The Radical Digital Right in Latin America (2018-2023)

Bolsonaro, Bukele, Kast, Hernández, and Milei

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of a collaborative effort between the Department of Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro and the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. It explores the role of digital media in the rise and consolidation of radical right-wing politics in Latin America, focusing on the cases of Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Nayib Bukele (El Salvador), José Antonio Kast (Chile), Rodolfo Hernández (Colombia), and Javier Milei (Argentina).

The analysis presented here was developed with graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Arizona during the Spring 2024 semester. Their contributions were integral to researching and structuring the discussions on each political figure, highlighting the intersections between digital strategies, disinformation, and political radicalization in the region.

By examining these leaders' campaigns and forms of governance through a comparative perspective, this report seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on how digital media reshapes political landscapes and democratic institutions in Latin America.

BOLSONARO AS A REFORMIST ALTERNATIVE

On January 8, 2023, approximately 4,000 Bolsonaro supporters gathered in Brasilia to protest his 2022 presidential defeat. A mob of Bolsonaro supporters invaded and caused deliberate damage to the Supreme Federal Court, the National Congress Palace, and the Planalto Presidential Palace in the Praça dos Três Poderes (Three Powers Square). This event underscored digital media's pivotal role in shaping Brazil's political landscape and bolstering Bolsonaro's influence. Through analyzing his presidential campaigns in 2018 and 2022, this case study focuses on how Bolsonaro utilized digital platforms, bots, and disinformation to radicalize supporters, sow division, and challenge democratic institutions.

Profile

Jair Bolsonaro began his political career after serving as an army captain during Brazil's military dictatorship. Entering politics in 1991 as a federal representative from the state of Rio de Janeiro, he positioned himself as a polarizing figure known for nostalgic references to the dictatorship and making racist, misogynistic, and homophobic inflammatory remarks. Despite being a career politician, Bolsonaro branded himself as an outsider during the 2018 presidential campaign, gaining substantial support from Brazil's disenchanted electorate. Before that, he was widely regarded as a political nobody—mocked, ignored, and even considered unhinged.

Brazil's Recent Political Context

Economic instability, corruption scandals, and public disillusionment marked Brazil's political climate before Bolsonaro's rise. Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and Lula's conviction in 2017 for corruption scandals eroded trust in traditional political actors and institutions. This political vacuum allowed Bolsonaro to exploit public anger and position himself as a reformist alternative.

Digital Media Landscape

Bolsonaro's campaign leveraged Brazil's rapidly growing digital media environment. By 2018, Brazil ranked third globally in Facebook users, with platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube dominating as key information sources. The decline of traditional campaign tools like the Free Electoral Broadcast Airtime highlighted the shift toward digital media as a primary political strategy. After the re-democratization process in the 1980s, the Free Electoral Broadcast Airtime (Horário Gratuito Político Eleitoral, or HGPE) started to provide time for candidates to promote their campaigns via TV and radio, with the time allotment based on the candidate's party representation in Brazil's Federal Congress. For decades, the HGPE had been considered a cornerstone of political campaigns in the country. In 2018, Bolsonaro was only given eight seconds of HGPE in the first round to promote his presidential campaign, yet he still achieved widespread prominence. His success through digital media in 2018 is evidence that the relative importance of HGPE and traditional media, in general, has declined due to the meteoric rise of digital media.

The Elections: 2018 and 2022

In 2018, Bolsonaro relied heavily on digital media, sidestepping traditional campaigning due to minimal resources and television airtime. His team orchestrated a "digital army" that utilized bots, trolls, and fake news to polarize public opinion and undermine opponents. Disinformation campaigns, such as the false "gay kit" narrative, proved highly effective. Bolsonaro's campaign leveraged WhatsApp and Facebook to disseminate disinformation, falsely claiming that Fernando Haddad—who replaced Lula as the Workers' Party (PT) presidential candidate after Lula's arrest for corruption—had created a "gay kit" to encourage young children in public schools to become gay. In reality, Haddad, Brazil's former Minister of Education, had promoted an inclusive curriculum aimed at combating homophobia. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a 'gay kit' meme.

Figure 1

Disinformation about the "Gay Kit"

Source: Taken from "How Jair Bolsonaro Used 'Fake News' to Win Power", por E. Bracho-Polanco, 2019, The Conversation (https://theconversation.com/how-jair-bolsonaro-used-fake-news-to-win-power-109343). It is in Portuguese: "If you defend the children, do not vote on him. Haddad is the creator of the gay kit for 6-year-old children."

