



Digital Disruption: Milei's Online Path to the Presidency

REPORT

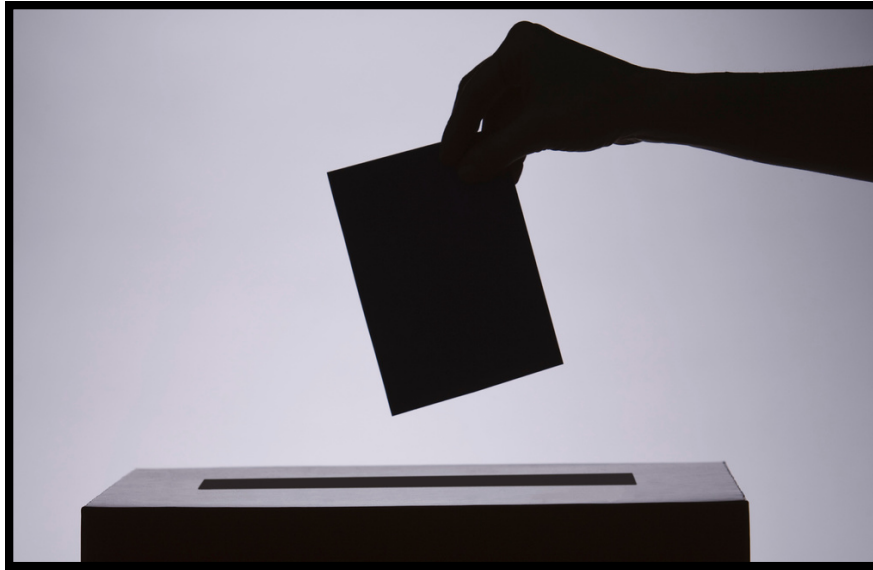
◆ Digital Democracy Institute of the Americas

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Executive Summary

January 10, 2024, marked Javier Milei's first month in office, following an ascent to the presidency underpinned by a paradigm shift in political campaigning, one that illustrates the profound and growing impact of digital media engagement in shaping modern political discourse.

This report analyzes, from an open-source standpoint, the use of humor, memes, and captivating visuals by Javier Milei, his campaign, and some of his most vocal supporters on video-centric platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok in the lead-up to and during the 2023 presidential elections in Argentina.

Though the strategies and ripple effects of Milei's approach extend beyond Argentina, his rise serves as a case study in the effective use of social media to galvanize grassroots support, leveraging his own and user-generated short-form video content to simplify and amplify his political messages. This strategy not only tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of a younger demographic but also spoke to a digitally connected faction of the electorate through their brand of media consumption.

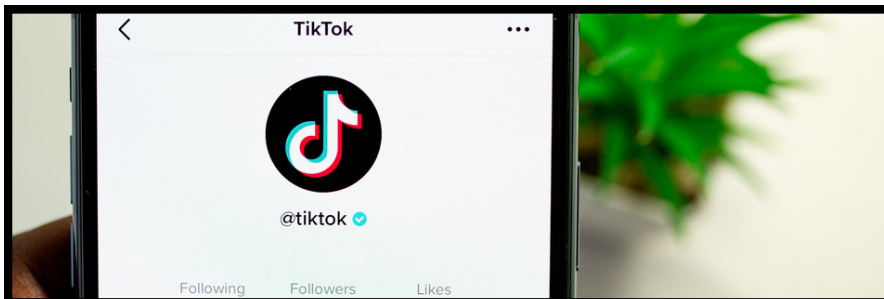
The success of Milei's campaign mirrors the shift in the landscape of popular political engagement in the age of social media, where digital savvy and emotional resonance, often laced with hyper-divisive rhetoric, become key drivers of influence and success.

Milei's triumph in the 2023 presidential elections is not just a testament to his appeal to voters amid a complicated set of economic, social and political realities in a vast country, but also underscores the evolving dynamics of a playbook employed by the likes of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to garner voter engagement in the digital age. This is a strategic communications approach we are likely to see again in multiple 2024 elections in the region, and beyond.



