

# The Electoral Representation of Evangelicals in Latin America

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Taylor C. Boas, Department of Political Science, Boston University

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## Summary

Evangelical Christians have drawn attention for electoral victories throughout Latin America, yet their engagement and success with electoral politics also varies significantly across countries and over time. Scholars' explanations for this cross-national variation generally fall into one of several categories. Sociological or demographic explanations argue that evangelicals should be better represented in countries where they are a larger share of either the population or the socioeconomic elite. A second set of explanations focuses on factors that might politicize evangelical identity and provide the motivation for contesting elections. Among these are the postmillennial and prosperity theology associated with neo-Pentecostalism; the influence of co-religionists from abroad, particularly the United States; historical struggles for religious freedom and legal equality with the Catholic Church; and the rise of values issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. A third set of arguments focuses on the degree to which electoral and party systems are open to new entrants, thus facilitating the electoral ambitions of a mobilized faith community. Finally, arguments focused on voting behavior examine how a candidate's religion affects electoral support, especially among fellow believers, and whether this tendency varies across countries. Explanations for cross-national variation in evangelical political representation also help us understand their electoral surge in the early 21st century, as issues such as same-sex marriage have arrived on the political agenda in a roughly contemporaneous fashion in much of the region, providing a common motivation for electoral contestation.

**Keywords:** Latin America, Latin American politics, evangelicals, religion, Christianity, elections, representation

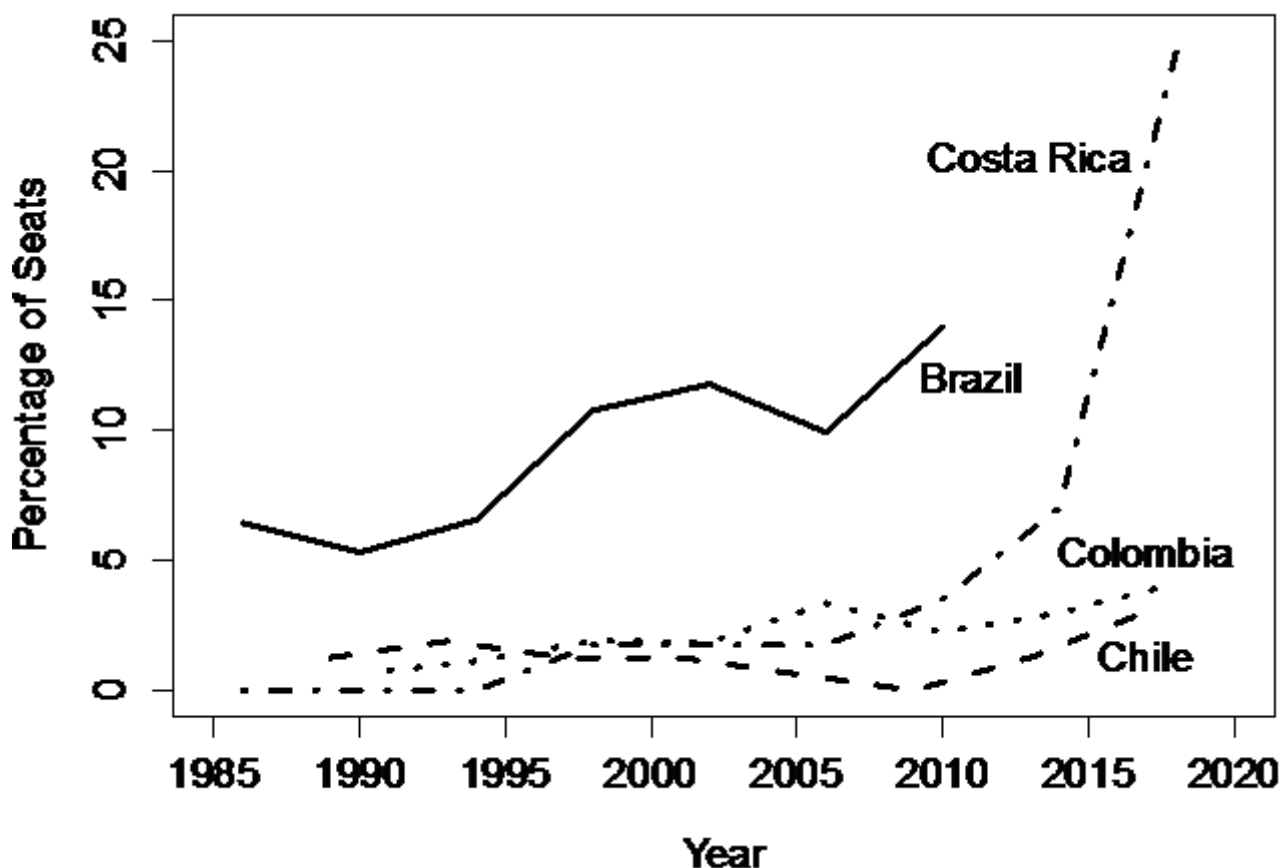
**Subjects:** Groups and Identities

For many observers of Latin American politics, the year 2018 seemed to herald the arrival of a new actor with political ambitions and potent electoral influence: evangelical Christians. In January, evangelical pastor and gospel singer Fabricio Alvarado went from single-digit standings to a first-place finish in the first round of Costa Rica's presidential election by capitalizing on opposition to an Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruling that would require the country to legalize same-sex marriage. On his coat-tails, Alvarado's National Restoration Party gained 25 % of seats in Congress, giving Costa Rica the region's largest evangelical caucus in percentage terms (Zúñiga, 2018). In July, Andrés Manuel López Obrador was elected president of Mexico; his coalition included the socially conservative and

evangelical-dominated Social Encounter Party, which won 11 % of seats in the lower house (Garma, 2018). In November, far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro triumphed in Brazil's presidential election with a discourse that celebrated traditional religious values. Though self-identifying as Catholic, Bolsonaro's wife is evangelical, and evangelical clergy, politicians, and voters all offered strong support for his candidacy (Alves, 2018). Coming on top of the 2016 defeat of Colombia's peace accord referendum, in which evangelical opposition has been accorded a key role (Cosoy, 2016), the rising electoral strength of this religious minority is often seen as a key component of a region-wide shift to the right and backlash against the "Pink Tide" of the 2000s (Reyes, 2018; Smith, 2018).