During his 2022 re-election bid, Bolsonaro expanded his digital influence with a massive social media presence. Disinformation became more radicalized. Claims of electoral fraud and conspiracy theories about electronic voting machines further undermined democratic norms. Throughout his presidency, Bolsonaro often attacked Brazil's political institutions and opponents, characterizing them as corrupt and illegitimate while

framing himself as a man of the people. During his campaign, Bolsonaro repeatedly cast doubt on the fairness of the election, at one point even gathering dozens of foreign diplomats to a presentation where he expressed, without evidence, that the election was rigged against him. This incident highlights how Bolsonaro abused his position to build support for his claims of fraud. Since the claims were coming from the president, they carried significant weight. Bolsonaro's defeat to Lula triggered the January 8th protests, organized via digital platforms.

In November 2024, Brazil's Federal Police presented evidence to the Supreme Court indicating that Bolsonaro was directly involved in orchestrating a coup to overturn the results of the 2022 election. Investigators also found that Bolsonaro had full knowledge of a plan to assassinate then-president-elect Lula, his running mate, Geraldo Alckmin, and the Supreme Court Minister Alexandre de Moraes, based on intercepted conversations between conspirators and meetings held at the presidential palace.

Discussion

Radicalization in Brazil intensified following the 2013 Protests and coincided with rapid advancements in communication technologies. The protests mobilized 2 million people in almost 20 cities in the context of other demonstrations worldwide, such as the Arab Spring, the Gezi Park protests in Turkey, and the Wall Street Protests in the U.S. Politicians adapted their strategies accordingly as digital platforms became increasingly central to how Brazilians consume and produce information. Jair Bolsonaro's campaigns leveraged these developments to carefully construct a disinformation strategy to generate fear of the left and portray him as Brazil's savior.

A key element of this strategy was Bolsonaro's use of digital media to undermine public trust in democratic institutions. Figure 2 shows how Bolsonaro was, in 2018, away ahead of his adversaries on social media. Throughout his presidency and campaigns, he propagated narratives that discredited his political opponents, the Judiciary, the press, universities, and the electoral system. This culminated in his refusal to concede defeat in the 2022 presidential election and ultimately led to the January 8, 2023, riots in Brasília, when thousands of his supporters stormed government buildings—including the Congress, Supreme Court, and Presidential Palace—demanding military intervention to overturn the election results. His rhetoric and actions exemplify how digital disinformation can erode public confidence in democracy. In February 2025, Brazil's federal prosecutor formally denounced Bolsonaro for his role in attempting not only to delegitimize the election but also to orchestrate a coup d'état, which allegedly included plans to assassinate President-elected Lula, Vice President Geraldo Alckmin, and Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes.

The events in Brazil are not isolated but form part of a global trend of radical right-wing politicians leveraging digital platforms for political gain. Bolsonaro's reliance on WhatsApp groups highlights the significance of private messaging apps as tools for spreading disinformation. These platforms facilitated the mobilization of supporters, amplified Bolsonaro's rhetoric, and fostered a sense of group identity among his bases.

Finally, Bolsonaro's presidency underscores the potential of digital media to both empower and destabilize democracies. While these platforms enable greater political engagement and outreach, they also present risks when manipulated for anti-democratic purposes.

Figure 2

Followers on Brazilian presidential candidates' social media in the 2018 election
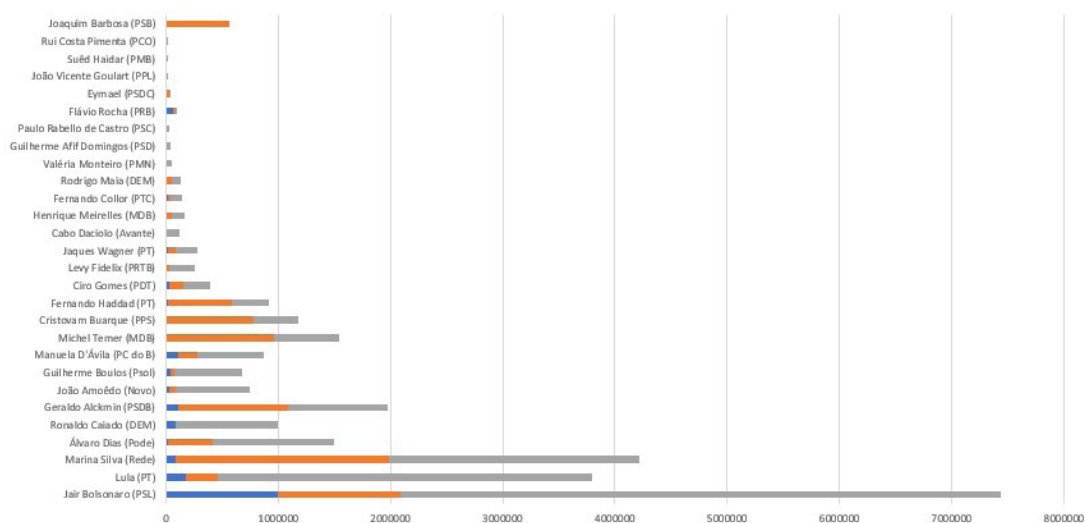
Source: Own elaboration with Crowdtangle and Nutec data (https://www.nutec.com.puc–rio.br/). In blue, followers on Instagram. It is in orange on Twitter (now X) and in gray on Facebook.