Introduction

From labeling politicians as "parasites" to ascending to Argentina's presidency, Javier Milei's election marked a shift in political and social dynamics we have begun to see in various countries in Latin America. His journey, fueled by a potent blend of populist rhetoric and savvy digital media strategy, exemplifies both a personal triumph and a warning about the landscape of political communication "in the age of TikTok." This transition from a divisive media figure to a national leader underlines the impact of social media, and in particular the video format, on engaging and swaying public opinion – an impact that is still underappreciated by many politicians.



Milei's background in economics laid the foundation for his ascent in politics, yet it was the skillful use of social media by he and his followers that propelled him into the political spotlight. His digital campaign heavily relied on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The populist narratives he championed resonated strongly with an increasingly disillusioned electorate, strained by difficult economic conditions. Milei's political journey is emblematic of a global trend where nationalist and populist leaders use digital media to bypass conventional channels, directly connecting with and mobilizing their supporters while swaying undecided voters. In an effort to understand this trend further, we examined Milei's background and rise to power. We then analyzed how he used social media, in particular short and long-form videos during 2023, to empower and sustain his campaign to victory.



Javier Milei: A Rising Voice

Born on October 22, 1970, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Javier Milei showed an early interest in economics, driven by the hyperinflation in Argentina during the late 1980s. He pursued this interest academically, earning an economics degree from the University of Belgrano and two master's degrees in economics from the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social and Torcuato di Tella University. After graduation, he had several successful stints as an economist, including as chief economist at the investment bank HSBC and as the head of finance for Eduardo Eurnekian, the founder of the Argentine conglomerate Corporación America. This relationship facilitated his entry into the media world as Eurnekian holds financial stakes in and exerts influence over several major media outlets. Notably, Eurnekian founded the Argentine television channel A24, and his nephew, Tomas Eurnekian is a minority stakeholder in the media outlet Infobae America.

Around five years ago, he gained public recognition as an unconventional agent provocateur on Argentina's numerous TV channels, such as LN+ and A24, which spotlight the country's problems and host debates between panelists. Using this experience as his campaign launching pad, Milei's transition into politics began with his election to the Argentine Chamber of Deputies in 2021. Despite a lackluster legislative record (he did not sponsor any bills), his distinctive, combative, and outspoken approach to criticizing Argentina's political elites and government spending lent him credibility as a political figure. He would then leverage this newly won recognition through visual media in a manner that distinguished him from other contenders for the presidency.





Positions, Platform, and Strategy

Javier Milei's entry into Argentine politics represents a significant shift in the nation's political landscape, historically dominated by more moderate center-left and center-right parties. His rise to prominence can be partially attributed to the country's staggering inflation rate of 200% and pervasive poverty, issues the last governments failed to address effectively at scale. His complex political platform encompasses far-right populism, right-wing libertarianism, and ultraconservatism, with a strong focus on economic issues. Milei's emergence on the political stage not only challenged the established order but also signaled an attempt to recalibrate online conversations by redefining the nation's approach to governance, the economy, as well as toward social and even historical issues. This strategy represented a departure from the more cautious and measured tactics often employed in traditional political communications.

Milei's approach to politics involved casting himself as the antagonist to the "parasitic and corrupt caste" that he accused of stealing from citizens. He employed populist rhetoric to engage his supporters, whom he addresses as the "good Argentinians," in opposition to the "political and economic elites that steal and lie to them." He also ventured into riskier gambles by engaging in historical revisionism regarding the number of people killed during Argentina's painful crackdown and murder of left-wing activists, known as the "Dirty War," contesting the commonly cited figure of 30,000 deaths, in favor of a much lower figure – 9,000. In the international sphere, he also forayed into new territory by praising the policies of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher with whom Argentina engaged in a conflict over the disputed Falkland Islands (Las Malvinas) in 1982, in which 650 Argentinians lost their lives.



