



Don't Confuse Javier Milei With Jair Bolsonaro

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If you read the global press, you may be under the impression that Javier Milei, the winner in Argentina's primary election last Sunday, is an identikit of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's former president, whom several news outlets dubbed "the Trump of the Tropics."

It's true that Bolsonaro endorsed Milei before the election. In a 2021 interview, Milei said that he had an "almost natural affinity" with both Bolsonaro and Donald Trump due to his "clear agenda against socialism and communism." When Milei was first elected to Argentina's Congress in November 2021, *El País* reported that some of his supporters wore pins and T-shirts with the slogan "Libertad, Guns, Bolsonaro, Trump" (a play on the LGBT acronym). Like Bolsonaro and Trump, Milei breaks with established political protocol—through the tactical use of profanity—and totally disregards political correctness. Beyond the gimmicks and blanket statements, however, Milei's differences with both Trump and Bolsonaro are as significant as the similarities.

Take Bolsonaro's famous statement on homosexuality: "I won't fight against it nor discriminate, but if I see two men kissing on the street, I'll beat them up." But when asked if homosexuality bothered him, Milei replied: "Not at all. I am a [classical] liberal... If you decide to be homosexual, how does that affect my life? In nothing. My liberty? In nothing. My property? In nothing. Therefore, I have nothing to say." When asked about transgenderism, Milei told a journalist: "I have no problem, as long as you don't make me pay the bill"—a stark contrast from Bolsonaro, who at his inauguration said, "We will unite people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, combat gender ideology and rescue our values."

But the differences extend far past social issues. Bolsonaro is a career army officer who served in Congress for 27 years, during which he often voted against free market measures such as the privatization of state-owned companies. He admires the military regime that, as Reuters' Marcela Ayres wrote, implemented a "state-led industrial model" between 1964 and 1985. Bolsonaro's rise to power in 2018 coincided with the emergence of Brazil's libertarian movement, which played a key role in the massive protests against Dilma Rousseff, the former socialist president who was impeached in 2016. Sensing the political winds changing, Bolsonaro announced during his campaign that, if elected, his finance minister would be Paulo Guedes, a University of Chicago-trained pro-market economist and former hedge fund manager.

Though Guedes was a force for good, Bolsonaro still clung to his statist instincts. Months before the 2022 election, he unveiled a \$7.6 billion package of "social spending" that, as Reuters reported, amended the constitution "to bypass the country's spending cap and boost social benefits." The taxpayer-funded splurge failed to win the former president reelection.

Milei is different. He is no career politician, having entered the legislature for the first time less than two years ago. Milei is a trained economist with a solid understanding of Austrian School principles. He is the intellectual product of Argentina's rich tradition of classical liberal thought. His mentor is fellow economist Alberto Benegas Lynch, whose father founded the Center for Liberty Studies in the 1950s and hosted Ludwig von Mises, among other distinguished scholars, in Buenos Aires.

Since then, Argentina has developed what is likely the most sophisticated network of free market think tanks in Latin America. As these matters go, their influence might have seemed negligible until last Sunday when, in his victory speech, Milei quoted Benegas Lynch to explain to the country the basic tenets of his guiding philosophy:

[Classical] liberalism is the unrestricted respect for one's neighbor's life plan, based on the non-aggression principle and the defense of the right to life, liberty, and property. The institutions of which are private property, markets that are free of state intervention, competition in terms of the free entry [to] and exit [from markets], the division of labor, and social cooperation, in which it is only possible to be successful by serving one's neighbors with goods of better quality or a better price, and where the results are evident, because the countries that are free are eight times richer than those that are oppressed.

Such a dissertation could not be found at a Bolsonaro rally. This alone suggests that the Milei phenomenon should be understood in light of Argentina's own history, not in terms of a neighboring country's contemporary politics.

As I wrote for *Reason* in 2020, Argentina became one of the richest countries in the world at the end of the 19th century because it followed the precepts of Juan Bautista Alberdi, the classical liberal polymath whose writings informed the crafting of the country's 1853 constitution. Having escaped the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas, a particularly brutal tyrant, Alberdi opposed militarism and advocated for "free immigration, commercial freedom, railroads, and unrestrained industry." In general terms, this was the model that a series of elected governments put in place between 1880 and 1916, a period that roughly coincides with Argentina's golden age as an exporting powerhouse. Buenos Aires began to rival New York commercially, and Paris aesthetically.

What changed since then? Once liberals turned to economic nationalism—President Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916–1922, 1928–1930) limited foreign companies' ability to operate the railroads and founded the world's first state-owned oil company in 1922—they paved the way for corporatist strongman Juan Domingo Perón, whose movement has dominated Argentine politics with few interruptions since the 1940s. The Peronist era has been one of steep national decline. The question now is whether a new era is about to begin.

Benegas Lynch (who is a fierce critic of Trump) considers Milei an ideological heir to Alberdi and credits him with having reintroduced classical liberal ideas into politics after an 80-year absence. Milei himself constantly refers to Alberdi and says he strives to reclaim his legacy. On Sunday, he told his supporters that, if Argentina rediscovers its tradition of liberty, it can become a world power again in a few decades' time. Is this comparable to, say, Trump's MAGA nationalism? Only if you ignore the methods that Milei has said he plans to employ.

Milei's main proposals include a unilateral commercial opening for highly protectionist Argentina, getting rid of the central bank, and mothballing the national currency by dollarizing the economy—a far cry from Trump's economic nationalism. In fact, nationalists on both the left and the right oppose Milei due to his intent to dollarize. However, as my colleague Gabriela Calderón and I argue in a recent [Cato Institute policy brief](#), dollarization is the right policy to tame the triple-digit annual inflation levels under which Argentines now suffer. Milei is the only prominent politician who recognizes that.

Would Milei's political program pass all libertarian purity tests? Not if you consider, for instance, the unfunded promises in his policy proposals, such as shutting down ministries without firing any public employees. Milei also says that he opposes liberalizing drug laws because addicts make use of the public health care system, thus creating an externality at the cost of the taxpayers. To me, that sounds like a clever way to appeal to more conservative voters without losing libertarian bona fides. Electorally, the wager has paid off so far.

A once-prosperous nation has become an impoverished, inflation-ridden, brain-drained, serial defaulter to its international creditors. For exasperated voters, taking a gamble on the one candidate who understands the ideas of liberty might be the safest available bet.

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