BUKELE: THE ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT REFORMER

Nayib Bukele, El Salvador's "millennial president," has garnered international attention for his populism and groundbreaking use of digital media. This section examines how Bukele leveraged digital platforms to consolidate power, build his political narrative, and establish control across all branches of government. This study evaluates Bukele's rise to power and explores the implications of his digital media strategy for Salvadoran democracy.

Profile

Born in 1981 in San Salvador, Nayib Bukele began his political career as the mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán in 2012 and later served as the mayor of San Salvador. In 2019, he became El Salvador's president, breaking the country's two-party dominance established after the end of the civil war (1979–1992). Bukele portrays himself as an anti-establishment reformer while advancing populist and authoritarian policies. His administration is characterized by militarized governance and the widespread use of digital media to control his public image.

The Country's Recent Political Context

El Salvador's democracy emerged from the 1992 Peace Accords, ending a 13-year civil war. However, post-war democracy failed to address systemic inequalities, perpetuating cycles of violence and corruption. Mano Dura policies, initiated in 2003 to combat gang violence, exemplify the state's punitive approach without much success. These failures and widespread corruption disillusioned Salvadorans, setting the stage for Bukele's rise as a perceived reformer who could deliver security and stability.

Digital Media Landscape

Digital media has been central to Bukele's political strategy. Figure 3 shows how Bukele was way ahead of other political adversaries in 2019. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have enabled him to craft a relatable and charismatic image while amplifying his policies and justifying controversial actions. Salvadorans rely heavily on social media for news, with Bukele's accounts dominating online discourse. Nayib Bukele's overwhelming social media success has allowed him to control much of the narrative about his actions and, thus, paint himself and his party, Nuevas Ideas, positively. Throughout Bukele's two campaigns, his following and presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Instagram have grown tremendously. His use of these platforms has built a narrative of effectiveness and transparency while sidelining traditional media and dissenting voices.

Figure 3

Facebook interactions of Nayib Bukele and his opponent, Carlos Calleja, at the 2019 Salvadorean presidential election

Source: Own elaboration with Crowdtangle data. Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments, and shares.

The Elections: 2019 and 2024

Bukele's 2019 election was historic, ending decades of two-party rule by ARENA and FMLN. He leveraged digital media to mobilize support and frame himself as a reformist outsider (Figure 4). By 2024, Bukele had solidified control over El Salvador's government and the Supreme Court, allowing for an unconstitutional re-election. His party, Nuevas Ideas, secured legislative and judicial dominance, enabling sweeping changes to electoral rules. Both campaigns showcased Bukele's ability to outpace opponents in digital outreach, with millions of followers compared to negligible numbers for his challengers.

Figure 4

Bukele's post on Instagram during the 2019 campaign pointed to a Facebook Live.

Source: Crowdtangle data.

Discussion: Authoritarianism as "Solution"

Bukele's administration exemplifies how digital media can favor a narrative that legitimizes authoritarian practices. Framing his militarized policies as solutions to gang violence, Bukele has fostered a narrative of "good versus evil," where dissenters are equated with criminal sympathizers. His administration's sealing of crime data and human rights abuses underscores the use of state violence to maintain control while presenting a façade of progress. The historical failures of Salvadoran democracy have bolstered his popularity, as many citizens view his punitive measures as necessary.

Digital media has played a pivotal role in this process, allowing Bukele to dominate national discourse and marginalize critics. His charismatic online persona has garnered widespread support from the Salvadoran diaspora, who often remain disconnected from state militarization and democratic backsliding. This raises critical questions about the role of digital media in shaping perceptions of governance and enabling authoritarianism.

KAST AND HIS CONSERVATIVE AGENDA

The 2021 Chilean presidential election marked a pivotal moment in the nation's political history, showcasing deep social divisions and the growing influence of digital media. José Antonio Kast, a far-right candidate, effectively utilized platforms like Facebook and TikTok to disseminate his conservative agenda, drawing significant support amidst political polarization. This study explores Kast's digital media strategy, its role in its rise, and its broader implications for Chilean democracy.

Profile

José Antonio Kast, born into a family with ties to the Pinochet dictatorship, has a long political career. A former member of the right-wing Independent Democratic Union (UDI), Kast founded the far-right Republican Party in 2019. Known for supporting law-and-order policies (Figure 5), free-market economics, and conservative social values, Kast has also been vocal about restricting immigration and opposing progressive reforms. His alignment with authoritarianism and nostalgic references to Chile's military regime define his political identity.

Figure 5

Kast's post on Instagram during the 2021 presidential campaign

Source: Crowdtangle data.