Javier Milei's campaign strategy received crucial support from consultant Fernando Cerimedo, a veteran advisor to right-wing figures in Brazil and Chile. Cerimedo, who played a significant role in promoting allegations of electoral fraud against Brazil's Lula da Silva, has been described by fact-checking organization Chequeado as the “advisor of the South American Trumpist Right.” In line with this strategy, following the first round of elections, Milei's party representatives submitted a petition to an electoral judge, calling for "legality and transparency" in the election process. They accused members of Argentina's military police, the gendarmerie, of committing "colossal fraud" in the first round and planning to rig the second round. The petition alleged that these agents, responsible for securing the electoral process, tampered with ballot boxes post-voting to artificially increase support for Massa, Milei's center-left opponent. Although these claims lacked evidence, they were widely disseminated by his followers through viral videos and comments on social media.

This not only amplified the message but also expanded Milei's political reach, resonating with both his existing base and attracting new followers. Additionally, Milei's campaign strategy was criticized by the Argentine union of journalists (FOPEA) for instances of abuse and discrimination. This included prohibiting outlets critical of his campaign from visiting his campaign headquarters on the night of the first election and verbal attacks against journalists like reporter Jesica Bossi.

It's conceivable that Javier Milei's strategy of adopting stances that initially appear unpopular or even somewhat treacherous, particularly on issues of diminishing historical significance, was a deliberate tactic to cultivate his image as a forthright and fearless individual, unafraid to face the consequences of his controversial positions. This approach could be seen as an attempt to stand out in the political landscape by embracing bold, often polarizing viewpoints, distinguishing himself from more conventional politicians who often avoid contentious subjects.

Such a method aligns with the broader trend observed in national elections across the Americas, whereby candidates like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have successfully employed similar techniques. These leaders have garnered significant public support by presenting themselves as unapologetic “truth-tellers,” willing to confront established norms and challenge prevailing narratives, despite their frequent use of false or misleading narratives to do so. This tactic seems to strike a chord with certain segments of the electorate, who find this brand of unfiltered, direct communication refreshing and authentic, in contrast to the often cautious and calculated statements of traditional politicians. By embracing this approach, Milei might have aimed to tap into a growing public appetite for political figures who are perceived as genuine and unbound by the constraints of political correctness or traditional diplomatic rhetoric.



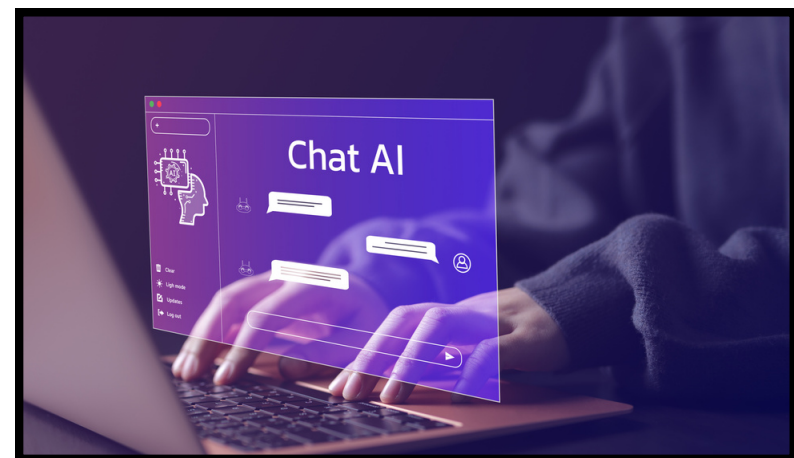


Online Strategy and Election Results

During the 2023 presidential campaign, both campaigns were marked by innovative uses of AI technology. Milei and Sergio Massa embraced generative AI software to create images for their campaigns. Although this utilization of AI technology was innovative, it was primarily employed by both sides to disseminate their own political messaging, or in some ways to spread campaign propaganda, rather than for the deliberate spread of disinformation. Using AI-image generation software such as Stable Diffusion, Massa and Milei's campaigns and supporters crafted images that were favorable to their political stances and campaigns objectives, while simultaneously denigrating the opposition.

One notable instance of this AI-driven strategy involved Massa being cast in various powerful, heroic, or benevolent roles. These ranged from portraying him as a priest, a soldier in war, or as the superhero Spiderman.