Press coverage and op-eds on Latin American evangelicals' electoral gains often paint the region with a broad brush or identify this phenomenon as a fundamentally new one (Bedinelli, Marcos, & LaFuente, 2018; Corrales, 2018; Reyes, 2018). Yet when one scratches beneath the surface, the cross-national and temporal variation in evangelicals' electoral representation is equally striking. Figure 1 plots evangelicals' legislative seat shares over several decades in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica, four countries often identified as part of the wave of evangelical political influence in Latin America. In Brazil, evangelicals enjoy a decades-long influential presence in Congress, dating back at least to the 1986 Constituent Assembly election. In Colombia and Chile, their representation has been much more modest, despite evangelicals' long-standing electoral ambitions in the former country and mobilization for the 2017 election in the latter. And in Costa Rica, evangelicals' representation in Congress was also fairly modest until 2018, when their share of seats surged to unprecedented levels.

How have scholars sought to explain evangelicals' political ambitions and electoral successes in Latin America—both the contemporaneous surge in many countries and the significant cross-national variation? This article reviews and examines evidence in favor of several existing explanations. A first explanation is sociological—that evangelicals' electoral ambitions and success vary according to their weight in the broader population or the ranks of the elite. A second group of explanations focuses on factors that might politicize evangelicals' religious identity, including shifts in theology, the influence of fellow believers from abroad, the struggle for legal equality with the Catholic Church, and the arrival of "values issues" on the political agenda. A third focuses on factors that might constrain or facilitate the electoral ambitions of a mobilized faith community, including electoral systems and political party systems. Finally, a fourth explanation looks at voting behavior—whether evangelicals are likely to vote for co-religionist candidates, and how a candidate's evangelicalism influences voters of all faiths. These explanations need not be mutually exclusive, and a number of studies have advanced arguments that fall into more than one of these categories.



**Figure 1.** Legislative seat shares for evangelicals.

Source: Boas (2019) for Chile and Brazil; Velasco (2018) for Colombia; Zúñiga (2018) for Costa Rica.

Before proceeding, a note on terminology is in order. This article uses the term “evangelical” in the same way that *evangélico* is commonly used in Spanish and Portuguese—to denote Protestant Christians of any sort, regardless of denomination. This is a broader usage than the common, English-language definition of “evangelical,” which typically denotes a subset of Protestants whose theology and religious practice emphasize missionary work, a literal interpretation of scripture, and the importance of being “born again.” While the Latin American sense of the term also includes mainline or historical denominations such as Methodists or Presbyterians, the majority of Latin American Protestants belong to Pentecostal denominations, whose theology and practice emphasize mystical gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues and faith healing. Like their U.S. counterparts, Latin American Pentecostals would fit comfortably within the English-language definition of “evangelical.”

## Sociology and Demographics

Perhaps the most obvious explanation for cross-national variation in evangelicals’ electoral fortunes concerns demographics. According to survey data, around 20 % of Latin Americans identify with non-Catholic Christian denominations (Boas & Smith, 2015; Pew Research

Center, 2014), but this figure masks considerable variation across countries—from a low of 8 % in Mexico to a high of 41 % in Guatemala, using data from the 2016–17 AmericasBarometer (Table 1). If evangelicals engage in identity voting, tending to favor co-religionist candidates, more heavily evangelical countries should elect more evangelical politicians. Moreover, even if a candidate’s religion is irrelevant to voting decisions, a greater share of evangelicals in the population should mean more evangelicals on candidate lists and, consequently, in elected office.

**Table 1. Evangelical Shares of the Population in Latin America, 2016–2017**

Country	Percentage	Country	Percentage
Guatemala	41	Chile	21
Nicaragua	37	Peru	16
El Salvador	32	Venezuela	15
Brazil	32	Argentina	14
Dom. Rep.	27	Ecuador	13
Panama	26	Uruguay	11
Honduras	25	Paraguay	10
Costa Rica	25	Colombia	10
Bolivia	21	Mexico	8

*Source:* AmericasBarometer surveys.

Basic demographics have sometimes been used to account for evangelicals' electoral fortunes. In Mora Torres's (2010) explanation for Pentecostal political incorporation in Latin America, the "nationalization" of Protestantism, which includes reaching 15 % of the population, is considered a requirement for evangelicals to be taken seriously as potential political allies or candidates. Evangelicals reached this milestone sooner in Brazil than in Panama, part of the explanation for the differences in their descriptive representation in these two countries. Similar demographic explanations could profitably be employed for other comparisons. For example, while there are many similarities between the policy issues and legislative opportunities that have motivated evangelical political projects in Brazil and Colombia, they account for 32 % of the population in the former, and only 10 % in the latter—an obvious potential explanation for the differences in legislative presence highlighted in Figure 1.

