



Blurred lines: Examining the mainstream right's response to the radical right in Argentina (2015-2023)

XI ZHAO

<xzhao@sociales.uba.ar>

Universidad de Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires, Argentina

ORCID: 0000-0003-4434-9522

[Abstract] The rise of radical right parties in Latin America has led to a significant reconfiguration of the political landscape, which poses a challenge for established parties and opens a new field of study regarding their strategic responses to this process. This paper presents a case study of Argentina's mainstream right-wing party, Propuesta Republicana (PRO), with the aim of examining its programmatic changes in response to the rising electoral relevance of radical right parties in Argentina. The analysis encompasses the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions, as well as their relationship with democracy. Based on a corpus of public speeches by its presidential and vice-presidential candidates during the last three presidential campaigns (2015, 2019, and 2023), the study tracks the distribution of thematic frequencies in its campaign agenda and investigates its positions on various issues through a qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal a progressive clarification of their liberal stance on economic issues and conservative stance on sociocultural issues, paralleling the growing electoral relevance of the radical right throughout these electoral cycles. These observations suggest an overall strategy of "assimilation" by Argentina's mainstream right in the face of the electoral threat from the far right, as the boundary between the mainstream right and the radical right becomes increasingly porous.

[Keywords] Mainstream right, radical right, Propuesta Republicana, Argentina, political parties.

[Título] La frontera porosa: cambios en el partido de la derecha *mainstream* argentina ante el ascenso electoral de la derecha radical (2015-2023)

[Resumen] El ascenso electoral de la derecha radical en América Latina ha llevado a una significativa reconfiguración del tablero político, hecho que plantea un desafío para los partidos establecidos y abre un nuevo flanco de estudio sobre sus reacciones estratégicas ante este proceso. Este trabajo propone un estudio de caso de la derecha *mainstream* argentina, Propuesta Republicana (PRO), con el objetivo de examinar sus cambios programáticos frente al ascenso electoral de los partidos de derecha radical en Argentina. El análisis abarca los ejes socioeconómico y sociocultural, así como su relación con la democracia. A partir de un corpus de discursos públicos de sus candidatos presidenciales y vicepresidenciales durante las últimas tres campañas presidenciales (2015, 2019 y 2023), se rastrea la distribución de frecuencias temáticas de su agenda de campaña y se indagan las posturas en distintas temáticas mediante un análisis cualitativo de contenido. Los hallazgos revelan una explicitación progresiva de su postura liberal en lo económico y conservadora en lo sociocultural, en paralelo con el crecimiento de la relevancia electoral

de la derecha radical a lo largo de las instancias electorales. Estas observaciones sugieren una estrategia general de “asimilación” por parte de la derecha convencional argentina frente a la amenaza electoral de la ultraderecha, mientras la frontera entre la derecha mainstream y la derecha radical se vuelve cada vez más porosa.

[Palabras clave] Derecha mainstream; derecha radical, Propuesta Republicana, Argentina, partidos políticos.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The early 21st century's progressive cycle in Latin America was subsequently followed by a political resurgence of the right. This phenomenon manifested in two distinct yet concurrent forms. First, the traditional right, having undergone processes of internal reorganization and programmatic renewal, successfully distanced itself from its authoritarian legacy and moderated its ideological profile (LUNA & ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2014). Through effective methods, these reconstituted entities gained electoral legitimacy, capturing presidencies by popular vote—in some instances for the first time since the region's third wave of democratization (HUNTINGTON 1993). Argentina's Propuesta Republicana (PRO)² serves as a paradigmatic case. Scholarly consensus suggests that such institutionalized partisan actors, capable of representing upper-middle-class interests, constitute a fundamental component of democratic stability (DI TELLA 1971; GIBSON 1996).

Concurrently, a novel and disruptive radical right emerged in Latin America, achieving unexpected electoral breakthroughs. The presidential campaigns of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018) and Javier Milei in Argentina (2023) signaled the consolidation of this sector within the region's political landscape. This faction is characterized by its explicit rebellion against political correctness (STEFANONI 2021) and a reactionary stance against the growing representation of political minorities (ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2024). These developments have precipitated a significant reconfiguration of political forces and an internal transformation within the Latin American right itself (BORGES *ET AL.* 2024).

These dynamics generate critical questions regarding the relational interplay between mainstream and radical right-wing parties. Specifically, it is pertinent to inquire: How do mainstream right-wing parties respond to the competitive challenge posed by the radical right? Furthermore, have the ideological and political boundaries between these sectors become increasingly porous?

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2 Propuesta Republicana (PRO) is the leading center-right political party, founded in 2005 by businessman Mauricio Macri. PRO was part of the electoral and political coalitions Cambiemos (2015–2019) and Juntos por el Cambio (2019–2023).

This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the strategic reactions of Argentina's center-right party, the PRO, to the electoral ascent of the radical right between 2015 and 2023. The analysis is structured around three key dimensions: socioeconomic policy, sociocultural issues, and commitment to liberal democratic norms. Corresponding to this overarching aim, the research establishes two specific objectives: (i) to compare the programmatic emphasis of the PRO's presidential election agendas before and after the radical right's electoral rise; and (ii) to investigate the evolution of the PRO's positional stance on salient electoral issues throughout the aforementioned electoral contests.

In accordance with these objectives, this study employs a methodological framework centered on the comparative analysis of programmatic changes within the PRO. This is achieved through a systematic examination of its presidential campaigns across the specified electoral cycles, situated within the context of relevant scholarly literature. To construct an empirical basis for this analysis, we gathered data via systematic tracking of major national newspapers, thereby creating a self-constructed corpus for the qualitative and quantitative examination of candidate discourses and policy emphasis.

This research offers dual contributions to contemporary political science literature. First, it presents a timely case study from Latin America, a region where the electoral ascent of the radical right is a relatively recent phenomenon, and where the strategic adaptation of established conservative parties in response remains underexplored. Second, it undertakes a novel effort to systematize empirical evidence from successive electoral campaigns. Through this approach, the study aims to rigorously assess the hypothesis of a programmatic radicalization of the Argentine mainstream right across distinct thematic axes in reaction to the growing electoral salience of the far right.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING THE MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT

Given the aforementioned objectives and to anchor the subsequent analysis, a precise conceptualization of the political right is necessary. Political theory provides a foundational distinction. Bobbio (1994, 49) famously framed the left-right dyad as "mutually exclusive, anchored in divergent conceptions of equality." From this perspective, the left is characterized by the belief that social inequalities can and should be actively reduced, whereas the right, as operationalized by Luna & Rovira Kaltwasser (2014, 4), is distinguished by

“the belief that the main inequalities between people are natural and outside the purview of the state.”

Scholars have subsequently sought to operationalize this abstract distinction through the analysis of concrete political positions. Historically, the economic axis of state intervention versus market autonomy (*laissez-faire*) has been a primary diagnostic tool for differentiating left from right, as exemplified in the spatial models of party competition (DOWNS 1957). However, this dichotomy has been complemented by the recognition of a salient sociocultural dimension. Conservatism on moral and social issues, emphasizing traditional order and hierarchy, constitutes a second critical plane upon which the right distinguishes itself, complicating a purely econometric mapping of the ideological spectrum.

Cas Mudde's (2007) influential tripartite typology distinguishes the center-right, radical right, and extreme right. The differences are based on the radicality of their ideas and their relationship with liberal democracy, which provides a foundational point of departure. Mudde's work is particularly valuable for establishing the essential demarcation between conventional and far-right formations and offers a differential basis for subsequent studies. However, his original conceptualization of the “center-right” is empirically grounded in European conservative, liberal, and Christian democratic parties, a categorization that does not seamlessly translate to the distinct political landscape and party systems of 21st-century Latin America. Consequently, while drawing on Mudde's core criteria, this analysis will not employ the “center-right” category for its case study.

A more directly applicable framework is offered by Akkerman *et al.* (2016), who propose a dichotomy between the mainstream right and the radical right. In alignment with Mudde, they characterize the mainstream right by: (i) a moderate articulation of right-wing ideas; (ii) a primary emphasis on socioeconomic issues; and (iii) a consistent respect for the procedural and institutional rules of liberal democracy. This conceptualization is particularly relevant for the present study for several reasons.

First, it provides clear, operational criteria for identifying and distinguishing between the party types under analysis. Second, it facilitates the examination of party metamorphosis into strategic adaptation, enabling the study of

interactive dynamics within the party system and their potential outcomes, such as radicalization or mainstreaming—an approach later applied empirically by Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser (2021) in the European context. Third, the framework provided by Akkerman *et al.* (2016) highlights the potential for shifts in electoral agenda emphasis, specifically the proportional weight accorded to socioeconomic versus sociocultural issues. This distinction is underscored by Rovira Kaltwasser's (2024) observation that the Latin American radical right is notable for its vigorous politicization of sociocultural cleavages.

