

Realism and Liberalism as Catalysts

Argentina's Withdrawal from the WHO

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The World Health Organization (WHO) is an intergovernmental organization that encourages cooperation among states and handles global health issues. Shortly after Donald Trump's inauguration, the United States began a process of withdrawal from the WHO after an executive order was signed by President Trump. Currently, under President Javier Milei, Argentina is also planning to withdraw from the WHO. President Javier Milei and Donald Trump have continuously criticized the WHO, particularly regarding the WHO's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as concerns over the organization's alleged influence by China. This raises an important question: Why do global actors, such as national governments, withdraw from international organizations like the World Health Organization, and what factors influence their decision-making and behavior in this context? Argentina's decision to withdraw from the WHO under President Javier Milei is driven by a desire for national sovereignty and ideological alignment with Donald Trump, which can be understood through liberalism's focus on international cooperation and realism's emphasis on state interests and power in a fragmented global system.

Donald Trump and Javier Milei share a close ideological and personal relationship characterized by mutual admiration and shared political views. Following Trump's recent inauguration as president of the United States, Argentina has increasingly mirrored U.S. policies in several areas. Both presidents are described as "dismissive of 'wokeism' and supportive of cost-cutting and deregulation."¹ They are also described as "climate skeptics," and after Trump's re-election in November, Argentina's withdrawal from the UN climate talks in Azerbaijan raised concerns that President Milei might replicate Trump's decision

1 James Grainger, Leila Macor, "Trump and Milei: An Ideological Match, but Can They Work Together?" *Buenos Aires Times*, January 18, 2025, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/news/argentina/trump-and-milei-an-ideological-match-but-can-they-work-together.phtml>.

to exit the Paris Agreement on climate change.² On January 22, 2025, Trump signed an executive order initiating a year-long process to withdraw the United States from the WHO in response to what he deemed the organization's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Brad Wenstrup, who is the Chairman of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic and a former U.S. Representative, said, "the WHO [denied] that COVID-19 was spread via human-to-human transmission, [a claim] based entirely on the word of the Chinese government" and "delayed naming COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern" early on enough.⁴ Brad Wenstrup also claims that this occurred because "the Chinese Communist Party told them the spread was under control" and that "when the WHO produced a report evaluating the possible origins of COVID-19, it became unquestionably evident that the entire report was nothing but more Chinese propaganda."⁵ As Assistant Administrator for Global Health at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Dr. Atul Gawande claims, "we want respect for our sovereignty, and so we also limit how much the WHO can control or demand things of us."⁶ Argentina's and the United States' shared concerns over the WHO's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and affiliation with China have reinforced their mutual stance on limiting external influence and asserting national sovereignty.

Two key theories in international relations—liberalism and realism—offer explanations for Argentina's and the United States' behavior and the dynamics of global cooperation concerning the World Health Organization. Realism is an international relations theory that emphasizes the pursuit of power and national interests as the primary drivers of state behavior. Realism would explain Argentina's decision to withdraw from the WHO as a reflection of the state's desire to prioritize its sovereignty and national interests. Realists argue that states act to prioritize power and security. Argentina likely views the WHO as a mechanism that could undermine its autonomy, especially if it perceives external influences such as China's involvement as contrary to its interests. Alternatively, liberalism is a theory that primarily focuses on cooperation between states and emphasizes the role of international institutions, democracy, and economic interdependence to promote peace and stability. Liberals emphasize the significance of multinational corporations, international non-governmental organizations, and individuals as

2 "Five Ways in Which Argentina's Milei Has Mirrored Trump," *France 24*, June 2, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250205-five-ways-in-which-argentina-s-milei-has-mirrored-trump>.

3 Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, "Three Ways That Argentina's Milei Is Trump's Doppelgänger," *WOLA*, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/three-ways-that-argentinas-milei-is-trumps-doppelganger/>.

4 House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, "Hearing Wrap Up: The World Health Organization's Flawed Framework Must Be Reformed," December 14, 2023, <https://oversight.house.gov/release/hearing-wrap-up-the-world-health-organizations-flawed-framework-must-be-reformed/>.

5 House Committee, "Hearing Wrap Up."

6 House Committee, "Hearing Wrap Up."

important actors in political systems. Liberals argue that it is in a state's best interest to work together to address common challenges through diplomacy, trade, security arrangements, and, most importantly, interdependence. Liberals would interpret Argentina's withdrawal from the WHO as a short-sighted and potentially damaging decision that undermines international cooperation.

