation. Poverty engulfed half the population, also suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated debt sustainability and financing difficulties in 2020²³. Therefore, each of the described compilation of economic failures gradually created the background for the last Presidential elections. By 2023 poverty had reached almost unprecedented levels in the country (27 out of 44 million Argentinians), and it had passed from 49.5% of the country's total population in December 2023 to 57.4% in January 2024²⁴. More recently, the latest data regarding inflation scored 193% in October 2024 in comparison with the record-breaking digit of 292.2% in April 2024²⁵.

The Argentinian economy has hit a definitive deadlock due to the political class's inability to secure economic stability. As a result, in October 2023 the dissatisfaction of the people had reached a “fever pitch” just in time for the election year²⁶. This distress has driven Argentinians to discomfort, reflecting in the election of a man that the political class does not fully understand²⁷.

²² Palmer (2024)

²³ Rojas (2024)

²⁴ Messari (2024)

²⁵ For an updated economic recap: <https://tradingeconomics.com/argentina/inflation-cpi>

²⁶ Palmer (2024)

²⁷ Belgrano (2023)

4. Development of Research Problem

What is unusual about Milei is that he sees himself as a liberal-libertarian defender of the West against collectivist policies, although being perceived by many as a populist²⁸. Overall, the rhetoric exposed in public speeches and documents oscillates between a neoclassical economist, a statesman and a demagogue wielding a chainsaw at campaign rallies²⁹.

Those who want to use violence or extortion to hinder change, I tell them that they will find a president of firm convictions, who will use all the resources of the state to advance the changes that our country needs. We will not give in, we will not back down, we will not give up, we will move forward with the changes that the country needs . . . [this] is the only way we will be able to get out of the hole they have put us in. (Javier Milei, Inauguration speech, 10 December 2023)

Empirical evidence shows that Milei's discourse contains crucial contradictions, particularly between economic libertarianism having its roots in radical individualism on the one hand and populist rhetoric which should be based on the concept of the "people" on the other³⁰. In particular, he considers the market and not a bottom-up general will to represent and adjust to the different interests of the individuals. As a result, market activity is presented as the purest form of democratic choice, and the market itself is the only system through which individuals can make choices without interference from *la Casta*³¹. The coexistence between the homogeneity of the people and the emphasis on individuals' needs and rights could be seen as incompatible considering that neoliberal rationality is based on dismantling the people as a collective political subject and reinscribing morality to the natural order of the market³². This contrast creates a very particular discourse, a paradoxical one in which individual freedom is

²⁸ As a definition for populism we employ the theoretical work by Mudde (2004) who holds that populism is "an ideology that sees society as ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. Accordingly, populists understand politics as an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people".

²⁹ Heinisch et al. (2024)

³⁰ *Ibidem*

³¹ Sendra et al. (2024)

³² Rossi (2023)

central, but the rhetoric often falls into a binary, *people-versus-elites* conceptualization³³. In addition, thanks to his past as a scholar and economist, he often presents himself as an expert who argues that there are technical solutions to improve citizens' lives. Therefore, it is noteworthy to point out how populist discourses that come with such explicit praise of expert knowledge that exists beyond the will of the people are not so frequent³⁴.

Libertarianism is the unrestricted respect for the life project of others, based on the principle of non-aggression and in defense of the right to life, liberty. . . and property, whose fundamental institutions are private property, markets free from state intervention, free competition, division of labor and social cooperation, where one can only be successful by serving others with better quality goods at a better price, in other words, the successful capitalist entrepreneur is a social benefactor...

(Javier Milei's Davos speech, 7 January 2024)

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the President expresses partially populist discourse, as he fails to define the core concept of "the people". Milei does not define them as homogeneous, nor does he ascribe their unique intention beyond what would be considered a majority preference³⁵. In addition, his rhetoric tends to be more of the typical conservative politician and his political proposals are not designed to be popular or opportunistic³⁶. However, in line with the concept of *performing crisis* expressed by Moffitt (2016), Milei conceptualizes the opposition to *la Casta* as those who collectively suffer under the crisis, for which he blames the Kirchnerists, the Peronist left, and the socialists in general. Not only is Argentina's crisis the central narrative in Milei's discourse but it has been his communication of the crisis that convinced voters to support him as a candidate and his libertarian agenda. In his presentation, the crisis is so existential that only amputation can save it, and only he as an outsider and eccentric has the recipe to restore Argentina to its former greatness. Therefore, the main difference concerning other populist discourses in the region is that Milei's populist rhetoric is directed against the previous populism inherent in the Peronist tradition³⁷.

Because [Sergio Massa] is the continuity of the caste model. . . He is the best expression of the caste. If the caste is the thieving politicians. . . what bigger thieves [are there] than the Kirchnerists?