Yet there are also important limits to simple numbers-based explanations for evangelicals' political representation. While Colombia has a relatively small evangelical population, Chile has a comparatively large one—21 % of the population in the 2016 AmericasBarometer, and 17 % in the 2012 census. Yet as highlighted in Figure 1, evangelical legislative representation has been similar in each case. Historically and demographically, Chile is much more similar to Brazil than to Colombia. Pentecostalism arrived early and grew rapidly in each country (Willems, 1967), and in Brazil's 2000 census and Chile's 2002 census, evangelical shares of the population were nearly identical (15.4 % and 15.1 %, respectively). Yet these countries are at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of evangelicals' political representation in Latin America (Boas, 2019).

Related to evangelicals' share of the broader population is their representation among the economic elite, who are disproportionately influential in Latin American politics. In general, evangelicalism has been particularly attractive among the poor, thanks to the social services offered by churches (particularly with respect to vexing problems such as alcoholism) and an emphasis on oral tradition that opens doors to illiterates (Boas, 2019; Levine, 2012). Yet in some countries, evangelicals as a whole are socioeconomically on par with Catholics or even better off. In particular, research on Guatemala has pointed to the popularity of Pentecostalism among the economic elite as an explanation for their long-standing political presence in that country (Freston, 2001)—notwithstanding its appeal among the poor as well, due to both churches' charity work after the 1976 earthquake (Turek, 2015) and self-protection efforts during the Civil War, when rural Catholics were often assumed to have leftist sympathies (Samson, 2008).

Indeed, Guatemala may be best conceptualized as a case where evangelicals first gained political representation somewhat accidentally, thanks to their presence among the political class rather than any specific political project (Ortiz, 2004; Dary, 2018). Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala's military dictator from 1982 to 1983, had already run for president in 1974 prior to his joining a Pentecostal church that was popular with the Guatemalan elite. After a coup that he did not lead, he was unexpectedly tapped as head of the military junta by officers who

apparently did not know that he was evangelical (Garrard-Burnett, 1998; Turek, 2015). A year later, after committing notorious human rights abuses cloaked in a moralizing religious discourse, he was overthrown by another coup.

From this initial foothold, Ríos Montt's presence in Guatemalan politics, and that of evangelicals more broadly, grew dramatically. In 1990 and 1995, Ríos Montt sought to run for president again, though he was blocked by a constitutional prohibition against candidacies by former dictators. His exclusion from the race in 1990 helped elect Jorge Serrano Elías, another evangelical who had served as head of Council of State under Ríos Montt's government (Garrard-Burnett, 1998, Freston, 2001). Ríos Montt's political party, the Guatemalan Republican Front, won the largest share of seats in the legislature in 1994, and it has been a major political party ever since. A candidate from his party, Alfonso Portillo, was elected president in 2000, and Ríos Montt himself was elected to Congress several times in the 1990s and 2000s, where he served for a number of years as president of the legislature.

While the electoral presence of Guatemala's evangelicals is of seemingly accidental origins, this religious minority would arguably have found some route to electoral representation even if Ríos Montt had not been tapped to lead the junta in 1982. Heavy representation among the political class as well as the population in general makes "accidents" of this sort more likely.

Aside from simply making it more likely that they will find their way into office, a larger weight within the population can fuel evangelicals' electoral ambitions, providing a sense that "their time has come" and that they deserve to have their voices represented in Congress. Freston (1993) argues that the Assemblies of God's decision to endorse an official slate of candidates in Brazil's 1986 Constituent Assembly election was ultimately motivated by an effort to translate their growing numbers into political representation. Likewise, López (2008, p. 59) identifies a numbers-driven political opportunism as the reason why a previously apolitical faction of Peru's evangelical community began to embrace electoral participation in the 1990s. Hence, numbers are also relevant to the politicization of evangelical identity—the topic of the next section.

## Politicization: Social Status and Theology

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Organized religion is by definition a group identity, binding people together in a shared community of believers, but it is not automatically a political identity that can motivate group members to pursue shared interests and address common grievances via participation in politics. On the contrary, some of the classic studies of evangelicalism in Latin America cast this community as expressly apolitical. In Lalive d'Épinay's (1969) analysis of Pentecostalism in Chile, religion served as a refuge from worldly concerns, leading congregants to withdraw from society rather than engage with it. Pentecostal churches, with their vertical structure of authority centered on the all-powerful pastor, were seen as reproducing the social relations of rural clientelism, in which a subaltern population was politically quiescent and dependent on the local landlord.

Lalive d'Épinay (1969) focused on the social conditions that inhibited political participation, but Pentecostal theology has also been seen as traditionally encouraging quiescence. The mainline Protestant view of the 19th century saw public engagement and political activity as a social expression of the Gospel, but Pentecostalism challenged this position. In the premillennial theology that prevailed among Pentecostals, the second coming of Christ was imminent, and his return would destroy all forces of evil in the world, initiating a thousand-year reign of peace and prosperity. The world was thus conceptualized as a mere “waiting room” for the afterlife (Pérez Guadalupe & Grundberger, 2018, p. 37), and engagement with politics was seen as a pointless distraction from the principal task of evangelization (Campos, 2010; Carvalho, 2015; Ortiz, 2012; Pérez Guadalupe & Grundberger, 2018). In the 1950s–1960s, conservative reactions to the rise of Catholic Liberation Theology—a left-leaning version of the “social gospel” theology of the 19th century—also reinforced Pentecostals’ apolitical stance (Campos, 2010).