These accounts also depicted Milei in negative lights such as the Joker and as a flesh-eating zombie. These images were primarily produced by two social media accounts, kukartificial and iaxlapatria, though they did not explicitly identify as working for the campaign. However, with neither account having a substantial following, their ability to disseminate this content widely was limited. Few posts from either account garnered more than 1,000 likes, indicating that the impact of this content on influencing voters was likely minimal.





Equally, Milei's campaign used AI-generated content. Through his personal X account, he circulated images of Massa. One such instance depicted Massa as the Chinese communist leader, and contrasted that with representations of himself as a more relatable and approachable cartoon lion. Since these were shared directly from his social media account, the ability to amplify the content was much greater. The negative depiction of Massa had over 3 million views, while the positive depiction of Milei as the cartoon lion had over 28 million views. These examples show both candidates used AI generated video and imagery as a creative outlet for their political propaganda.

Aside from innovations in the use of AI, video content seemed to play an important role. Milei leveraged platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, capitalizing on Argentina's high digital engagement—one of the highest in Latin America. This approach was vital in a country where 86% of online users are on Instagram, 70% on YouTube, and 53% on TikTok.

The fragmentation of social media into specific audiences enable politicians like Milei to independently craft specific narratives to targeted users, bypassing traditional media channels and receiving more instantaneous feedback about the resonance of their messaging among the wider population.

In analyzing the videos promoted on social media during Milei's campaign, it becomes evident that both his team and his followers consistently uploaded content characterized by emotive and non-technical language. This strategy seemed to be designed to resonate with individuals disillusioned by establishment politics or those harboring mistrust towards the economic and political elite. He employed potent symbols, such as a chainsaw, to metaphorically represent his intention to implement significant public sector cuts, thereby visually conveying his commitment to drastic policy changes. He also called himself "the Lion" and, on occasion, "el Loco" (the madman).



Milei's success in steering the political discourse was evident in his ability to introduce and popularize narratives on his terms, often focusing on topics that were either poorly understood or considered unorthodox by mainstream standards. Like Trump and Bolsonaro before him, Milei “shocked and awed” with radical and controversial ideas that garnered attention and dominated headlines. Such ideas included his proposition to replace the Argentine peso with the U.S. dollar, something he has since walked back, and his stance on legalizing the sale of organs.

These tactics did not just serve to differentiate Milei from traditional politicians; they also allowed him to tap into a vein of public sentiment that felt neglected or unrepresented by the usual political discourse. By utilizing straightforward, direct language, he cultivated an image of a candid and bold leader, unafraid to “confront” taboo subjects or propose unconventional solutions.



This approach may have been particularly effective on social media platforms, where short, straightforward messages tend to have more impact and are more likely to be shared, further amplifying his reach and influence.

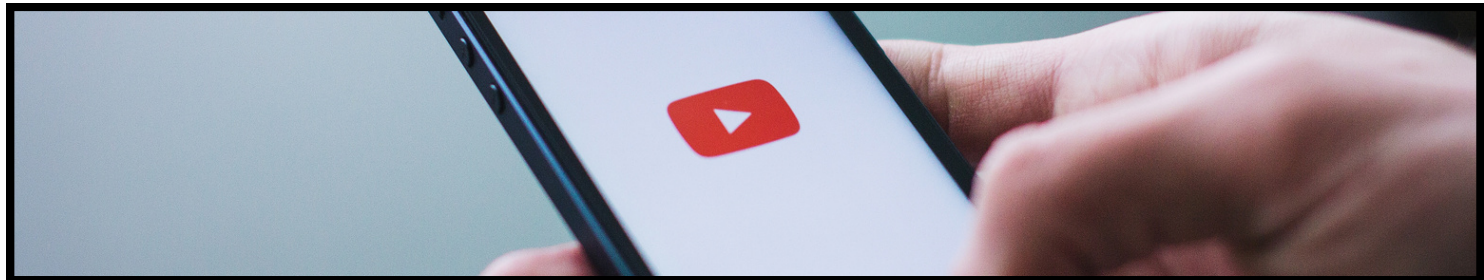
Prior to the first round of elections, Milei had only visited thirteen of twenty-four provinces yet he won in half of the provinces he did not visit, including in major provinces like Córdoba, indicating that his digital presence had successfully penetrated even those areas he physically did not reach. Notably, Milei was particularly popular among younger voters, garnering around 70% support from those under 24. His campaign resonated more with men but also won a majority of women voters. Key issues driving his support included a preference for reduced government spending and relaxed gun laws, contrasting sharply with his opponent's base. This electoral outcome highlighted a deep divide in Argentine politics, particularly in views on government performance and critical national issues like corruption and crime. Milei's success could potentially be attributed to his ability to tap into these concerns, using his digital platforms to amplify his messages and connect with voters' sentiments.



