

# How Javier Milei upset Argentina's political status quo

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**A political tsunami has hit Argentina with far-right libertarian economist Javier Milei winning the largest share of the vote in the [presidential primary elections](#) on Sunday, 13 August. It's no longer far-fetched that Milei could become president; in fact, it now seems the most likely scenario.**

"We are the true opposition," he declared. "We are the only ones who want real change. Because remember: a different Argentina is impossible with the same old ones, who have failed."

The primaries, in which presidential candidates from all parties take part, is seen as a good gauge of the actual election, scheduled for 22 October. Milei's party Freedom Advances (La Libertad Avanza) took 30% of the total vote, while Milei (who had no rival for his party's presidential nomination) won the most votes at an individual level.

The centre-right opposition coalition Together for Change (Juntos Por el Cambio) came second on 28%, with hardline ex-security minister Patricia Bullrich becoming its candidate for president. These two results – Milei's overall victory and Bullrich's victory as nominee – entails a significant advance for the right.

The ruling centre-left coalition Union for the Fatherland (Unión por la Patria) came third on 27%. It was the worst result for Peronism – a movement identified with former president Juan Domingo Perón, whose main banner is social justice – since the return of democracy 40 years ago. Union for the Fatherland's presidential candidate will be the current economy minister Sergio Massa, who won the primary comfortably. But governing took its toll: Union for the Fatherland lost almost half of the votes it won in 2019.

Turnout was under 70% – a low number given that voting is compulsory.

It's unlikely that any of the three candidates – Milei, Bullrich, Massa – will win the presidency in the first round, which requires 45% of the votes (or 40% plus a difference of ten percentage points from the second-placed candidate). But Milei is now the favourite to win the run-off in November.

Milei anchored his campaign on the promise of uprooting the "political caste" and what he sees as its byproducts: a bureaucratic state that cares for those in need. Before he began his victory speech in a packed hotel in downtown Buenos Aires, Milei's excited young supporters chanted: "They all must go – not a single one of them must remain." That slogan, aimed at the country's political parties and their leaders, was last heard on Argentina's streets during the severe economic and political crisis of 2001.

The bipartisan political system born out of that crisis – basically centre-left 'Kirchnerism' based on Néstor Kirchner's presidency in 2003 and his wife Cristina Fernández's two terms (2007-15) followed by the centre-right 'anti-Kirchnerism' of Mauricio Macri, who won in 2015 – has ended with

the emergence of Milei.

Now the country is back in crisis. Inflation is above 100%, 50% of the population does not have secure employment, 40% live in poverty and there's been no growth for more than a decade. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Argentina boasted of being a sort of European island in Latin America; now it increasingly resembles its neighbours.

That longstanding polarisation has been replaced by a more powerful one that pits traditional politics ("the caste" in Milei's words) against the "[indignados](#)" ('outraged').

## **Eccentric libertarian**

An eccentric character, resembling a messy-haired rockstar in looks, Milei was born into a lower middle-class family and had a turbulent childhood. Journalist Juan Luis González [portrays](#) him in his recent biography '*El loco*' ('the madman') as an unstable person who indulges in messianic delusions and communicates with his deceased dog via his sister Karina. In his victory speech on Sunday, he thanked his "four-legged children", who are named after Austrian School economists.

Before becoming a politician, he taught economics at university, worked as a financial adviser for several large companies and was a TV panellist discussing economics. In 2021, he won a seat as a deputy in Buenos Aires city – his only political experience so far.

Milei's supporters are socially diverse and come mainly from the provinces. In Sunday's primaries, Milei and his party won 16 of the country's 24 provinces. In some traditionally Peronist provinces in the south and north, he got more than 40% of the vote, as he also did in the agribusiness-dominated central region, until now a centre-right stronghold. He fared worst in Buenos Aires city and province, respectively Argentina's capital and most populated electoral district, which have long monopolised national politics.

Milei is a libertarian who identifies with the global far right, wants to launch a [referendum](#) about the 2020 legal abortion law and has promised to scrap mandatory sex education, [as openDemocracy explained](#). A [climate crisis denier](#), he proposes a shock economic programme with [dollarisation](#) as the main policy – until recently considered taboo in Argentine politics, but perceived by many voters as the only way to curb inflation.

A negative media campaign, which intensified in recent months in the wake of a series of [financial scandals](#), did not damage him; possibly the opposite, in fact.

With an electorate divided into almost three equal parts, Milei is not far ahead of his rivals, but he has the advantage of momentum from his victory – and they also face more problems.

The centre-right candidate Patricia Bullrich may well lose right-wing votes to Milei. Her dilemma reflects a global trend, with the rise of the far right punishing mainly traditional centre-right parties.

Meanwhile, the ruling party's candidate Sergio Massa carries the burden of being the driver of an economy that was dealt a [severe blow](#) by Sunday's results. After a record interest rate hike, inflation is expected to rise, further exacerbating the economic crisis. The ruling coalition still has a chance of reaching the presidential run-off, but to achieve this it will have to win the left-wing vote.

And all the parties have to appeal to the record ten million voters who didn't cast their ballots on Sunday.

As for Milei, he has to show he's more than the recipient of 'angry votes' and that his [proposals](#) are feasible. The opinion polls, which before the primaries failed to capture the strength of his support, show some [dissent](#) from his own voters for his more radical ideas.

The results of the primaries in the southern province of Santa Cruz, the home and stronghold of centre-left Kirchnerism, are revealing. Milei won the most votes as contender for president. But his Freedom Advances party did not present any candidates, ceding first place to the ruling party – but on only 17% of the vote. More than 60% left this part of their ballot blank. In other words, it was Milei's party or none at all.

**JUAN ELMAN**

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- OpenDemocracy. 17 August 2023:  
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/argentina-presidential-election-primaries-javier-milei-polarisation/>