The emphasis both Mudde (2007) and Akkerman *et al.* (2016) place on the relationship to liberal democracy as a key differentiating criterion finds empirical support in recent studies of Latin American parties. Borges & Zanotti (2024) demonstrate that far-right parties in the region share a common illiberal orientation towards democracy, which they further categorize into three subtypes: the populist radical right; the hardline far right, characterized by a pronounced emphasis on social order and security; and the authoritarian-fundamentalist far right, distinguished by its salient adherence to religious conservatism.

To analyze how mainstream right-wing parties respond to electoral challenges from the radical right, scholars employ a “spatial model of partisan competition” (ALENDA & ESCOFFIER 2024). This framework delineates a typology of strategic options available to established parties. Following the work of Bale *et al.* (2010) and Meguid (2005), we can identify three core strategies: (1) dismissal, characterized by ignoring the issues prioritized by radical right parties and refocusing the political agenda elsewhere; (2) confrontation, defined by a defense of core ideological principles and a direct challenge to the positions of radicalized actors; and (3) accommodation, which entails a strategic convergence toward the policy stances of radical right parties and the incorporation of their issue frames.

3. MAINSTREAM AND RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES IN ARGENTINA

The political right constitutes a broad and ideologically diverse set of actors (MAYKA & SMITH 2021). In examining its resilience in Latin America, Luna & Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) distinguish three strategic modalities: non-electoral, non-partisan electoral, and partisan. The partisan strategy entails sustained investment in organizational development and active electoral participation

to shape public policy, representing a commitment to institutional politics. In this context, the Propuesta Republicana (PRO) exemplifies a successful case of partisan right-wing consolidation in Argentina following the democratic restoration of 1983 (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2014).

From a socio-historical perspective, the PRO is situated within the liberal-conservative tradition of the Argentine right (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2015), characterized by its commitment to “the liberal organization of the economy and the republican organization of politics” (BOHOSLAVSKY & MORRESI 2016, 3). It differs from the reactionary-nationalist tradition, which roots Argentine identity in a “Hispanic-Catholic legacy” and regards “the Armed Forces and the Church as custodians of a national essence threatened by liberal and leftist modernity” (MORRESI *ET AL.* 2022, 135).

The PRO's trajectory represents a distinctive and enduring party-building project, contrasting with other unsuccessful attempts to establish neoliberal-oriented parties in the post-dictatorship period, such as the Unión del Centro Democrático (UCUDE) and Recrear para el Crecimiento (Recrear) (VOMMARO 2019). The party originated in the capital as a political venture led by its founder, businessman Mauricio Macri. Macri adeptly capitalized on the profound delegitimization of traditional parties following the 2001 crisis, forging a new political project within Argentina's fragmented and fluid party system (GERVASONI 2018). By promoting a “new” way of “doing politics”, he came out first in the election for the mayor of the City of Buenos Aires in 2003 with an independent platform.

The party was built upon a heterogeneous coalition of groups (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2014), which Macri formalized as the Alianza Propuesta Republicana in 2005 and later consolidated as Propuesta Republicana. Its national projection was achieved through strategic alliances with regionally-based parties, a tactic that ultimately secured the presidency in 2015 (GENÉ & VOMMARO 2023). Furthermore, the PRO cultivated an organized militant base, particularly within its youth wing, fostering a strong partisan identity (GRANDINETTI 2023). Through this process, the PRO successfully consolidated its role as the principal representative of the anti-Peronist space within Argentina's foundational Peronism/anti-Peronism cleavage (OSTIGUY 2009).

The PRO's ideological profile is defined by strategic pragmatism. While its positions align with economic liberalism and sociocultural conservatism, the

party has historically prioritized a “managerial” brand over explicit ideological display, emphasizing technocratic competence and effective governance (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2015). Its program centered on a clear defense of free-market economics, often accompanied by deliberate ambiguity on contentious sociocultural issues. This focus enabled the construction of a consistent and differentiated party identity (VOMMARO 2021), a critical factor for electoral success as noted by Lupu (2016). Crucially, this identity was framed within an explicit acceptance of liberal democratic rules, consciously distancing the party from the Argentine right’s authoritarian legacy (MORRESI 2015).

In contrast, a constellation of radical right parties—Frente NOS, Frente Despertar, and La Libertad Avanza (LLA)—gained national electoral relevance beginning with the 2019 presidential election, capitalizing on a space that opened to the right of the PRO during Mauricio Macri’s presidency (2015-2019). Initially, Frente NOS emphasized nationalist and morally conservative elements, while Frente Despertar focused on an ultra-libertarian economic critique of Macri’s public spending (GENÉ 2024). Their platforms increasingly converged around a fusion of neoliberal economics and reactionary sociocultural politics, themes later partially assimilated by Macri’s 2019 reelection bid (MORRESI & VICENTE 2023).

The most electorally consequential case is La Libertad Avanza (LLA), which propelled Javier Milei to the presidency in 2023 by displacing the PRO-led coalition as the hegemonic force of the right. LLA is characterized as a populist radical right formation (MORRESI & RAMOS 2023; MORRESI & VICENTE 2023), with a distinctive ideological fusionism. It amalgamates disparate right-wing traditions: orthodox libertarian economics, reactionary conservatism, anti-feminist diatribes, the discursive repertoire of the American alt-right, “law and order” platforms, nationalism, vindications of military discourse, and a pronounced relativization of liberal democratic institutions (GENÉ 2024, 15).

This synthesis is articulated around a core opposition to state intervention in both the economic and sociocultural spheres (MORÁN FAÚNDES 2022; MORRESI & VICENTE 2023). Its offensive against “gender ideology” and a supposed “neo-Marxist” agenda served as a key bridge, uniting libertarian and nationalist-reactionary sectors. This strategy also enabled LLA to reach beyond

the traditional upper-middle-class constituencies of the right, appealing to more diverse social strata (SEMÁN 2023).

A critical distinction between the mainstream and radical right in Argentina lies in their relationship with liberal democracy. Scholarly analysis consistently highlights the anti-pluralist character of La Libertad Avanza (BELLONI 2023; GENÉ 2024; MORRESI & VICENTE 2023), marked by the denial of minority groups, a tenuous commitment to democratic processes, and the systematic demonization of political opponents—rhetoric often accompanied by incitements to political violence (MEDZIORSKY & LINDBERG 2023). Furthermore, the Latin American radical right's nostalgic affinity for the security forces raises specific concerns for democratic stability, given the region's history of authoritarian regimes (BORGES & ZANOTTI 2024; KESTLER 2022). This dimension is personified in LLA figures such as Victoria Villarruel, whose background as a military family member and leader of a pro-Armed Forces organization underscores the reactionary and authoritarian elements within this political sector.

The electoral ascendancy of both right-wing variants must be contextualized within the political fatigue following progressive governments. The mainstream right offered a neoliberal alternative centered on technocratic “management,” maintained strategic ambiguity on cultural issues, and adapted to the democratic system. In contrast, the radical right channeled a broader discontent with the political establishment, fueled by perceived governmental failures (ANRIA *ET AL.* 2025). Beyond its radical economic program, this force is fundamentally defined by its illiberal posture and a reactionary backlash against advances in sociocultural and moral rights (MUDDE 2024; STEFANONI 2021).

In summary, the Argentine political landscape since the return to democracy features two distinct right-wing party types that, while sharing a broad ideological core, diverge sharply in their democratic commitments and programmatic radicalism. Following the radical right's electoral breakthroughs in 2019 and 2023, scholars have identified preliminary signals of the PRO's strategic shift toward a more defined and assertive right-wing profile (GENÉ & VOMMARO 2023; MORRESI 2020).

It is precisely this postulated shift that forms the empirical core of this study. While existing literature suggests an approximation, this work seeks to provide systematic evidence to test these claims. Consequently, it aims to address a more nuanced question: If programmatic changes did occur, in which specific dimensions (socioeconomic, sociocultural, democratic) were they evident, and in which were they not?

4. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a diachronic approach to trace the evolution of the Argentine mainstream right's political agenda, contextualized by the growing electoral salience of its radical right counterpart. The central inquiry examines how the thematic focus and strategic positioning of the traditional right have shifted in response to the emergence of this competitive force. To address this, the study pursues two specific objectives: (i) to quantify and analyze the frequency distribution of themes within the mainstream right's campaign discourse across the 2015, 2019, and 2023 electoral cycles; and (ii) to describe and critically evaluate the substantive stances adopted on a selection of key topics throughout this period.