Some scholars have attributed evangelicals’ political ambitions to the growth of neo-Pentecostalism, whose very different view of the end of the world is more favorable to participation in public life. Neo-Pentecostal denominations like Brazil’s Universal Church of the Kingdom of God revived an older view, postmillennial theology, which held that Christ would return after the thousand-year period of peace and prosperity, not before. The task of Christians, therefore, was to build this “Kingdom of God on earth”—a charge that implied political engagement (Campos, 2010; Pérez Guadalupe & Grundberger, 2018). In conjunction with this view, neo-Pentecostalism also embraces prosperity theology, a belief that God bestows wealth upon those that he favors, which tends to promote engagement in worldly affairs. Finally, neo-Pentecostalism is most likely to take the form of independent churches that concentrate all authority in their pastor-founders, meaning that a leader’s political ambitions, if they exist, are unchecked by any disapproval among the congregation or higher-level denominational authorities (Gaskill, 2002).

The rise of neo-Pentecostalism makes sense as an explanation for evangelical political ambitions in many countries. Across Latin America, some of the earliest or most prominent evangelical incursions into electoral politics have involved neo-Pentecostals, and often clergy: Humberto Lay and Julio Rosas in Peru, Efraín Ríos Montt in Guatemala, Salvador Pino Bustos in Chile, a majority of Colombia’s evangelical politicians (Velasco Montoya, 2018), and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) in Brazil. Though their religious movements vary in important respects, with some appealing more to a lower-class population and others drawing from the middle class or elite, they have in common the factors identified above—premillennialism, prosperity theology, and pastoral authority—that might favor political activity.

Yet the rise of neo-Pentecostal churches and ambitious neo-Pentecostal politicians is more of a constant than a variable across countries, so this development is less helpful in accounting for cross-national variation in evangelical political representation. Neo-Pentecostal theology does little to explain why candidates from Brazil’s IURD have been so electorally successful, Salvador Pino Bustos’s 1999 presidential campaign never got off the ground in Chile, and Humberto Lay’s career lies somewhere in between.



## Politicization: Foreign Influences

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While explanations based on evangelical social status and theology look internally for factors that would affect political engagement, most other arguments focus on factors external to the evangelical community. One of the most obvious is foreign influence. In the popular press, especially in the United States, it is common to imply that the U.S. Christian Right is playing an important role in stimulating the political ambitions of their counterparts in Latin America (e.g., Bell & Taj, 2014; Fox News, 2014). Similar claims have been made by some scholars of Latin American politics (Corrales, 2018; Encarnación, 2017; Levine, 1992, pp. 360–361). To what extent does the academic literature on evangelicals and politics in Latin America support these arguments?

Scholars focused on the politicization of evangelical identity in Latin America have almost uniformly argued to the contrary: foreign influence has either been a minor factor in evangelicals' political ambitions or has actually served to suppress them. In Chile, after a schism in the country's first major Pentecostal church, the group led by the original American founder remained expressly apolitical for decades, whereas the Chilean leader of the rival faction became notorious for making votes-for-benefits deals with candidates from the Radical Party (Kessler, 1967; Mansilla & Orellana, 2016). In Colombia, the evangelical confederation's decision to promote a slate of candidates for the 1991 Constituent Assembly election has been partly attributed to the declining influence of foreign missionaries and the fact that most Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches were native-born (Munévar Mora, 2008). In Brazil, the most politically ambitious Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal denominations have either been homegrown, such as IURD and Brazil to Christ, or else thrust themselves into politics only once they gained independence from foreign founders, as with the Assemblies of God and Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Freston, 1993; Gaskill, 2002). Historically, Panamanian evangelicals' political ambitions were limited by the fact that local Protestantism was dominated by foreign clergy operating out of the Canal Zone and primarily serving ethnic enclave populations such as Americans and West Indians (Mora Torres, 2010).

Guatemala is often seen as a case where U.S. evangelicals have been particularly influential (Rose & Brouwer, 1990, p. 44; Turek, 2015). The Reagan administration and Christian Right did offer strong support for Ríos Montt's government during the 1980s. Moreover, Ríos Montt's church, *El Verbo*, was founded and still run by Americans at the time he became dictator in 1982. While considering whether to accept the military's request, he apparently consulted with church elders (Turek, 2015). But whatever influence U.S. missionaries may have had in Ríos Montt's decision, they clearly did not jumpstart his political career, since he first ran for president in 1974, before his conversion. Moreover, there is no evidence that U.S. evangelicals played a role in the political ambitions of their Guatemalan counterparts during the democratic period from the 1990s onward.

If U.S. influence has not historically been a major cause of evangelicals' political ambitions in Latin America, it might still be doing so more recently, during the era of political conflict over values issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights. Yet scholarship focused specifically on religion and political mobilization in Latin America's culture wars has also dismissed foreign

influence as being a major factor (Smith, 2019). Socially conservative movements in Latin America naturally have international contacts, just as progressive ones do, and they may share ideas and influence each other's strategies and tactics. Yet it is not at all obvious that the flow of influence is primarily from North to South. For example, Christian Rosas, the leader of Peru's conservative social movement ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (Don't Mess with My Children) and the son of a neo-Pentecostal pastor and Peruvian congressman, is actively seeking to spread his organization's model around Latin America and the rest of the world, including to advanced democracies such as France (author's interview, January 11, 2019). As intuitive as it might seem at first glance, there is little evidence that Latin America's evangelicals are getting involved in politics because their U.S. counterparts "put them up to it."