The Country's Recent Political Context

Chile's transition to democracy in 1990 ended the Pinochet dictatorship but left deep-seated divisions unresolved, entrenched in a constitution drafted by the military

regime. Massive protests erupted in 2019, demanding structural reforms to address economic and social disparities and a new constitution. These demonstrations led to a constitutional referendum in 2020. A new text was drafted but rejected in 2022 (see Figure 6), reflecting a polarized electorate. This backdrop of discontent provided fertile ground for Kast's law-and-order rhetoric, and his appeal to conservative voters disillusioned with the left-leaning government.

Figure 6

Political Turmoil in Chile (2019-2023)
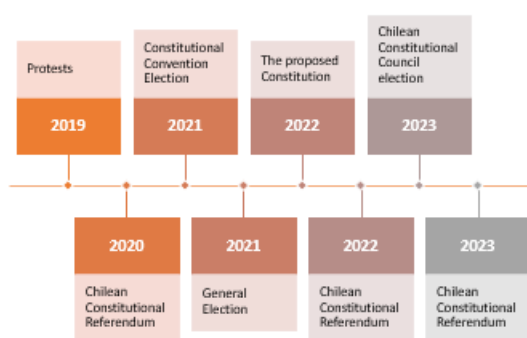
Digital Media Landscape

Digital media played a central role in Kast's campaign. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok allowed him to reach diverse demographics. Kast excelled on Facebook, posting extensively and garnering significant engagement (Figure 7). On TikTok, his campaign embraced humor and entertainment (Figure 8), achieving 7,527,954 interactions, nearly 90,000 interactions per video. However, his presence on Instagram lagged behind that of his opponent, Gabriel Boric, reflecting differences in audience demographics and platform preferences.

Figure 7

Facebook interactions of Jose Antonio Kast and Gabriel Boric in the Chilean 2021 presidential election

Source: Own elaboration with Crowdtangle data. Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments, and shares.

Figure 8

This Kast's post on TikTok during the 2021 campaign reached more than 3m views, dancing to celebrate the arrival of Friday

Source: Own elaboration with TikTok API.

The Election: 2021 Presidential Race

In his campaign, Kast appealed to conservative voters. His platform was based on calls for army intervention in the Mapuche conflict in the South and measures like building a ditch along Chile's northern border. Kast and the Partido Republicano advance a programmatic agenda emphasizing authoritarian, nativist, and populist ideas. They continuously criticize the absence of law and order in the country and insist on the necessity of severely punishing any behavior they consider deviant. This became particularly evident during the 2019 social outburst. José Antonio Kast won the first round of the election with 27.9% of the vote but lost the runoff to Gabriel Boric, who was able to mobilize younger and moderate voters.

Discussion: Digital Media and Polarization

Despite his electoral loss, Kast's campaign exemplifies how digital media can deepen political divisions and bolster far-right movements. By targeting specific demographics with tailored messages, Kast amplified fears about crime, immigration, and leftist policies. His campaign utilized a hybrid media system, blending traditional and digital strategies to craft an image of strong leadership.

Kast's reliance on bots and polarizing rhetoric underscores the risks of digital media. These tactics can undermine trust in democratic institutions and exacerbate societal divisions. The 2021 election highlighted the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and the need for safeguards against radicalization and the politics of fear. On November 14, 2019, for example, one day before the agreement to

hold a national referendum was signed, Kast tweeted that "while politicians in Congress get together to distort democracy, on the streets extreme violence is unleashed and destroying everything. The rule of law and the public order are out of control, and the government still does not react."

José Antonio Kast's 2021 campaign underscores the transformative impact of digital media on modern politics. It reflects broader trends in the rise of far-right movements and their adept use of digital media to mobilize support and normalize themselves.

HERNÁNDEZ: "EL VIEJITO DE TIKTOK"

Rodolfo Hernández, a Colombian businessman turned politician, captured public attention with his unconventional and often controversial political style. In 2013, he started his political trajectory by opening a Facebook page to complain about politicians and corruption. Two years later, he was elected mayor of Bucaramanga. Known as "El Viejito de TikTok," Hernández leveraged social media, especially TikTok, to reach disillusioned and younger voters during the 2022 presidential campaign. He had conducted one of the most successful digital media campaigns in Colombian electoral history, ultimately placing second in the presidential race. This study explores Hernández's digital strategy, the limitations of relying on digital media in a country with significant technological inequalities, and its implications for Colombian politics.

Profile

Born in 1945, Hernández began his career as a successful businessman specializing in affordable housing projects. As mayor of Bucaramanga (2016–2019), he gained some notoriety for his outspoken and anti–establishment rhetoric, often engaging with citizens through live Facebook sessions. In November 2018, during his municipal term, he assaulted a municipal councilor during a heated political discussion. The incident was captured on video, circulated widely on social media, and used by the Office of the Nation's Attorney General as conclusive evidence to suspend Hernández from office.