Methodologically, the study investigates the programmatic positions of the *Propuesta Republicana* (PRO), treated as the dependent variable, through a qualitative content analysis of its presidential candidates' public discourse. The independent variable is operationalized as the percentage of the national vote secured by the radical right in the corresponding electoral contests.

The corpus for analysis comprises a systematically assembled collection of campaign statements, identified through a review of two high-circulation Argentine newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, as certified by the Instituto Verificador de Circulaciones (IVC). Data collection adheres to three parameters: (1) the winning presidential tickets³ and of *Cambiamos/Juntos por el Cambio* coalition in the primary elections or *PASO*;⁴ (2) it encompasses

3 The methodological decision to include the vice-presidential candidacy responds to the need to complement the profile of the presidential ticket, insofar as it constitutes a strategic selection by the presidential candidate. Although they were not necessarily members of PRO (in 2019 and 2023), the vice-presidential candidates aligned themselves with the presidential campaigns, participated actively in the electoral process, and helped to round out the ticket's programmatic profile.

4 The Elecciones Primarias Abiertas Simultáneas y Obligatorias – PASO (Open, Simultaneous, and Mandatory Primary Elections) were established in 2009 for legislative and presidential elections. This process determines which parties are eligible to compete in national elections and to select the slate of candidates that will represent each political party.

the official campaign periods defined by the National Electoral Chamber for the PASO, general election, and any subsequent runoff in which the coalition participated; and (3) it relies exclusively on the two aforementioned newspapers.

The initial data collection yielded 353 periodical publications. From these, direct statements by political representatives were extracted and coded, forming the final corpus for analysis (N = 358). The electoral context and temporal scope for this corpus are detailed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

TABLE 1
Case selection and electoral relevance of mainstream and radical right
(2015-2023, general elections)

Year	Mainstream right	Radical right	Vote percentage (mainstream right)	Vote percentage (radical right)
2015	Cambiamos	N/A	34.15 %	N/A
2019	Juntos por el Cambio	Frente NOS; Frente Despertar	40.28 %	3.18 %
2023	Juntos por el Cambio	La Libertad Avanza	23.81 %	29.98 %

Source: Own elaboration

TABLE 2
Candidates and period for mainstream right campaign analysis (2015-2023)

Dates	Candidates
From 24-June-2023 to 20-October-2023	Patricia Bullrich (PRO) - Luis Petri (Unión Cívica Radical)
From 22-June-2019 to 25-October-2019	Mauricio Macri (PRO) - Miguel Ángel Pichetto (Partido Justicialista)
From 10-June-2015 to 19-November-2015	Mauricio Macri (PRO) - Gabriela Michetti (PRO)

Source: Own elaboration

To ensure systematic and comparable categorization, we employed a predominantly pre-categorical strategy based on the classification scheme of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (LEHMANN *ET AL.* 2025). This framework is selected for its demonstrated utility in mapping party political

preferences across different thematic axes and its proven effectiveness in studies of political parties across various regions, including Latin America (ALENDA *ET AL.* 2024; ARES & VOLKENS 2017; MIRANDA OLIVARES *ET AL.* 2022).

The analytical strategy for processing the corpus data is primarily qualitative. While a descriptive quantitative overview of category frequencies is provided, the core of the analysis involves a qualitative content analysis through phrase coding. This method entails “verifying the presence of themes, words, or concepts in content and their meaning within a text in a context” (ARBELÁEZ GÓMEZ & ONRUBIA GOÑI 2016, 19).

The coding of statements into pro-market or pro-state positions is based on the categorial framework developed by Volkens & Merz (2015), as outlined in Table 3. For the sociocultural dimension, the operationalization follows the categories of “moral issues,” “immigration,” and “security” established by Abou-Chadi and Krause (2021), detailed in Table 4. This approach, however, is not strictly confined to these predefined categories. To ensure analytical comprehensiveness, I employed an open coding strategy. This allows for the inclusion of statements that fall outside the core framework, such as those pertaining to governmental and administrative efficiency (e.g., per303).⁵

The analysis of the party’s relationship with democracy examines three core dimensions: (1) direct references to the democratic framework; (2) positioning along a pluralism-antipluralism axis (MEDZIHORSKY & LINDBERG 2023); and (3) discursive engagement with the legacy of the last military dictatorship (see Table 5). This tripartite analytical framework is applied consistently to the campaign data, thereby providing an empirical test of the theoretical constructs outlined in the preceding section.

5 For a detailed explanation of each specific category, see the CMP coding manual (LEHMANN *ET AL.* 2025), available at <http://bit.ly/4ngM7Lz>

TABLE 3

Categorization framework for socioeconomic categories for campaign analysis

Market economy	Planned economy
Free market economy (per401)	Market regulation (per403)
Incentives for entrepreneurial activity (per402)	Economic planning (per404)
Economic growth (per410)	Keynesian economics (per409)
	Controlled economy (per412)
Economic orthodoxy (per414)	Nationalization (per413)
Welfare state limitation (per505)	Anti-growth economy (per416)
Labor groups: Negative (per702)	Welfare state expansion (per504)
	Labor groups: Positive (per701)

Source: Own elaboration based on Volkens & Merz (2015)

TABLE 4

Categorization framework for sociocultural positions

Categories for moral issues, security, and immigration	
Traditional morality: Positive (per603)	Traditional morality: Negative (per604)
Multiculturalism: Positive (per608)	Multiculturalism: Negative (per607)
National way of life: Positive (601)	National way of life: Negative (per602)
Law and order (per605)	Disadvantaged minority groups (per705)

Source: Own elaboration based on Abou-Chadi & Krause (2021)

TABLE 5

Categorization framework for democratic positions for campaign analysis

Democracy	Democracy (negative)
Democracy (per202)	Low commitment to democratic process (antipluralism)
Transition: Pre-democratic elites – negative (per305_5)	Demonization of political opponents (antipluralism)
	Disrespect for fundamental rights of minorities (antipluralism)
Transition: rehabilitation and compensation (per305_6)	Encouragement of political violence (antipluralism)
	Transition: pre-democratic elites – positive (per305_4)

Source: Own elaboration based on Medzihorsky & Lindberg (2023) and Lehmann *et al.* (2025)

5. THE PRAGMATIC PARTY BEYOND LEFT AND RIGHT IN 2015

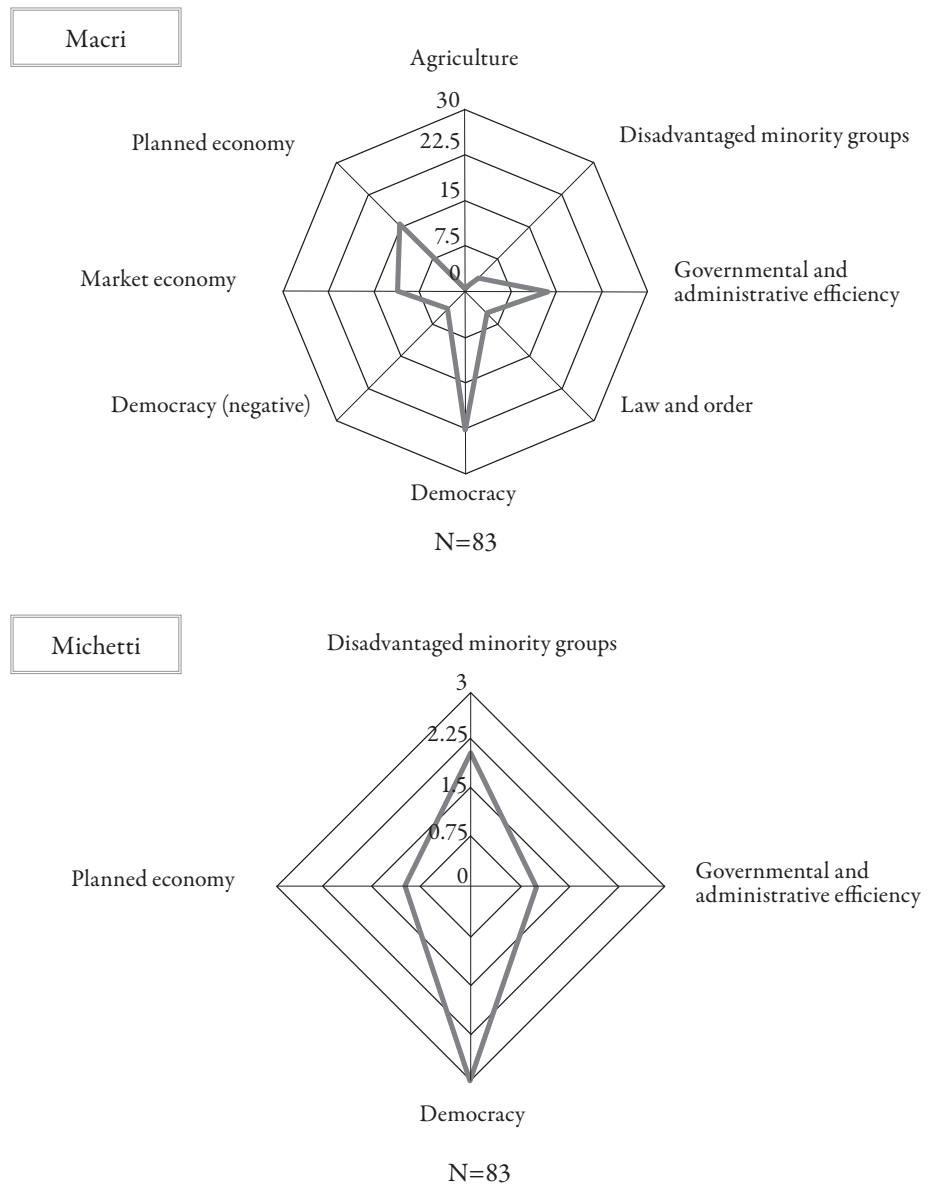
Mauricio Macri's initial presidential candidacy emerged within a context defined by the exhaustion of the incumbent economic model, prominent corruption scandals, and escalating social conflict between business sectors and Kirchnerist administrations (GENÉ & VOMMARO 2023). This period witnessed a regional shift towards a moderate right, which sought to establish governmental legitimacy primarily on managerial efficiency rather than ideological commitment, reflecting an electoral right's adherence to democratic processes as the sole legitimate avenue to power (PELFINI 2020).