### **Politicization: Freedom of Religion**

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While foreign influences do not seem to play a major role in stimulating Latin American evangelicals' political ambitions, a number of studies have pointed to the importance of domestic policy issues and opportunities to address them through electoral politics. In this respect, evangelicals might be seen as no different from any other organized interest group: they get involved in politics if they have something to gain. Yet overcoming an initial standoffish attitude toward politics and worldly affairs has required more than just potential benefits. Rather than getting involved in politics merely to gain something, Latin America's evangelicals have historically thrust themselves into the electoral sphere because they faced a perceived threat to their way of life and elections presented an opportunity to address this threat.

The principal threats that have motivated evangelicals to enter the political sphere concern religious freedom. As a religious minority in a predominantly Catholic region, Latin American Protestants historically suffered significant discrimination because of their faith. The first constitutions of newly independent republics generally established Catholicism as the official, state-sanctioned religion and forbade the public practice of any other (Mecham, 1966). Around the turn of the 20th century, the Church's official status was abolished in most countries, and *de jure* religious freedom was guaranteed. Yet the Catholic Church did not always accept this loss of privilege without a fight. In some countries, the Church mobilized politically during the 20th century to regain benefits such as state subsidies and mandatory Catholic education in public schools, as well as to place restrictions on proselytizing by their evangelical competitors. Moreover, evangelicals' growing numbers and public presence meant that they were often subject to violent attacks or harassment by local authorities, generally without repercussions for the perpetrators.

Where evangelicals have faced the threat of violence or a resurgent Catholic Church, and elections have presented an opportunity to defend against this threat, they have cast aside a traditional apolitical stance and sought electoral representation. Chief among these opportunities are elections to constituent assemblies, given the durability of constitutions and

the fact that they often deal with fundamental questions of the relationship between church and state. To a lesser extent, evangelicals have also mobilized to influence ordinary religious freedom legislation.

In Brazil, evangelicals' first organized foray into electoral politics came during the constituent assembly election of 1933. Seeking to capitalize on warmer relations with the new Getúlio Vargas government, the Church organized the Catholic Electoral League to promote constituent assembly candidates who endorsed its platform for the new constitution. In response, evangelicals organized a similar political association, the São Paulo Evangelical Civic Union, and several evangelicals ran for office, one successfully (Campos, 2006; Oro, 2006).

Scholars have pointed to Brazil's 1986 constituent assembly as a particularly important event that launched the modern era of evangelical presence in elected office (Carvalho, 2015; Freston, 1993; Gaskill, 2002; Mariano & Pierucci, 1996). In the lead-up to that election, the Assemblies of God (AD) dropped its traditional apolitical stance, deciding that the church should mobilize for the election and endorse an official slate of candidates. In some states, it held primary elections to determine its nominee. It also encouraged an AD member and congressional staffer to publish a book, *Brother Votes for Brother* (Sylvestre, 1986), that promoted electoral participation by evangelicals of all denominations. AD leaders and articles in the church's magazine identified the Catholic constitutional agenda, including the supposed threat of Catholicism being declared the official state-sanctioned religion, as the main motivation for their efforts (Freston, 1993, p. 213; Mariano & Pierucci, 1996, p. 209). The electoral push was hugely successful; 33 evangelicals were elected to the constituent assembly, 14 of them from the AD, which supplied the largest church contingent.

Evangelicals' entrée into electoral politics in Colombia follows a similar logic. Historically, de facto and de jure religious freedom often depended on which of Colombia's traditional parties was in power—the Conservatives, who were closely aligned with the Catholic Church, or the Liberals, who favored secularism. During La Violencia, Colombia's partisan civil war from 1946 to 1958, evangelicals were often targeted by Conservatives for being presumed Liberal supporters; there were a number of murders and attempted murders, and 48 churches were burned (Brusco, 1999; Figueroa, 2016; Freston, 2001). Yet Colombian politics at mid-century provided few opportunities to address this threat through electoral organizing. The 1957 pact that ended La Violencia enshrined two-party dominance and Catholic Church prerogatives; the agreement signed by both parties held that "the Catholic religion. . . is that of the nation and that as such the state will protect it" (Freston, 2001).

In 1991, the calling of constituent assembly elections, along with liberalized party registration rules, provided evangelicals with the opportunity to address long-standing grievances by electoral means. As in Brazil, Colombia's evangelicals shifted from a standoffish attitude toward politics to one of active engagement. The Colombian Evangelical Council surveyed its members and decided to contest the elections. It created the Christian Unity Movement which allied with the recently formed National Christian Party to run a slate of pastor-candidates, two of which were elected. Evangelical representatives succeeded in their principal aim, the

constitutional separation of church and state. This initial success served as a springboard to evangelical participation in subsequent elections, resulting in further religious freedom legislation in the 1990s (Beltrán & Quiroga, 2016; Ortega, 2018).

If all Latin American countries experienced similar threats to freedom of religion and opportunities to address them via electoral politics, this factor might not account for cross-national variation in evangelicals' electoral presence. Yet as Boas (2019) argues, Chile is a revealing counterexample. Following the cordial separation of church and state in 1925, Chile's Catholic Church was much more restrained in its political ambitions, reducing the sense of threat to evangelical interests. There was also no significant extralegal persecution of evangelicals. Moreover, Chile's 1980 constitution was written by an appointed committee and approved in a particularly undemocratic plebiscite under Pinochet, so there have also been no opportunities for evangelicals to contest elections in order to influence constitution writing. Ordinary legislation bearing on religious freedom—for example, a 1959 proposal to require Catholic education classes in public schools, or a comprehensive religious freedom law passed in the 1990s—did inspire some limited evangelical political organizing, but no candidates gained office as a result (Fediakova, 2004; Fediakova & Parker, 2006; Mansilla & Orellana, 2016; Willems, 1967).