Following his tenure as mayor, Hernández ran for the presidency in 2022 but was defeated by Gustavo Petro in the runoff election. In March 2024, he was convicted of corruption related to the Vitalogic case involving irregularities in a waste management contract. During the trial, Hernández revealed he had terminal cancer. He was sentenced to 64 months of house arrest and fined approximately $20,900. Hernández passed away on September 2, 2024, due to complications from his illness.

The Country's Recent Political Context

Colombian politics have been shaped by decades of armed conflict, corruption, and inequality. Following the divisive referendum related to the peace agreement with FARC in 2016, political polarization deepened. Discontent with the traditional two–party system and the failure to address socioeconomic issues created fertile ground for the 2019 protests. The demonstrations, also known as the "National Strike #21N," were a series of non–consecutive events held in several cities from November 21, 2019, to February 21, 2020. Another series of protests began in Colombia in April 2021 against increased taxes, corruption, and health care reform proposed by the government of President Iván Duque. This context favored Hernández, and his populist message was built on a language that differed from that of traditional politicians, which aligned him with social discontent. The 2022 presidential election reflected this shift, pitting Hernández against leftist Gustavo Petro in a runoff.

Digital Media Landscape

Digital media has transformed political campaigns in Colombia, providing platforms for nontraditional candidates. Hernández first embraced this shift, using Facebook, which

was later complemented with Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to bypass traditional media and connect directly with voters. However, Colombia's digital divide – marked by disparities in internet access between urban and rural areas – limited its reach.

The Election: 2022 Presidential Race

"We, all Colombians, are tired of working only to have everything taken from us. We are tired of fighting without strength, tired of being accomplices to our political executioners. We are tired of electing those who kill us and feeding with high salaries those who steal from us and of admiring those who despise us." Rodolfo Hernández delivered those words on May 22, 2022, during the closing of his presidential campaign in Piedecuesta, Santander, Colombia. Although he did not organize mass events, he connected via Zoom to address his supporters gathered in the main park of his hometown.

Hernández's 2022 presidential campaign focused on anti-corruption and populist messaging, branding himself as a political outsider (Figure 9). His informal language, humor, and direct engagement on Facebook and TikTok set him apart from traditional candidates. Hernández's campaign relied heavily on social media to amplify his message. He attracted over 500,000 followers only on TikTok, where he gained millions of likes. His videos, characterized by humor and blunt populist rhetoric, resonated with younger voters. Despite his loss (Hernández lost the runoff, securing 47.35% of the vote to Petro's 50.42%), it was an impressive performance because Hernández was primarily unknown and exclusively doing a digital campaign. He won his place in the second round against Federico Gutiérrez, who was the appointee candidate of the former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), who had made two successors: Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and Iván Duque (2018-2022). The winner in 2022, Gustavo Petro, was well-known as a former mayor of Bogota. In addition to social media, he relied on traditional practices, reaching the poorest people in the country.

Figure 9

Hernández's campaign post on Instagram

Source: Crowdtangle.

Discussion: Digital Media's Opportunities

Hernández's campaign exemplifies how digital media can be a powerful tool for political outsiders who present simple (often populist) solutions to complex societal problems. Using platforms like Facebook and TikTok allowed him to bypass traditional media and connect directly with disillusioned voters who felt abandoned by the political establishment. In an era where trust in institutions is low, digital media provides an unfiltered channel for figures like Hernández to present themselves as champions of the people against entrenched elites.

Hernández positioned himself as an anti-establishment candidate who promised to restore law and order while framing corruption as the root cause of Colombia's structural problems. His rhetoric was straightforward and appealing to voters frustrated with political elites. Digital media amplified this message effectively, particularly in a country marked by protests, economic struggles, violence, and deep-seated corruption. His campaign strategy demonstrates that digital platforms can create opportunities for nontraditional candidates, enabling them to gain traction without traditional political machines' financial and logistical backing. Ultimately, the case of Hernández underscores the growing influence of digital media in electoral politics, particularly for populist outsiders. Social media can provide a shortcut to political relevance in politically and economically turbulent contexts.

MILEI'S "¡VIVA LA LIBERTAD CARAJO!"

Javier Milei, an economist–turned–politician, has emerged as a central figure in Argentina's political landscape. From the debates on segmented TV shows to digital media, Milei amplified his radical anti–establishment rhetoric, resonating in a society tired of successive major economic crises. This study explores Milei's meteoric political career, his use of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to captivate voters, and the broader implications for democracy in Argentina with his election as president in 2023.