As a pragmatic party singularly focused on “winning power,” its electoral-maximizing logic compelled it to address several strategic challenges. To compensate for weaknesses in subnational organizational infrastructure, it formed a coalition with the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), a century-old party with a deeply entrenched territorial presence (VOMMARO 2019). Concurrently, the task of forging a distinct party identity separate from traditional political forces resulted in a programmatic emphasis on renewing “the way of doing politics,” grounded in principles of effective management and administration (MORRESI 2015).

During the 2015 electoral campaign, a central objective of the PRO's agenda was to distance itself from the historical image of the Argentine right (BOHOSLAVSKY & MORRESI 2016). A key effort involved moderating its economic positions; this was the only electoral contest in which its discourse featured more positive references to the state's role in socioeconomic life than to the market (see Figure 1). While the party integrated pro-market elements that qualify it as a right-wing project by focusing on economic growth and monetary orthodoxy to combat inflation, its policy proposals remained cautious. The announced removal of the “cepo” (the currency controls that limit the ability to buy or sell any foreign currency) stands out as the sole concrete market-liberalizing measure explicitly promoted.

FIGURE 1

Frequency distribution of themes in public discourses of the Macri-Michetti
presidential ticket, by electoral campaign



Source: Own elaboration

Furthermore, this electoral cycle unfolded against the backdrop of the Kirchner legacy, which retained considerable social legitimacy (VOMMARO & GENÉ 2022). In this context, candidate Macri did not reject state intervention per se but instead advocated for its more efficient administration in the service of citizens. His tenure as mayor the City of Buenos Aires was strategically invoked to substantiate this claim:

[...] no hay dudas de que el Estado está más presente y funciona mucho mejor en la ciudad de Buenos Aires que en la provincia de Buenos Aires. Ahí están los ocho años de gestión de cada uno.

[...] La gestión de la ciudad marca lo contrario, y si la gente decide confiar, van a ver que voy a trabajar para todos los argentinos, en especial para los que menos tienen. Que me juzguen por lo que haya avanzado con relación a trabajar por la pobreza cero en el país.”⁶

“[...] there is no doubt that the State is more present and functions far more effectively in the City of Buenos Aires than in the Province of Buenos Aires. The eight years of administration in each case speak for themselves.

[...] The city’s record shows the opposite, and if people choose to place their trust in me, they will see that I will work for all Argentines, especially those who have the least. Let me be judged by the progress I make toward achieving zero poverty in the country.”

Accordingly, Macri committed to preserving key economic policies inherited from Kirchnerism, notably forgoing the privatization of emblematic state enterprises such as Aerolíneas Argentinas and Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) in favor of improved administration. He likewise pledged to maintain social programs, including the Asignación Universal por Hijo (AUH).⁷ Vice-presidential candidate Michetti reinforced this stance, asserting that such transfers do not constitute “gifts” or “handouts” but rather “constitutional rights held by those living in poverty” (SOLÁ 2015).

This discursive strategy sought to mitigate public apprehension regarding potential retrenchment of social rights, a fear historically associated with right-wing governance in the region (LUNA & ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2014).

⁶ Mauricio Macri, in an interview for La Nación (ROSEMBERG 2015A)

⁷ The Asignación Universal por Hijo (Universal Child Allowance) is a non-contributory social protection program established in 2009 during the first administration of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. It provides monthly monetary transfers per child under eighteen years of age to households in which parents are unemployed, employed in the informal sector, or engaged in domestic service.

Macri repeatedly voiced concern for the welfare of impoverished households, retirees, and workers (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2015a; 2015b), and pledged to “end poverty, social exclusion, and inequality” (BULLRICH 2015). Furthermore, he drew a deliberate distinction between his project and the neoliberal administration of Carlos Menem (1989–1999), arguing that Argentines were not condemned to choose between populist governments and adjustment-oriented neoliberal ones (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2015c; BULLRICH 2015). The privatization wave of the 1990s was explicitly characterized as a negative precedent.

A further point of departure from the conventional image of the Argentine right concerned the PRO's relationship with democracy. Historically, the Argentine right had been complicit in authoritarian ruptures, a legacy that situated it outside the democratic consensus (BOHOSLAVSKY & MORRESI 2011). In this context, the PRO's unequivocal adherence to liberal democratic norms constituted a significant innovation for an electoral right-wing force (MORRESI 2015). Macri's campaign registered numerous affirmations of constitutional order and democratic procedure. Particularly notable were his appeals to democratic coexistence with ideological adversaries, framed within a call for “national unity” and transversal dialogue. This orientation was encapsulated in statements such as “Peronism is not authoritarianism nor drug trafficking, which must be expelled from the country,” and his invocation of Peronist symbolism: “the Perón of the seventies understood the importance of unity. And more than ever I want to raise that flag. We must unite the country; we have already tried confrontation and it went badly for us” (ROSEMBERG 2015A). Macri also selectively valorized political traditions outside the PRO's orbit, observing that “from the Radicals I highlight the defense of institutions; from the Peronists, the defense of work and social justice” (ROSEMBERG 2015b).

In summary, the 2015 campaign axis was oriented toward dispelling fears associated with “change” and persuading broader electoral sectors to coalesce around a liberal-conservative agenda (BOHOSLAVSKY & MORRESI 2016). Programmatic commitments concentrated on preserving extant social rights, improving governmental management, and optimizing the administrative efficiency of the state. A cultural transformation in the *modus operandi* of politics was proposed, grounded in probity and integrity and articulated in

opposition to Kirchnerism, characterized as synonymous with populism and corruption (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2015). Despite its ideological orientation, the PRO exhibited considerable reluctance to self-identify as right-wing. This reticence is attributable both to the limited popular identification with such a label and to the historical burden of Argentine right, indelibly associated with authoritarianism. In this regard, the party displayed multiple attributes consistent with the ideal type of a mainstream right party (AKKERMAN *ET AL.* 2016; ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2024). This consistency included programmatic moderation, a pronounced emphasis on socioeconomic issues coupled with the strategic omission of value-based cultural themes, and an unequivocal reaffirmation of democratic commitment as a mechanism for consolidating legitimate standing within the party system.

6. THE ADVANCE TOWARD A MORE SHARPLY DEFINED RIGHT IN 2019

The centre-right's tenure in government constituted a failed experiment: it proved unable to implement the economic reforms it had pursued, impeded both by resistance from sociopolitical coalitions aligned with Kirchnerism (VOMMARO & GENÉ 2022) and by programmatic divergences within its own governing coalition (VOMMARO 2019). The outcomes of its economic policies were disappointing, and the administration concluded with a marked increase in inflation. In seeking reelection, the incumbent coalition Juntos por el Cambio found itself at a crossroads, confronted by dwindling social and political support in the face of a unified Peronist opposition: Frente de Todos (FdT). This erosion of voter confidence was particularly pronounced in the coalition's relationship with the economic elite—widely considered a core constituency (GIBSON 1996)—which exhibited visible signs of disarticulation from the government (GENÉ & VOMMARO 2023). Concurrently, disaffection emerged within another segment of the right-wing electorate following the congressional debate on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (Interrupción Voluntaria del Embarazo – IVE) program, a process habilitated by President Macri that turned out to divide positions even among officialist legislators.