Argentina's decision to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) can be best understood as a strengthening step for increased sovereignty and control over its own policies through a realist lens. The realism theory emphasizes that states act in their personal self-interest, prioritizing power and security over global cooperation. As claimed in the article *National Identity and Public Attitudes Toward the World Health Organization* by Gal Arieli, "The pandemic will strengthen the state and reinforce nationalism" as the COVID-19 pandemic drove countries, particularly powerful ones such as the United States, to act in a way that reinforced their sovereignty.⁷ Similarly, wealthy states, such as the U.S, that prioritized domestic vaccine access "used the rhetoric of nationalism to justify their decision to prioritize access of members of their own nations to the COVID-19 vaccine rather than cooperating globally by sharing vaccines."⁸ This further exacerbates the realist idea of prioritizing self-interest and that states prioritize their populations over global cooperation.

A rising divide between nationalist and globalist governments shows that states are prioritizing their own interests over commitment to international institutions like the WHO. While Argentina's contribution to the WHO is relatively small (\$8 million for the 2024-25 biennium), the U.S. has provided significant contributions to the WHO, amounting to over \$260 million in assessed contributions.⁹ Therefore, both countries will now be able to redirect these funds for their own benefit rather than contributing to the organization. Furthermore, the division between nationalist states, like the U.S., and globalist entities, such as the European Union, further reinforces realism's core tenet that state actions are primarily driven by the seeking of sovereignty and national interests, as "the nationalists are critical of the WHO and, in the case of the United States, even left the organization temporarily, while the globalists, like the leaders of the EU, support the WHO."¹⁰ The growing divide between nationalist states, such as the U.S. and Argentina, and more globalist entities highlights the realist belief that nations act based on their perceived national interests, even if it means distancing themselves

7 Gal Arieli, "National Identity and Public Attitudes toward the World Health Organization," *Oxford University Press, Oxford Academic*, March 11, 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article-abstract/35/1/edad004/7076106?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

8 Arieli, "National Identity and Public Attitudes."

9 Elaine Ruth Fletcher, "Argentina Withdraws from WHO, Executive Board Pauses Approval of New Resolutions Pending Cost Reviews," *Health Policy Watch, Independent Global Health Reporting*, May 2, 2025, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/argentina-withdraws-from-who-executive-board-pauses-approval-of-new-resolutions-pending-cost-reviews/>.

10 Arieli, "National Identity and Public Attitudes."

from international organizations that previously encouraged cooperation.

On the contrary, from a liberal's perspective, the lack of cooperation between states is a setback for global governance. Liberals would focus on overall gains and would argue that the benefits of multilateral cooperation far outweigh the perceived advantages of unilateral decision-making because there is a "need for international cooperation and communication to ensure the health of all the world's citizens."¹¹ Moreover, while both countries spend significant amounts of money on the organization and still criticize the WHO's handling of the pandemic, liberals may argue that "alleged missteps are an unavoidable part of the politics of international cooperation."¹² From a liberal's perspective, intergovernmental organizations such as the WHO are crucial for fostering cooperation during global challenges. Argentina's exit could be seen as a retreat from the collective effort to address global health cooperatively due to domestic political pressures or ideological shifts rather than rationality. However, Argentina's withdrawal from the WHO could also reflect a positive shift as it provides Argentina with an opportunity to strengthen its bilateral relationship with the U.S. by aligning with its values. Currently, "the United States is Argentina's third-largest trading partner," and "Trump's and Milei's alliance is poised to be influential, especially given the lack of other strong U.S. allies in Latin America," allowing both the U.S. and Argentina to strengthen a vital and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship.¹³ Therefore, leaving the WHO may bring the U.S. and Argentina closer together, potentially consolidating political and economic ties.

Although there may be a significant improvement in international relations between Argentina and the U.S., realist theory may predict that two actors leaving an international organization that is responsible for improving public health may set a dangerous precedent for other states and the survival of the World Health Organization. While Argentina's withdrawal may align with U.S. skepticism, it could isolate Argentina from global health cooperation, limiting its influence and future collaboration in international frameworks and potentially deepening global fragmentation. Additionally, the WHO may experience a weaker global influence and, therefore, have increased trouble coordinating international health responses due to decreased financial contributions and political support from states. Furthermore, it may cause other states to follow Argentina and the U.S., which can diminish overall global cooperation as a result of bystander countries observing this shift and seeing that prioritizing national sovereignty over multilateralism may be politically advantageous. This trend could encourage other

11 Donald Lien and Joseph Kortsch, "The Future of the World Health Organization: China and the United States Square Off," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15, no. 4 (2020): 520-29, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-bja10047>.

12 Lien and Kortsch, "The Future of the World Health Organization."

13 "The New Relationship between the United States and Argentina," *Latin American Foreign Direct Investment*, January 12, 2025, <https://latamfdi.com/relationship-between-the-united-states-and-argentina/>.

nations, particularly those with rising nationalist sentiments, to follow Argentina and withdraw from critical international organizations.