While high-level threats to religious equality have historically inspired most evangelical electoral offensives, Gaskill (2002) argues that legal and regulatory harassment by lower-level elected and appointed officials is also a major factor motivating evangelical political activity in Brazil. For example, evangelicals often run afoul of noise ordinances for holding loud worship services; building inspectors may be disproportionately likely to identify code violations in evangelical meeting spaces; and Pentecostal clergy who practice faith healing have been charged with practicing medicine without a license. Having allies among elected officials can help rein in discriminatory applications of the law or ensure that inspectors overlook true violations. Where the rule of law is stronger, such incentives for evangelical electoral organizing may not exist—another potential explanation for cross-national variation in evangelical electoral presence.

Related to the struggle for religious equality with the Catholic Church is competition for believers—another potential motivating factor for evangelical political activity. Historically, evangelicalism has posed a threat to membership in the Catholic Church, rather than the other way around. Where competition for souls was most intense, the Church responded by promoting new ways to minister to the poor and retain their loyalties, such as support for indigenous rights and the introduction of Ecclesial Base Communities (Gill, 1998; Trejo, 2012). Yet the growth of Charismatic Catholicism—a movement whose theology and religious practice makes it very much akin to Pentecostalism—has helped stem the loss of membership. In Brazil, prominent Charismatic Catholic and Pentecostal clergy clearly compete with one another for the faithful (Cleary, 2011). Brazilian evangelical churches also warily eye the growth of Afro-Brazilian religions such as Candomblé. Smith (2019) has shown that when Brazilian evangelical clergy are reminded of the threat of membership loss, they are more

inclined to support legislative advocacy. In other countries where evangelicals do not face the same competitive pressures, they may have fewer incentives to get involved in electoral politics to defend their interests.

### Politicization: Values Issues

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While threats to religious freedom have historically been the major issue motivating evangelical involvement in electoral politics, values issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights have become more significant in the 21st century. Most issues regarding the legal equality of the Catholic and evangelical churches had been resolved by the 2000s, at the same time that values issues began arriving on the political agenda in a serious way. Abortion and same-sex marriage do not present an existential threat to evangelicals like restrictions on the right to worship or proselytize did in previous generations. However, socially conservative evangelicals often perceive that their traditional way of life is under threat from an increasingly progressive and secular society.

Values issues have become a source of political motivation for Latin American evangelicals in part because of the gap between elite and mass attitudes and the way in which legislation or judicial action has often leapt ahead of public opinion. In general, the poor in Latin America are much more socially conservative than either the wealthy or elected officials, who tend to be drawn from the economic elite (Boas & Smith, 2019; Corral, 2013). This incongruence in attitudes may have influenced progressive policy decisions as well as public reactions. For example, in the United States, the Supreme Court's legalization of same-sex marriage took place four years after public opinion on the issue shifted from majority opposition to majority support; in Brazil, the courts' legalization of same-sex marriage happened four years before the equivalent shift in public opinion.

In Colombia, a series of progressive judicial decisions on values issues in the 2000s prompted a second wave of evangelical electoral mobilization, following the resolution of the religious freedom issues that had inspired participation in the 1990s. In a short period of time, the Constitutional Court partially decriminalized abortion, legalized same-sex marriage, granted gay couples the right to adopt children, allowed transgender individuals to change the gender designation on their identity cards, prohibited discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation, and mandated a review of how gender and sexuality were presented in school curricular materials (Ortega, 2018; Rodríguez Rondón, 2017). In 2017, evangelical senator Viviane Morales tried to appeal to public opinion, proposing a national referendum on same-sex marriage, but was blocked by Congress. This string of defeats for evangelicals, and the perception that LGBTQ groups were better organized and had more allies in Congress, prompted a surge of evangelical candidacies in 2018, the most ever (Ortega, 2018; Velasco Montoya, 2018).

A similar wave of progressive legislation prompted evangelical organizing for Chile's 2017 election. During Michelle Bachelet's second presidency, from 2014–2018, new laws permitted same-sex civil unions and abortion under limited circumstances, and bills were introduced to

allow same-sex marriage and adoption and to strengthen transgender rights. In response, evangelicals mobilized politically in a concerted fashion for the first time. At least 32 evangelical candidates ran for Congress in 2017, compared to 10 in the previous election, and a new cross-party initiative, For a Chile for Christ, promoted a slate of 14 of the most conservative evangelical candidates (Boas, 2019). Further defeats for social conservatives under the Sebastián Piñera government—for example, a Gender Identity Law signed by the president in 2018—might be expected to prompt even greater mobilization in the next election.

Chile also shows that the extent and timing of legislative conflict on values issues can help explain cross-national variation in evangelicals' electoral ambitions. While Chile saw a surge of progressive legislation on abortion and LGBTQ rights starting in 2014, virtually no movement on values issues had taken place before this. During the 1990s, for example, the only abortion legislation brought up for a vote in Congress sought to strengthen criminal penalties (Blofield, 2006). Facing a comparatively comfortable environment in terms of both values issues and religious freedom, evangelical leaders sensed little threat to their worldview until the 2010s. As a result, the first serious electoral push happened only in 2017, and it has yet to bear much fruit in terms of results (Boas, 2019).