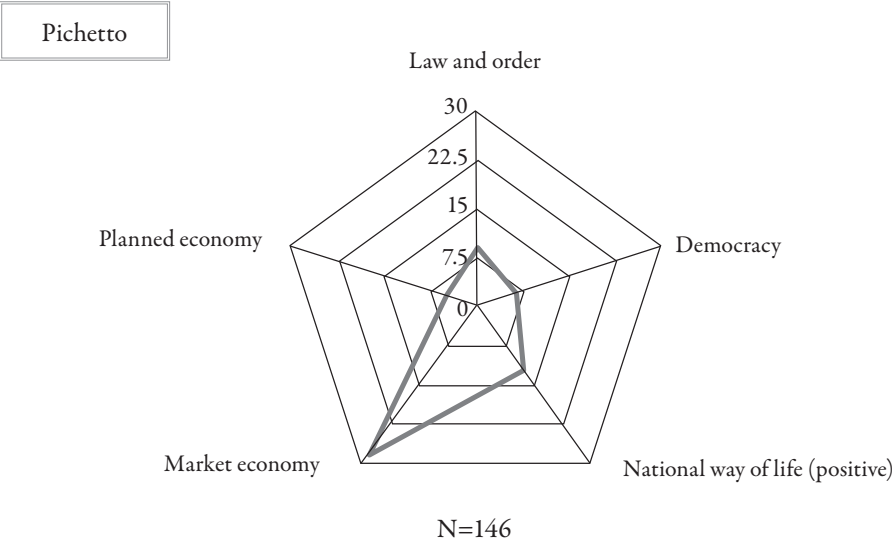
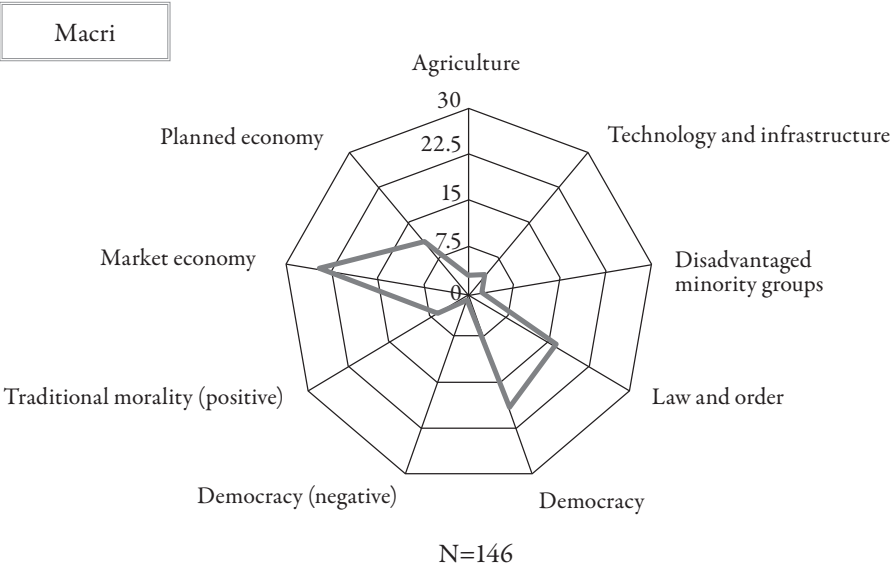
By the conclusion of the four-year administration, the crystallization of electoral alternatives to the right of the PRO had become evident. These

formations articulated more culturally conservative and economically liberal platforms: the Frente NOS, led by former military officer Juan José Gómez Centurión, and the Frente Despertar, headed by liberal economist José Luis Espert. Both candidacies, identified with a more radicalized right, successfully surpassed the PASO threshold and secured participation in the general election. Their electoral performance, however, remained largely testimonial, jointly capturing approximately 5% of the vote.

Within this adverse electoral scenario, Macri adopted a markedly more pronounced pro-market orientation vis-à-vis state intervention (see Figure 2). The promotion of economic openness and free trade constituted one of the most salient axes of his discursive platform. In multilateral fora, Macri actively defended the expansion of international commercial exchange and its positive implications for economic growth, while underscoring the Cambiemos administration's record in advancing liberalization policies. He characterized the proposed free trade agreement between Mercosur and the European Union as the "definitive path" for Argentina to "advance from backwardness and isolation" (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019a). In so doing, he constructed a stark binary opposition between the Cambiemos model—predicated on "openness to the world" and "freedom"—and that of Kirchnerism, which he portrayed as enclosing the nation within a "cardboard-picker spirit" and, more gravely, opening a gateway "to Chavismo" (ROSEMBERG 2019).

FIGURE 2

Frequency distribution of themes in public discourses of the Macri-Pichetto presidential ticket, by Electoral Campaign



Source: Own elaboration

Regarding economic policy, the 2019 campaign marked a clear departure from the euphemistic register employed four years earlier. Macri explicitly ratified the necessity of fiscal adjustment in accordance with the agreement signed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), following the historic loan extended to Argentina in 2018. His discourse assumed an increasingly polarizing tenor, framing the electoral contest as a binary choice between economic orthodoxy and “populism.” Along these lines, he committed to deepening financial reforms, asserting: “We are starting to come out, now we must accelerate. [...] to have a more competitive economy, with a state that removes its foot from on top with distortive taxes” (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019b). Furthermore, his relationship with organized labor became overtly conflictual; unions were portrayed as part of the problem, accused of profiting from the state and obstructing the normal functioning of economic life (JASTREBLANSKY 2019).

Conversely, favorable references to state intervention occupied a considerably diminished proportion of campaign discourse. Isolated announcements regarding welfare state expansion and economic controls were nonetheless recorded, including extraordinary increases for AUH beneficiaries and a ninety-day freeze on fuel prices. These measures, however, must be contextualized within a specific electoral conjuncture: they were adopted days after Macri's defeat by nearly twenty points in the PASO primaries against Peronist candidate Alberto Fernández. As such, they are best understood as targeted relief measures of an electoral character, designed to mitigate the adverse effects of his administration's record and to catalyze a potential political recovery.

A particularly salient feature of the 2019 campaign concerned Macri's positioning on moral issues pertaining to the conservative agenda. Prior to assuming the presidency, he had addressed such questions with strategic ambiguity, reflective of internal party divisions. By the end of the 2019 electoral cycle, however, his stance had crystallized with notable clarity and force: he declared himself opposed to abortion and “in favor of both lives” (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019c).

This strategic repositioning cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the electoral threat posed by the radical right, specifically the Frente NOS, whose political platform was squarely centered on traditional

morality. This party's presidential candidate directed his criticisms not only against progressivism but also against Macrism itself, asserting that "he [Macri] sent the [abortion] bill to Congress and committed not to veto it. This does not give the impression of pro-life conduct" (GIL VIDAL 2019). In response to this challenge from his right flank, Macri sought to secure his conservative constituency and forestall vote defection by reiterating his opposition to abortion throughout the campaign.

His vice-presidential candidate, Miguel Ángel Pichetto—a Peronist dissident from Kirchnerism—further contributed to the more sharply defined right-wing profile of the 2019 electoral option. On economic matters, Pichetto criticized state intervention, particularly price and wage agreements. He frequently emphasized the need to reduce the welfare state, arguing that social plans had eroded the work ethic and consolidated "a structure of poverty." In his view, "the notion that middle sectors and workers must sustain, through their taxes, a structure of people who do not work is unviable" (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019d).

Furthermore, Pichetto's rhetoric reinforced the "law and order" axis of the campaign, particularly concerning the fight against drug trafficking. In this context, he explicitly linked the arrival of foreigners to security problems, stating: "I have no problem with those who come to work in our country, but there are also many who come to commit crimes" (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019e). Consistent with his critique of an "open doors" policy toward criminal immigration, he advocated for immediate expulsion and the establishment of stricter entry controls through some form of visa system, framing these measures as necessary to safeguard the security of Argentines.

Another axis of the 2019 campaign was the appeal to republicanism against the populist threat. In this regard, Macri maintained a discursive line similar to that of the previous election, oriented toward the defense of institutionalism, republican values, and national unity. He further invoked human rights policy and justice in relation to the last military dictatorship, asserting, for instance, that "memory is fundamental to know our history and what we do not want to repeat in our future" and that "the postulates of Memory, Truth, and Justice continue to endure as state policies" (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2019f).