³³ Heinisch et al. (2024)

³⁴ Sendra et al. (2024)

³⁵ *Ibidem*

³⁶ Heinisch et al. (2024)

³⁷ *Ibidem*

(Javier Milei in an interview with Jaime Bayly, 7 November 2023)

Lastly, evidence shows a marked Manichean vision of politics which crafts a political caste that includes all political parties (except his one) and defines them as thieves, privileged, corrupt, and parasites who use the super-powers of the state to live comfortably at the expense of the citizens³⁸. He also depicts as “heroes” those who struggle against the “evils of Peronism”³⁹. Additionally, strong anti-elite rhetoric is directed against a very specific type of elite: a group of rent-seeking special interests and politicians who share interests in public spending at the expense of taxpayers⁴⁰. Lastly, it is important to highlight how differently from the majority of so-called populist politicians, there was no evidence that he was seeking direct, non-institutionalized support from the masses: his movement was just an electoral platform, not an attempt to radicalize the streets⁴¹.

“ . . . politicians steal from us good Argentines, that is, they steal [people’s] work”.

(Javier Milei presenting his case on the program La Noche de Mirtha, 23 December 2023)

For over a hundred years, politicians have defended a model that only generates poverty, stagnation and misery, a model that considers that citizens are there to serve politics instead of politics serving citizens, a model that considers that the task of a politician is to direct the lives of individuals in all possible areas and spheres, a model that considers the State as a spoil of war to be shared among friends. That model has failed all over the world, but especially in our country.

(Javier Milei, Inauguration speech, 10 December 2023)

Another important point, mainly directed at confuting the point expressed by Forti (2024), is the absence of a nationalist element in Milei’s main discourses⁴². In addition, his rhetoric impressively omits the issue of immigration from its messages, marking an important differentiation from commonly regarded populist rhetoric⁴³. However, the cultural background of the country could play a role in diminishing the relevance of the immigration issue, considering the positive role that it has historically played in Argentina. Accordingly, research proved that Milei did not employ singular rhetoric, but his narratives are constructed according

³⁸ Sendra et al. (2024)

³⁹ Heinisch et al. (2024)

⁴⁰ Sendra et al. (2024)

⁴¹ Heinisch et al. (2024)

⁴² Sendra et al. (2024)

⁴³ Tarullo et al. (2024)

to the contingency in which they take place, according to the political priorities in force⁴⁴. Additionally, the President employed different main features of other right-wing populist leaders, such as patriotic symbols, images of high visual impact and proximity to his followers, mostly young people, which turned out to be crucial for his success⁴⁵.

5. Preliminary Conclusions

The explicit goal of this research paper was to *explore the defining elements of Javier Milei's discourse and rhetoric*. Specifically, the priority was to investigate the content of the President's communication released from any ideological constraint or struggle to fit his multifaceted discourse into existing categories and political labels. The research explicitly wanted to find out if the current academic and media descriptions of Milei's narratives were falling short in exploring the different layers embedded in a broader political dialogue. Furthermore, the research aimed at differentiating these nuances and offering an overview that could work as a "toolbox" for political science practitioners who desired to explore the topic more deeply. In other words, the implicit objective was to seek complexity beyond models and classifications.

Therefore, initial findings point toward a description of Milei's rhetoric different from the broad general understanding of the topic. At the core, it lays an apparent contradiction in terms between populist rhetoric and economic libertarianism. However, a closer look exposes a discourse that functions, crafting a coexisting hybrid political paradigm with rare other examples. Furthermore, it has been proven how Milei's behavior can only be accounted as partially populist, failing to properly conceptualize the core content of "the people". On the other hand, the concept of *la Casta* is widely used as a catch-all term which includes all possible enemies of *La Libertad Avanza* and Argentina. Therefore, of major importance is how context-related the evolution of Milei's discourse is. As explained in Section 2, the root causes that prompted the President's success are to be found in the country's long-lasting political and economic instability, allowing Milei to exploit the overall feeling of crisis and emergency. Lastly, the absence of nationalist remarks, together with the absence of seeking direct support from the masses and criticism against immigration, firmly went against some findings described by the literature and aligned with the initial purpose of investigating complexity.

⁴⁴ Tarullo et al. (2024)

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*

Finally, future research on this topic may decide to broaden the scope of analysis by including more material and qualitative sources. This could be done by differentiating more narrowly the timeframes of the analysis and creating a comparison. A clear limitation is the recent nature of the phenomena, leaving small room for an objective and data-rich assessment of the issue. An interesting evaluation could be done by comparing the promises and campaign rhetoric of Milei before the election and later on, tracking the differences and trends while being forward in his Presidency. This approach could shed light on the behavioral changes of semi-populist leaders once they reach institutional relevant positions. In addition, greater attention should be given to the context of Argentina and its politics, refraining from trying to seek links among other similar politicians around the world but paying more attention to the endogenous causes that created the Milei phenomenon.

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