Profile

Javier Milei gained public attention with a radical anti–establishment discourse. He championed ultraliberalism and attacked traditional political parties and politicians, whom he labeled as the "caste." His slogan, "¡Viva la libertad, Carajo!", encapsulated this anti–establishment stance. With a background in economics and early fame from segmented television appearances, Milei embodied a hybrid media politician, skillfully blending traditional and digital media strategies to resonate with a disillusioned electorate, particularly younger voters. His discourse heavily relied on liberty, which became a central concept in his TikTok videos. According to an analysis at PUC–Rio, "liberty" was the most frequently used word in his campaign content, reinforcing his narrative of a minimal state and a rupture with the traditional political system.[1]

The Country's Recent Political Context

Argentina's political and economic challenges—including rising poverty, inflation, and corruption—have eroded public trust in democratic institutions. The 2019 victory of Alberto Fernández, despite widespread discontent with his predecessor, Mauricio Macri, failed to address these systemic issues. By 2023, the electorate was disillusioned, creating fertile ground for Milei's anti–systemic rhetoric. His appeal was bolstered by dissatisfaction with both Peronist and non–Peronist political structures.

Digital Media Landscape

Social media has transformed political campaigns in Argentina, with TikTok emerging as an essential platform for political discourse among young voters. By 2023, Milei had far outpaced his competitors in TikTok followers, using the platform to amplify his anti–politics discourse and policy proposals. His content often repurposed television interviews, demonstrating a seamless integration of traditional and new media (Figure 10). This hybrid approach allowed him to expand his reach and create a distinct, engaging political persona. Milei had 1.4 million followers on TikTok, while his main competitors lagged far behind, with Patricia Bullrich at 213,000 and Sergio Massa at 42,000 (Figure 11). This dominant presence on the platform underscores the central role of social media in his campaign. Three significant themes defined his digital communication on TikTok: anti–politics, monetary policy, and state reduction. During the campaign, the anti–politics discourse comprised 21 percent of his videos on TikTok, positioning Milei

1. Ituassu, A., Alves, M., Lifschitz, S., Bruck, G., Marçal, F., Akel, D., Costa, L., Heine, A. A. P., Barreto, M. P., & Villas, M. V. (2023). Javier Milei, o candidato TikTok. Nutec Lab COM/PUC-Rio.

as a radical outsider attacking traditional politicians and the state. His monetary policy content, making up 33 percent of his posts, focused on the abolition of the Central Bank and the dollarization of the economy, often framed as mini-lessons to establish his credibility. The largest category, state reduction, accounted for 45 percent of his videos, advocating drastic government cuts and eliminating ministries to promote a minimal state's vision.
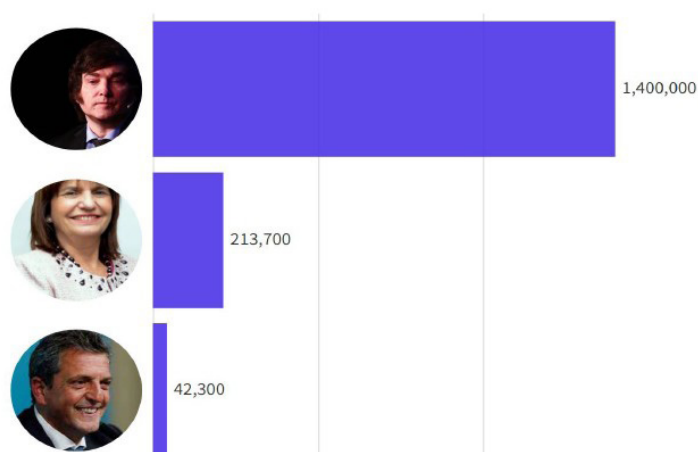
Figure 10

TikTok post of Javier Milei during the campaign.

Source: TikTok API data.

Figure 11

TikTok followers of Javier Milei, Patricia Bullrich, and Sérgio Massa at the eve of the 2023 Argentinian Presidential election.


Source: Own elaboration with TikTok API data.

The Election: 2023 Presidential Campaign

Milei's 2023 campaign was a masterclass in digital media usage. He used TikTok to connect with voters through humorous, straightforward videos emphasizing his libertarian ideology. His rhetoric targeted "the caste," which he blamed for Argentina's economic woes while promoting policies such as the abolition of the central bank and drastic economic liberalization. His video, in which he symbolically removed entire ministries from a government chart, generated massive attention, reinforcing his promise to drastically downsize Argentina's public sector (Figure 12). His ability to create digital traction played a significant role in his victory, securing 55.65 percent of the votes. His content on monetary policy accumulated around 24 million views, demonstrating the strong appeal of his economic proposals. His state-reduction videos received the most engagement, with 2.4 million likes and comments, reflecting the public's enthusiasm for this narrative.