Taken together, Macri's agenda during the 2019 campaign evidenced a discernible turn toward a more sharply defined right-wing identity. Pronouncements from the Macri-Pichetto ticket referring to the free market acquired notable salience, while a coherent discursive articulation emerged linking Kirchnerism, unionism, social movements, and beneficiaries of state aid (KESSLER *ET AL.* 2025). These sectors were collectively portrayed as having appropriated the state (KESSLER *ET AL.* 2025) and erected an impoverishing structure sustained by the taxes of working people. This discursive formation, characteristic of the Argentine right in the post-dictatorship period, has been identified by Iglesias (2024, 176) as the discourse of the "productive Argentina." It rests upon a foundational opposition between a productive social sector—defined by meritocracy and labor—and an unproductive sector that "does not work and is manipulated by the political class for its own benefit" (IGLESIAS 2024, 176).

Within this semantic construction, a nativist component of the Argentine mainstream right becomes particularly noteworthy at this electoral instance. An outgroup is constructed around immigrants, yet the basis of their exclusion differs markedly from European radical right discourses. Rejection is articulated not primarily through ethnic or cultural difference but through the perceived threat posed by immigrants to the material well-being of native-born groups. This dimension thus constitutes a distinctive feature of the Argentine mainstream right's nativism: an economic, rather than ethno-cultural, logic of exclusion (MUDDE 2019).

It is also pertinent to note the incorporation of conservative cultural elements into Macri's campaign agenda, which evinced a tendency toward confluence between two distinct traditions of the Argentine right: the nationalist-reactionary and the liberal-conservative. This phenomenon unfolded within an electoral context marked by a rupture within the right-wing camp. Competitors to the right of the PRO shared the diagnosis that the Macri presidency had been insufficiently right-wing; their activist bases were substantially composed of disenchanted *Cambiemita*⁸ sectors seeking alternatives more unequivocally identified with the right. It was under these competitive

8 The term refers to the sociopolitical actors who supported the Cambiemos coalition.

dynamics that Macri's candidacy incorporated discursive nuances responsive to the demands and criticisms emanating from his right-wing competitors, most notably those concerning the deepening and acceleration of pro-market reforms and opposition to legal abortion.

With respect to the relationship with democracy, no significant departures from the previous period are observed. References to justice and human rights policies, the defense of republican institutions, and unwavering support for the democratic process remained central axes of Macri's discourse. In this dimension, there is no identifiable evidence to suggest a deviation from the conceptual parameters that are characteristic of a mainstream right party committed to liberal democracy.

7. A BLURRED MAINSTREAM RIGHT AMIDST THE DISPUTE FOR RIGHT-WING HEGEMONY IN 2023

The 2019 electoral defeat deepened the internal fissure within the traditional right, a cleavage that became increasingly evident both within the PRO and its broader coalition. Two distinct diagnoses of the electoral outcome gave rise to competing strategies vis-à-vis sociopolitical actors (GENÉ 2024). The first, led by Horacio Rodríguez Larreta—then mayor of the City of Buenos Aires—defended the party's historical identity and its emphasis on managerial competence. The second, embodied by then PRO president Patricia Bullrich, advocated for a more sharply defined right-wing profile aimed at forestalling vote leakage toward the radical right. This latter option, which garnered tacit support from former President Mauricio Macri, progressively gained ground within the political space.

It should be noted that this internal divergence had intensified considerably since the emergence of a radical right alternative represented by Javier Milei's La Libertad Avanza (LLA) in the 2021 legislative elections. On that occasion, LLA secured 17% of the vote in the City of Buenos Aires (MINISTERIO DEL INTERIOR 2021), a traditional stronghold of the PRO. This electoral incursion generated significant concern among PRO leadership and presaged an intense dispute for hegemony within the right-wing space in the forthcoming presidential contest.

This internal struggle translated into a fierce competition for power, culminating in primary elections in which Bullrich emerged victorious, becoming the standard-bearer of the traditional right in the general election. Alongside her running mate Luis Petri, a figure from the UCR, Bullrich confronted a three-way electoral scenario comprising: the Peronist candidacy of then Economy Minister Sergio Massa; the LLA ticket headed by Javier Milei and Victoria Villarruel, which had experienced a marked ascent in opinion polls and obtained approximately 30% of the vote in that year's PASO (MINISTERIO DEL INTERIOR 2023); and her own centre-right coalition.

Regarding the predominant orientation of the traditional right in 2023, the electoral campaign evidenced not merely a continuity of the rightward shift observed in 2019 but a marked deepening of that trajectory (see Figure 3). Amidst a profound inflationary crisis, the PRO candidate's agenda converged substantially with that of her libertarian adversary around the imperatives of fiscal balance and economic adjustment. She declared that her administration would be "the most austere that the Argentine Republic remembers" (LA NACIÓN 2023a) and pledged to pursue "maximum austerity" (MORENO 2023). Under the slogan "No more money printed in Argentina" (VÁZQUEZ 2023a), she proposed reforming the Central Bank's Charter to "establish the prohibition, the impediment of *cepos*" (VÁZQUEZ 2023b), in addition to constitutionally restricting monetary issuance (NAISHTAT 2023). In this regard, her policy platform transcended conventional economic instruments and encompassed institutional reforms designed to entrench economic orthodoxy.

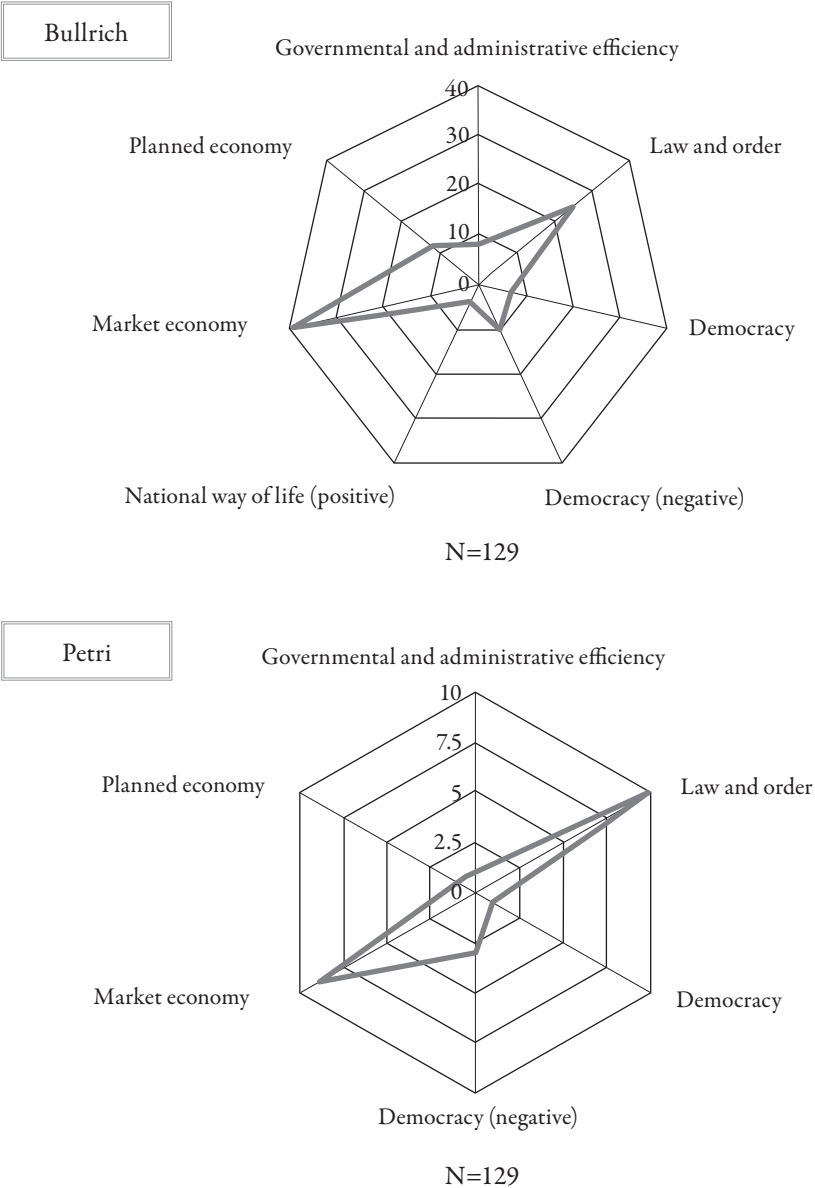
She further committed to the immediate elimination of *cepos* and export duties, alongside a reduction of the tax burden, which she characterized as "anti-production." Her vision was articulated as a "rules-based capitalism [...] where everyone has the possibility to grow because the government's highway runs out of obstacles" (LA NACIÓN 2023a). She justified her advocacy of governmental retrenchment on the grounds that "society spends money better than the state" and that the state's legitimate purview should be limited to "health, education, equipped armed forces, and security forces" (LA NACIÓN 2023a).