By contrast, conflict on values issues came early to the Brazilian political scene, helping to sustain robust evangelical electoral mobilization after threats to religious freedom largely subsided. Abortion and LGBTQ rights were both up for debate in Brazil's 1987–1988 Constituent Assembly (Boas, 2019). The evangelical caucus, which initially mobilized for this election to oppose a Catholic power grab, ended up leading their socially conservative Catholic counterparts in a shared effort to defeat liberalizing proposals in both areas (Freston, 1993; Sylvestre, 1988, p. 33–34). In Sylvestre's (1988, p. 33) review of the Constituent Assembly experience and call for continued political involvement, values issues were a much more important justification than religious freedom. By the 2000s, they had become the primary motivation. In 2011–2012, when asked about their attitudes toward electoral politics, evangelical leaders and politicians frequently mentioned the importance of defending traditional religious values against secularizing, liberal political projects (Machado & Burity, 2014).

In addition to directly motivating evangelicals' electoral participation, the rise of values issues on the political agenda has inspired the creation of new conservative social movements. They have been particularly active with respect to school curricula, which are often the responsibility of the executive branch and not readily influenced by an evangelical presence in Congress. In the first decades of the 21st century, evangelical movements mobilized against plans to introduce new curricular materials on sexual orientation, gender roles, and gender identity. In Peru, ConMisHijosNoTeMetas, launched in 2016, has organized several massive marches and helped bring about the downfall of two education ministers (Pérez Guadalupe & Grundberger, 2018). Grassroots-based activism against "gender ideology" has inspired similar demonstrations throughout the region, including one outside a lecture in Brazil by U.S. feminist theorist Judith Butler, in which protestors burned her in effigy (Smith, 2019).

In Colombia, evangelical opposition to the 2016 peace accord with the FARC, which was organized primarily by grassroots groups rather than evangelical representatives in Congress (Basset, 2018), was partially a byproduct of the fight over educational curricular materials. When an embattled Minister of Education—who, in addition to promoting a progressive curriculum, happened to be a lesbian—was removed from her position and reassigned to head up the government's Yes campaign in the plebiscite on the peace accord, organized opposition from evangelicals naturally followed (Ortega, 2018; Rodríguez Rondón, 2017).

The success of evangelical social movements can feed back into electoral efforts. ConMisHijosNoTeMetas leader Christian Rosas has helped to found a new Christian political party in Peru, and evangelicals' success in opposing the Colombian peace accord helped inspire the surge of candidacies in 2018 (Velasco Montoya, 2018). Moreover, the sort of social media-facilitated organizing that brought protestors to Judith Butler's talk in Brazil has almost certainly help drive votes toward evangelical candidates in Brazilian elections.

In sum, a prominent and promising explanation for cross-national variation in evangelicals' political representation concerns the factors that might lead them to abandon a traditional apolitical stance in favor of active involvement in elections and public life. While most scholars reject the notion that Latin America's evangelicals run for office because of foreign influence, challenges to religious freedom and to evangelicals' socially conservative worldview have done more to prompt electoral involvement. Where threats in these areas have been greater and opportunities to address them via electoral politics have been more numerous, we see the earliest and most extensive evangelical incursions into electoral politics, as in Brazil.

## Electoral and Party Systems

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If evangelicals are motivated to seek political representation via elections, their success should hinge in part on whether electoral and party systems are hospitable to new entrants. As a formerly excluded constituency, evangelicals seeking election to public office have to first find slots on the ballot. The nature of a country's party and electoral system determine how many parties will be presenting candidates, what share of these are viable, how hard it is to register a new party, how many candidates each party or coalition can run for office, and how competitive these elections are. In some places, a closed institutional configuration may frustrate the ambitions of even the most determined evangelical candidates; elsewhere, they may find a relatively easy path to running for office.

In particular, open list proportional representation (OLPR) with high district magnitude is often thought of as an electoral system that is particularly favorable to evangelicals. When votes for individual candidates contribute to a party's total, as with OLPR, party leaders have an incentive to diversify their lists, offering slots to candidates who represent different constituencies and can bring in new votes. When OLPR is combined with low district magnitude—that is, few seats per district—the diversifying incentive is countered by a

scarcity of list positions, but when district magnitude is high, party leaders can freely hand out candidacies. OLPR also tends to generate candidate-centered campaigns, helping those who can mobilize a personal vote, which evangelicals are often thought to do (Gaskill, 2002).

A number of scholars have focused on legislative electoral systems as an explanation for why evangelicals are so well represented in Brazil and so poorly represented in Chile (Fediakova & Parker, 2006; Freston, 1993, 2001, 2008; Gaskill, 2002). In Brazil's version of OLPR, entire states serve as legislative districts, with magnitude ranging from 8 to 70. Parties and coalitions are allowed to nominate more candidates than there are seats, further increasing the supply of list positions. In contrast, Chile's OLPR system had a magnitude of 2 for all districts from 1989 to 2013; since 2017, it has ranged from 3 to 8.

Open list proportional representation has also been identified as a factor facilitating evangelical ambitions in Peru (Lecaros, 2016, p. 109). Diversifying the list (in a single national district election with a magnitude of 100) was APRA's explicit motivation for inviting evangelical pastor Pedro Arana to run for office in the 1978 constituent assembly election, despite his not being a party member. The personal vote in this election has been seen as crucial in Arana's winning a seat; he received the fourth highest vote total on the APRA list, ahead of some long-time party leaders (Arana, 1987; Arroyo & Paredes, 1992).