Figure 12

TikTok post of Javier Milei during the campaign.
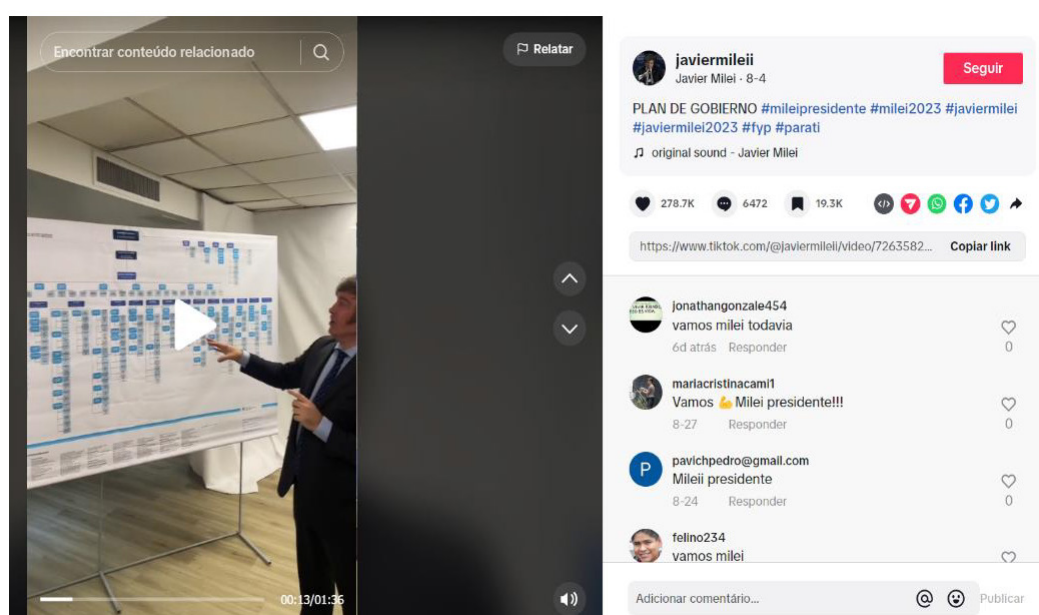
Discussion: Hybrid Media Populism

Milei's success illustrates the effectiveness of hybrid media populism in mobilizing support. By combining television appearances with tailored social media content, he created a multifaceted public image that resonated with diverse demographics. His aggressive style and anti-elite messaging were central to his appeal, fostering a sense of unity among disillusioned voters. His social media strategy was carefully structured, with performative videos, such as the one where he dramatically removed ministries from a whiteboard, reinforcing his vision of dismantling bureaucracy. However, this approach also raises concerns about the implications of digital media in politics. While enabling direct engagement, platforms like TikTok and Instagram amplify populist narratives that often oversimplify complex issues. Additionally, Milei's campaign underscores the role

of emotional appeals in digital politics, leveraging anger and discontent to galvanize support. This strategy, while effective, risks deepening societal polarization.

In February 2025, President Milei appointed two Supreme Court judges by decree, bypassing the Senate during recess. This action aligns him with other radical digital right politicians. Nayib Bukele, for example, consolidated power in El Salvador. Jair Bolsonaro attempted similar moves in Brazil. Milei's newest action raises concerns about the potential erosion of democratic institutions in Argentina.

CONCLUSION

The rise of Bolsonaro, Bukele, Kast, Hernández, and Milei in Latin America between 2018 and 2023 reflects a regional wave of radical right-wing politicians who strategically leveraged digital media to gain and consolidate political capital. Their trajectories share key patterns: all positioned themselves as personalist leaders, distancing from traditional party structures or forming new political vehicles to bolster their influence. Each capitalized on moments of political instability in their respective countries, presenting themselves as outsiders capable of disrupting the status quo.

A defining characteristic among them—especially those who secured presidential victories—is their challenge to liberal democratic institutions. By centralizing power and undermining institutional checks, they exemplify the core of the radical right: a direct confrontation with the principles of liberal democracy. Their ideological variations, however, are notable. Kast aligns with traditional conservatism and economic liberalism. Hernández embraced some liberal social stances, while Milei radicalized economic liberalism to an extreme degree. Bolsonaro and Kast, in contrast, firmly adhered to conservative values.

This report aimed to map this phenomenon in Latin America, highlighting the interplay between digital media and the radical right's ascendance. The pressing challenge ahead is to dissect the specific consequences of digital media in shaping this historical process—how it facilitates not only the rise but also the governance and consolidation of these figures in the region's political landscape.

ABOUT THE EDITORS AND AUTHORS

Alvaro Diaz earned his dual B.A. in Political Science and Latin American Studies from the University of Arizona. With deep roots in the Arizona-Sonora region, he is interested in topics related to international policy and natural resources management. As a dual master's student in Latin American Studies and Public Administration, Alvaro wants to dedicate his research to water policy in urban areas and its effects on peripheral communities.

Antonio José Bacelar da Silva is an Associate Professor at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. He earned a Ph.D. in Linguistic and Sociocultural Anthropology from the University of Arizona. Silva's research focuses on Afro-Brazilians' continued exploration of blackness and political positionality in the context of mobilizations for racial justice in Brazil. Silva won the 2023 Sérgio Buarque de Holanda Prize from the Latin American Studies Association-Brazil Section for the best book in the social sciences for his book Between Brown and Black: Anti-Racist Activism in Brazil (2022, Rutgers University Press).