In these respects, Bullrich's discourse continued and radicalized the meritocratic framing present in the 2019 campaign. She asserted the necessity of curtailing the welfare state, contending that beneficiaries of social plans were enmeshed in a vicious state model. Accordingly, she proposed that "in four years there will be no social plan left in Argentina and everyone [will go] to work" (GONZÁLEZ DEL SOLAR 2023).

Echoing the rhetoric of a state captured by Kirchnerism that permeated previous electoral cycles, Bullrich characterized the Argentine state as "blocked" and "colonized" (VÁZQUEZ 2023b), denouncing it as "the cave of La C  mpora" (V  ZQUEZ 2023c), a formation that "takes [money] from people to concentrate it in a corrupt bureaucracy that keeps everything" (AZARKEVICH 2023). She likewise intensified the hostility toward organized labor that had already surfaced in Macri's latest candidacy. Within Bullrich's discursive framework, unionism was explicitly equated with mafias that obstructed reform and was presented as a structurally distortive component of economic life.

FIGURE 3

Frequency distribution of themes in public discourses of the Bullrich-Petri
presidential ticket, by electoral campaign



Source: Own elaboration

Notwithstanding these affinities with radical right discourse, certain strategic nuances evidence an attempt to demarcate the PRO candidacy as a “serious alternative” distinct from its libertarian competitor. This distinction was articulated most clearly through an affirmative stance regarding the role of the state and the defense of public services, rather than their privatization. Bullrich explicitly rejected the libertarian candidate’s proposal to privatize the university system, thereby marking a point of divergence with the radical right by defending public education, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET, for its Spanish acronym), and public health. In so doing, she repudiated the prospect of a “market society” (ORIGLIA 2023a), asserting: “We are another society [than the libertarians]. We are the society that believes in public education. That believes in training. That believes education is the door out to well-being and progress” (GONZÁLEZ DEL SOLAR 2023). She further distanced herself from more radical reform proposals advanced by the libertarian candidate, including dollarization and the elimination of the Central Bank.

A further salient feature of Bullrich’s campaign was the pronounced predominance of references to “law and order.” Drawing on her tenure as Security Minister during the Macri administration and reacting to episodes of supermarket looting, she declared: “First of all, I want to make a brief mention of what is happening these days: chaos, disorder, a society without law” (LA NACIÓN 2023a). Her discursive framing transcended the conventional boundaries of crime and drug trafficking; she argued that the country’s underlying affliction resided in the erosion of “order” itself: “[...] governability is changing chaos for order. Anomie must be replaced by law” (ORIGLIA 2023b). Within this framework, she identified unionism and social movements as principal vectors of this disorder and advocated for a “hardline” policy against them. She asserted, for instance, that “Porteños are victims of the *piquetes*⁹ and strikes” (LA NACIÓN 2023b) and that “no police officer, no gendarme needs an order to evict a *piquete*” (VÁZQUEZ 2023a).

In this dimension, the candidate was closely complemented by her vice-presidential running mate, Luis Petri, with whom she shared a convergent

9 The term *piquete* refers to roadblocks or pickets, and *piquetero* denotes a member of the *piquetero* movement, a social movement of unemployed workers that emerged in Argentina during the mid-1990s.

agenda centered on security and social order. Petri, in addition to emphasizing the necessity of applying penal consequences to protests deemed “violent,” proceeded from the diagnosis that the incumbent Peronist government was complicit with unionism. He proposed an alliance between *piquetero* organizations and the ruling party, both positioned in opposition to the citizen interest. This antagonistic construction enabled the mainstream right ticket to justify explicitly repressive policies framed as necessary for the restoration of order.

Another observable particularity of Bullrich’s candidacy consists of the nativist contours of her discourse. In continuity with Pichetto’s 2019 stance, her rejection of immigration was articulated not through cultural or ethnic criteria but through the perceived threat that migrants pose to the distribution of state resources, framed as favoring impoverished foreign populations to the detriment of native-born groups (DÍAZ *ET AL.* 2023). The center-right candidate’s discourses were inscribed within this logic, asserting that “Argentine universities are empty of Argentine students because almost half of the enrollment is occupied by foreign students who come and take those places” (REDACCIÓN CLARÍN 2023). Basic public services such as health and education thus became open flanks for the development of a xenophobic reasoning that appealed to the logic of foreigners appropriating limited resources. Hostility toward outgroups became particularly pronounced when such groups are perceived as encroaching upon the material interests of the native-born population (RYDGREN 2008, 740, 743).

Finally, Bullrich’s relationship with liberal democracy presents a more complex and ambivalent profile. On the one hand, her discourse abounded with references to institutionalism and democratic processes. At various junctures, she sought to explicitly demarcate herself from her radical right adversary. This occurred, for instance, when she differentiated herself from Milei following his proposal to hold a plebiscite on abortion legislation: “It seems to me that countries must respect legal processes. Those laws that have been voted are laws in force” (IGLESIAS 2023). She also issued unequivocal condemnations of the last military dictatorship, questioning Milei on the grounds that “he went a bit overboard by denying the dictatorship” (SERRA 2023) and asserting that “the actions of the military dictatorship in Argentina are not a matter of numbers and that killing 8,000 people or 30,000 is an atrocity. Argentina had

disappeared persons and brutalities by the dictatorship” (LA NACIÓN 2023c). These statements confirm that, at certain moments, Bullrich endeavored to preserve the PRO’s brand as a modern center-right force committed to the democratic framework and clearly differentiated from the radical right.

At the same time, her campaign was not without alarming signals suggestive of a potential erosion of that commitment. First, a pronounced concentration of argumentative resources grounded in personal insult and disqualification is observable. Throughout the electoral cycle, Bullrich resorted with notable frequency to offensive epithets and ad hominem attacks to discredit her political adversaries. She characterized Javier Milei as “the crazy one,” and referred to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and her allies as thieves, corrupt, mafiosi, and *chorros*.¹⁰ She sought, for example, to capitalize on the scandal involving then Mayor of Lomas de Zamora, Martín Insaurralde, through defamation and irony: “I came to Lomas de Zamora because the brutal pornography of Insaurralde has been what filled our glass of twenty years of theft [...] in Insaurralde we have seen Kirchnerist corruption” (VÁZQUEZ 2023d). In sum, the campaign evidenced a sustained attempt at demonization and personal vilification of opponents through emotional and provocative linguistic resources, a discursive repertoire that risks contributing to the delegitimization of political adversaries.

This discursive modality brings Bullrich’s campaign style into closer alignment with that of her libertarian adversary, whose discourse has been characterized by the permanent stigmatization, discrimination, and vilification of subjects constructed as enemies (FAIR 2025). Through mockery, insults, threats, verbal aggression, and related offenses, Milei manifested a belligerent attitude toward recipients of state assistance, public sector employees, feminist and sexual diversity communities (BERDONDINI & VINUESA 2024), as well as toward the political establishment, including figures of the traditional right. He infamously referred to Bullrich as a “*montonera* bomb-thrower” (INFOBAE 2023), alluding to her past militancy in Peronist youth organizations. This style was already evident in 2021, when he disparaged the then mayor of the City of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, with expressions such as “leftist piece of shit” and “I can crush you even in a wheelchair” (INFOBAE 2021).

10 *Chorro* is an Argentine colloquialism for “thief” or “robber.”

Furthermore, Bullrich's campaign discourse expressed a resounding rejection of consensus and negotiation with actors holding significantly divergent positions. In this vein, the candidate explicitly refused to engage in agreements with Kirchnerism, *piquetero* organizations, and large segments of unionism. More strikingly, she advanced toward the rhetorical extinction of opposing ideologies, declaring that "we must dismantle ideologies that have done harm to Argentina" (LA NACIÓN 2023d). Her running mate, Luis Petri, reinforced this orientation, arguing, for example: "I exclude all those who brought us here" (YBARRA 2023).

This is a non-minor fact, as one of the essential traits of liberal democracy resides in the recognition of the inevitability and desirability of societal differences (MEDZIHORSKY & LINDBERG 2023). Bullrich's candidacy evinced a discernible disdain for the democratic processes of negotiation and agreement, as well as a frank disposition to impose one's own will without due consideration for the rights of other groups. The constant allusion to the delegitimization and destruction of a political sector holding divergent ideological convictions allows the inference of a limited commitment to pluralism (LEVITSKY & ZIBLATT 2018).

In this regard, the denial of political opponents and their sociopolitical coalitions reveals further affinities with the radical right. Within LLA, a skeptical perspective on democratic politics and a profound contempt for the construction of agreements predominates, with the latter being dismissed as a practice functional to the interests of "the caste" (BELLONI 2023). Concurrently, its tension with democracy emanates from the anti-pluralist contours delineated by the nationalist-reactionary tradition that informs its political space, "in which reason and truth must impose themselves over agreements, institutional obstacles, and social forces that resist them" (MORRESI & VICENTE 2023, 73). The contempt—and frequently, the verbal aggression—directed at state-linked sectors by LLA referents reflects an intolerance toward pluralism that justifies the rollback of rights for those social sectors, constructed as obstacles to national development.