Analysis - Short-Form Video and Populist Narratives: A Powerful Potion

Javier Milei's social media strategy during the presidential campaign was a key focus for his political communications, and as evidenced by the numbers, appeared to increase his visibility. By mid-December, his official YouTube channel had 381,000 subscribers, significantly more than his opponents. Sergio Massa's official channel, by comparison, had only 45,800 subscribers, and Patricia Bullrich, another opponent, had less than 30,000. On TikTok, in mid-December, Milei's official channel boasted over 1.6 million followers and 13.8 million likes, with each of his 46 videos surpassing one million views. By contrast, Massa's TikTok account had 266,000 followers, with only eight of his 129 videos reaching over a million views.

Sergio Massa's digital campaign, marked by a more traditional and reserved communication strategy, struggled to gain traction online. Unlike his opponent, Massa did not achieve significant engagement on YouTube; none of his shorts, either from his official account or from supporters, reached over one million views. In fact, one of the most viewed videos featuring Massa on YouTube was one where he is portrayed unfavorably in a debate against Milei. Massa's approach, which harbored more compromising and inclusive language, was less effective in the digital sphere, where fiery, contentious content has the propensity to go viral.



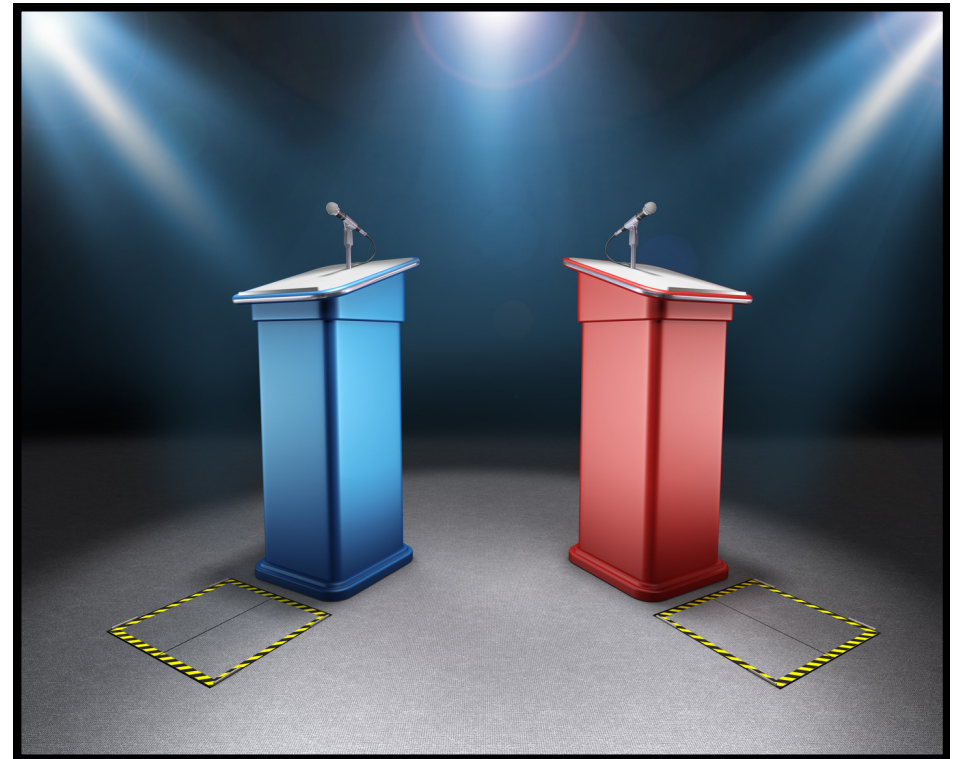


His TikTok account was opened shortly after announcing his candidacy, reflecting a possible underestimation of the platform's potential to aid campaign messaging. This was further highlighted by comments from former Vice President Cristina Kirchner, a Massa supporter and main representative of the Peronist movement, who ironically suggested that young people should limit their TikTok usage to “no more than 20 minutes,” possibly indicating a disconnect with the platform's relevance in modern politics. Moreover, Massa's coalition, composed of traditional parties, remained focused on conventional methods like street demonstrations and rallies, in stark contrast to Milei's digital-first campaign strategy.

Central to Milei's digital dominance was 23-year-old Tomas Jurado, a Milei supporter whose social media account “elPelucaMilei” became popular across various platforms, by posting content from his speeches and television appearances. Jurado's YouTube channel had 1.38 million subscribers, 1.3 million on Instagram, and 2.5 million on TikTok.

He developed a distinctive style focusing on short, punchy, meme-filled, and subtitled videos that highlighted Milei's arguments in a way that would have appealed to younger users more accustomed to viewing the style of video content popular on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Jurado produced over 32 regular-timed videos (over three minutes each) and nearly 80 YouTube shorts (normally under one minute each), all featuring Milei and each garnering over one million views. Notably, one of the top YouTube search results for Sergio Massa, produced by Jurado, was a 44-second video titled “Milei Destroyed Sergio Massa in the Presidential Debate.” Besides Jurado's channel, which was directly involved in editing and production, other channels played an influential role in directing traffic directly to Milei's TikTok page. One of the top Facebook referrers to Milei's channel was the page managed by Argentinian journalist José Viñuela, which provided frequent commentary in support of Milei's talking points.