Arthur Ituassu is an Associate Professor of Political Communication at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Visiting Professor (DCC) at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona (CLAS/UA). Associate Researcher at the National Institute of Science and Technology in Digital Democracy (INCT.DD). Member of the Board of the Democracy Under Check Institute (DX). Dr. in International Relations (IRI/PUC-Rio), served as President (2017-2019) of the Brazilian Association of Researchers in Communication and Politics (COMPOLÍTICA).

Brenda Borges Aguiar is a master's student in Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, where she researches reproductive rights movements in Argentina. As a Tinker Foundation Fellow, she conducted fieldwork examining the intersections of activism, policy, and gender justice in the region. She holds a degree in International Relations and Languages from the University of Porto, specializing in French and Spanish, and she works as a Spanish and Portuguese Teaching Assistant, combining academic expertise with hands-on teaching experience.

Chelsea Guevara is a master's student at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. With an undergraduate background in Latin American Studies and Writing & Rhetoric Studies, Chelsea currently focuses her graduate research on Salvadoran history, culture, and literature.
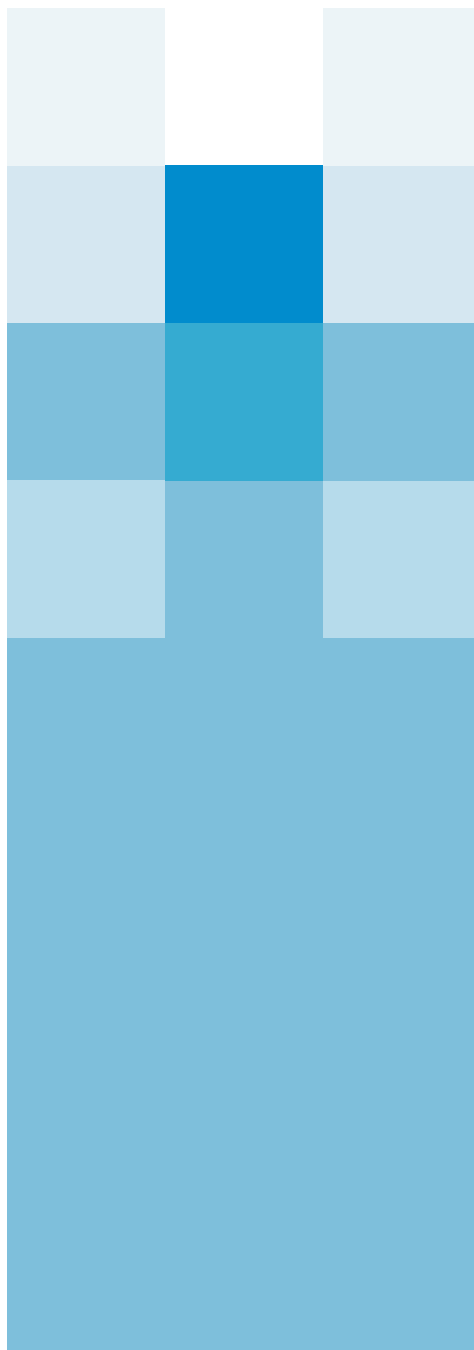
Edward Buck-Shannon was born and raised in Tucson, Arizona. Edward graduated from the University of Arizona in 2024 with a BA in global studies with an emphasis in political economy and a BA in Latin American studies. Edward previously worked as a researcher and translator at Keep Tucson Together, an organization that provides pro-bono legal services to asylum seekers, DACA recipients, and other people in immigration court. He currently works as an advocate for progressive immigration and housing policy in Oregon.

Kristine Witko is pursuing a Master of Arts in Latin American Studies. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in English in 2009, Kristine obtained a Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language in 2013. Following graduation, she split her time between Rio de Janeiro and the U.S. for several years. Kristine then worked as an elementary school

teacher in New York City. Her time working with social projects in Rio de Janeiro made her interested in education in conflict zones, which is the focus of her current research at the University of Arizona. She was awarded twice the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) Fellowship to study Portuguese and the Tinker Field Research Grant to conduct research in Brazil.

Sandra Cecilia Madrid is a researcher and advocate committed to migrant rights and humanitarian aid at the U.S.–Mexico border. As the daughter of immigrants and an Arizona native, Sandra has seen firsthand the impact of increased security and militarization along the border and the corresponding rise in migrant care. Her master's project focuses on the critical role that these Search and Rescue volunteers play in locating migrant remains and restoring dignity to those who have passed in the Arizona Sonora desert.

Simon D. VanHoute is from upstate New York and moved to Tucson, Arizona, in 2021. He is an undergraduate at the University of Arizona and is on track to graduate in May 2025. Simon will graduate with a BA in History and a minor in Latin American studies.