Taken together, the mainstream right's profile in 2023 presents specific signals of commitment to the state and the democratic framework that distinguish it from the radicality of its right-wing competitor. Yet a

more explicit articulation of its own right-wing ideological component is unmistakably evident. When comparing redistributive axes with LLA's profile, both formations share the diagnosis of a state provider of deficient public services, incapable of resolving economic problems, and transformed into an impediment to individual progress. This shared diagnosis translates into common proposals regarding economic deregulation and the elimination of the fiscal deficit. Correspondingly, in both imaginaries, a political elite appears that monopolizes public resources for the benefit of minority interests.

In that sense, both right-wing variants explore the same electoral universe: voters located on the anti-Peronist axis who resonate with a right-wing offer. However, LLA radicalizes this offer through proposals such as dollarization. Furthermore, while the traditional right is itself part of the political establishment (MORRESI & VICENTE 2023), denominated "the caste" in libertarian discourse, the antagonistic space it constructs is occupied by Kirchnerism and its sociopolitical coalitions (KESSLER *ET AL.* 2025).

As in the 2019 election, the mainstream right also exhibited certain nativist nuances reflected in its rejection of immigrants. It is pertinent to note that this xenophobic attitude is grounded in the perception of a threat to the material resources of native-born Argentines. This stance diverges from that of some nationalist-reactionary factions within LLA, which base their rejection of immigration on civic-cultural grounds. For instance, Victoria Villarruel has articulated a position that distinguishes between immigrants from African countries and those considered "good immigrants" (VILLARRUEL 2018). Furthermore, while the radical right has resorted to cores such as "gender ideology" to articulate its offensive against state intervention (BERDONDINI & VINUESA 2024; MORRESI & RAMOS 2023; MORRESI & VICENTE 2023), this discursive tool did not form part of the traditional right's repertoire, which continues to appeal principally to the Peronism-anti-Peronism cleavage.

The centrality of social order within the traditional right's discursive repertoire acquires particular salience in this electoral contest, as it reflects an authoritarian character that became increasingly pronounced. According to this ideological component, society must be structured according to a determinate and correct order, and infractions of that order must be met with severe punishments (MUDDE 2007). As various scholars

have noted, authoritarianism constitutes a core attribute that characterizes the Latin American far right (KESTLER 2022; BORGES & ZANOTTI 2024). Consequently, in this dimension one may affirm a displacement of the Argentine mainstream right toward what Borges and Zanotti (2024) have conceptualized as the “hardline far-right.”

Finally, the proliferation of anti-pluralist elements within the traditional right's discourse is particularly worthy of note. Whereas a mainstream right is distinguished by its acceptance of liberal democratic principles, the systematic deployment of narratives that demonize and delegitimize political opponents distances the Bullrich-Petri ticket from this “mainstream” ideal type. In terms of anti-pluralist character, this discursive repertoire enables its assimilation to the radical right and its standard-bearer, Javier Milei.

8. CONCLUSION

This study illuminates significant transformations in the PRO's agenda against the backdrop of the radical right's electoral ascendance. Drawing on systematic empirical evidence, it generally corroborates a process of increasing explicitness of right-wing ideological components in the party's campaigns—components that were deliberately attenuated in 2015 (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2015)—as well as an assimilation strategy adopted in response to the growing electoral relevance of the radical right, as suggested by various scholarly precedents.

Although sociocultural themes were progressively incorporated and references to them increased over the last two electoral cycles, the predominance of socioeconomic issues remained constant throughout the period under analysis. Within the socioeconomic sphere, discourse shifted from an emphasis on management and state administrative efficiency to the adoption of a narrative explicitly critical of state intervention. In the two most recent elections, the PRO assumed a more clearly neoliberal stance in its economic proposals, advancing initiatives oriented toward deregulation, fiscal balance, and state retrenchment. This thematic reorientation signals a radicalization of the PRO that blurs the conceptual boundary between mainstream and radical right variants—particularly given that the latter is characterized in Latin America by a more extreme neoliberal agenda (ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2024; ROVIRA KALTWASSER & ZANOTTI 2023).

Along similar lines, the construction of a political elite and its sociopolitical allies as beneficiaries of state resources at the expense of “working people” began to gain discursive prominence from 2019 onward. The incorporation of foreigners as enemies threatening the material interests (resources and security) of native-born Argentines in the 2019 and 2023 campaigns suggests another point of assimilation with the radical right, specifically regarding its nativist component (MUDDE 2007; 2024). However, the narratives examined also reveal differences with respect to the xenophobic stance of certain factions within the Argentine radical right, which ground their rejection of immigration in cultural rather than material factors.

The appeal to security and order themes remained constant throughout the electoral contests examined. Nevertheless, the emphasis on this issue acquired greater significance in the last two elections, and the authoritarian character of the Bullrich-Petri ticket in 2023 was particularly pronounced. Given the centrality of authoritarianism within the Latin American variant of the far right (BORGES & ZANOTTI 2024; ROVIRA KALTWASSER 2024), the mainstream right’s approximation to the radical right in this dimension is further reinforced. By contrast, moral conservatism did not exhibit continuity nor attain substantial importance across the analyzed period, with the exception of 2019. In that instance, its salience responded to an attempt to capture conservative votes in the face of an electoral threat emanating from the nationalist-reactionary tradition, and it remained concentrated on the specific debate surrounding abortion legislation.

Regarding its relationship with liberal democracy, the PRO has shown constancy in its recourse to the republican and institutional axis in rejection of populism, a characteristic of liberal-conservative origin from a socio-historical perspective (VOMMARO & MORRESI 2015). Similarly, a consistent distancing from the last military dictatorship is observable throughout the period. However, the proliferation of anti-pluralist elements aimed at delegitimizing political opponents and imposing one’s own will signals a tension with liberal democracy. In this sense, this tendency constitutes a concerning drift for the democratic framework and reactivates the theoretical discussion regarding the importance of the mainstream right’s commitment to democracy. This aspect, which marks the foundational distinction from the radical right

(MUDDE 2007), has become increasingly diffuse within the PRO during the last electoral contest, evidencing another sign of the party's radicalization.

Following the PRO's failure to reach the runoff in 2023, Mauricio Macri extended his support to Javier Milei's candidacy, contributing to the latter's eventual victory. Furthermore, numerous PRO cadres subsequently joined the libertarian government, while PRO legislators coordinate strategically with the Executive branch. This trajectory permits the conclusion that the PRO adopted a strategy oriented toward recognizing and establishing alliances with its far-right competitors in the electoral arena. In this context, there exist founded reasons to warn of the danger that this move may generate disillusionment with its party brand (LUPU 2016), a brand that had hitherto represented a successful case of right-wing party building (VOMMARO 2021). Concomitantly, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between a mainstream right and a radical right in the Argentine party system. This phenomenon strengthens Mudde's (2024) thesis, according to which the legitimization of the radical right within the political system was not a product of its own mainstreaming, but rather the responsibility of established actors who, by recognizing and incorporating radical stances, legitimize the far right instead of constructing a *cordon sanitaire* (MUDDE 2019).

This article proposes a correlation between the mainstream right's programmatic shift toward the radical right and the growing electoral weight of radicalized forces. However, it is not possible to attribute this programmatic change exclusively to the electoral emergence of the radical right without considering other variables that may have exerted influence. For future lines of research, it would be advisable to incorporate additional analytical factors to strengthen causal inference. Furthermore, it would be pertinent to investigate the reactions of other mainstream right-wing parties both within the region and in other latitudes for comparative purposes. Efforts aimed at systematizing data on public opinion in Latin America are also required, in order to verify the correlation between programmatic movements of political supply and changes in electoral preferences.

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Authors contribution:

XI ZHAO: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, writing (original draft), writing (review & editing).

Corresponding author:

XI ZHAO

<xzhao@sociales.uba.ar>

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[About the author]

XI ZHAO

Postgraduate fellow of the Ministry of Human Capital of Argentina—Chinese Scholarship Council and Master's candidate in Government at Universidad de Buenos Aires (FSOC/UBA). He holds a Master's degree in Hispanic Literature and Linguistics, with a specialization in Latin American Studies from Shanghai International Studies University, and a Bachelor's degree of Arts from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Additionally, he has completed a diploma in New Rights and Social, Political, and Cultural Processes in Latin America at the Escuela IDAES/UNSAM. His research addresses topics concerning democratic processes, political parties, and electoral competition in Latin America, as well as party-building and interaction among right-wing actors in the region, with special emphasis on Argentina and Chile.