The use of confrontational political debate on YouTube, as exemplified in Jurado's content, echoes a style popularized in the United States by conservative personalities like Ben Shapiro. Shapiro's media company, The Daily Wire, has been instrumental in promoting a more aggressive and confrontational style of political discourse. This approach, characterized by direct and often combative engagement, seems to have significantly influenced the broader political-cultural narrative in social media, extending its impact and providing a playbook for political figures in Latin America. The adoption of this framing and editing style in Latin American social media, as seen in Milei's campaign, suggests a tactic that resonates with and engages the digital audience, mirroring trends observed in U.S. political media.





Conclusion

By effectively harnessing video platforms and populist narratives, Milei managed to connect with a digitally savvy electorate, using emotive and direct language that appeared to resonate with their concerns and aspirations.

His success story is a compelling reminder that in the digital age, political discourse is no longer confined to rallies, debates, and traditional media; it thrives in the realm of social media, where messages are rapidly disseminated and amplified by a networked populace.

As digital platforms continue to evolve, so too will the strategies employed by political campaigns and the media ecosystems within which they operate. Javier Milei's journey from a divisive media figure to the President of Argentina is a case study in this digital transformation, highlighting the indispensable role social media, and in particular, video content, now plays in amplifying divisive rhetoric. It also underscores the importance of pressuring social media companies to increase transparency about the role algorithms play in serving this content to audiences on their platforms.

Beyond recognizing the important work social media companies need to do, it is also essential to scrutinize the underlying causes of what makes controversial and divisive rhetoric more attractive to viewers. This may involve efforts from a coalition of public and private stakeholders to better examine political polarization and the effects social media has in undermining democratic discourses. In addition, more concrete measures may also be necessary, including more timely and detailed fact-checking of content, emphasis on media literacy and selection of authoritative sources with respect to video streams, and building capabilities to better predict when divisive rhetoric will be used, in order to pre-bunk such content.





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