Party systems also matter for how well evangelicals who are politically motivated can gain electoral representation. Fragmented multiparty systems imply numerous legislative lists in each election and more opportunities to get on the ballot with established parties. Fragmentation may also make it easier for evangelicals to form new, viable parties themselves, either because of permissive registration requirements (strictly speaking, a cause rather than an effect of fragmentation) or because the effective threshold for winning office is lower. The programmatic versus clientelistic nature of the party system can matter as well. Where the party system is programmatic, with parties representing clear policy alternatives, evangelicals may find a welcome home only on one side of the ideological spectrum, at least during a period when values issues have been their major political cause. By contrast, in a clientelistic or personalistic party system, a larger share of parties may welcome evangelical candidates as long as they can bring in votes and material resources.

Given this logic, party systems have often been invoked as explanations for evangelicals' varying electoral prospects in Latin America. Brazil's and Peru's party systems have traditionally been classified as fragmented and non-programmatic, with a large and frequently shifting set of parties holding seats in Congress (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). This arrangement is considered favorable to evangelicals getting on established party lists as well as forming their own parties (Freston, 1993; López, 2004; Pérez Guadalupe, 2017, p. 122; Willems, 1967, p. 221, 225). By contrast, Chile's institutionalized and ideologically structured party system is often seen as an impediment to evangelicals' electoral prospects, as they have trouble breaking into the political establishment (Fediakova, 2002; Fediakova & Parker, 2006; Freston, 2001; Willems, 1967, pp. 221, 225). In Costa Rica, the breakdown of the traditional biparty system has been credited with opening the door for evangelical parties (Zúñiga, 2018), though these parties are also a cause of the party system opening up.



In a cross-national comparative analysis, Mora Torres (2010) argues that both party system fragmentation and barriers to entry posed by the electoral system influence evangelicals' strategy when seeking political representation. In fragmented party systems with low barriers to entry, evangelicals should create their own parties; where barriers to entry are low but parties are better established, they should seek positions on existing parties' lists; and with established parties and high barriers to entry, they are more likely to organize as pressure groups than to run for office. This third category—in which Mora Torres places Puerto Rico, and where Chile might also be located—is where we would expect less evangelical representation.

Institutional explanations for cross-national variation in evangelical representation are attractive, but they also have their limitations. For example, evangelicals have often sought to create their own parties, even in places where party system arguments would suggest that the effort is futile, including Puerto Rico, Costa Rica in the 1980s, and Chile in the 1990s (Fediakova, 2004; Mora Torres, 2010; Zúñiga, 2018). Bastian (1999) shows that there is a broad variety of evangelical political parties in Latin America, spanning countries with very different party systems. Moreover, the vast majority of these parties have met with limited success, regardless of whether there were significant barriers to new party formation. Once they have definitively decided to embrace electoral politics, evangelicals' sense of divine mission may lead them to found parties even where the objective prospects for success are slim.

Another limitation of arguments linking variation in evangelical representation to electoral and political institutions is that these comparisons are confounded by all of the other potentially relevant ways that countries differ, such as historical factors that might serve to politicize evangelical identity. Most institutional arguments have relied on cross-case analysis and an implicit logic of regression rather than presenting within-case evidence. An exception is Boas (2019), who examines how evangelical ballot access varies across Brazilian states with different levels of party system fragmentation and legislative district magnitude. This analysis, which holds constant national-level factors that might influence evangelical politicization, shows that evangelicals actually run for office more often in states with smaller district magnitude and less fragmented party systems. Hence, this subnational analysis casts doubt on traditional institutional arguments about evangelical political representation in Brazil.

Changes over time in electoral formulas and party registration requirements can offer additional insight into their effects on evangelical political representation. In 2003, Colombia implemented a far-reaching electoral reform intended to combat party-system fragmentation and the personalization of politics. The new rules had the effect of ousting a longtime evangelical incumbent, Jimmy Chamorro, and killing off five of the six personalistic evangelical parties that had sprung up in the 1990s (Beltrán & Quiroga, 2016; Ortega, 2018; Velasco Montoya, 2018). Hence, Colombia presents clear evidence that unfavorable changes in electoral institutions can at least temporarily reduce evangelical political representation. Similarly, Chile's 2015 electoral reform suggests that favorable electoral system changes might boost evangelical representation, though its effects are more ambiguous. The moderate increase in district magnitude between 2013 and 2017 coincided with an increase in

evangelical candidacies and elected legislators, though it is difficult to disentangle the effects of this change from the politicizing effect of progressive values issue legislation passed during this same period (Boas, 2019).

On the whole, electoral and party systems do seem to matter for the efforts of a previously excluded constituency like evangelicals to gain political representation. However, their value for explaining cross-national variation in this outcome may be somewhat oversold. Political ambitions are logically prior to institutional features that might facilitate or hamper those ambitions. Where they co-vary—as in Brazil versus Chile, where the party system, electoral system, and history of threats to evangelical interests and worldview all point toward the same outcomes—it is hard to argue from a simple cross-national comparison that institutions matter more than politicization. Hence, institutional explanations would benefit from leveraging additional within-case evidence, such as subnational variation or changes over time in party and electoral systems.

## Voting Behavior

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Assuming that evangelicals are motivated to run for office and can find positions on party ballots, the final necessary ingredient to gaining office is winning votes. This fact raises the question of the effect of a candidate's religion on voting behavior. If evangelical candidates are more or less likely to win support than similar politicians of other faiths, voting behavior matters for their ability to gain political representation. Moreover, if the effect of candidate religion on voting behavior varies cross-nationally, voting behavior is a potential explanation for why evangelicals are better represented in some countries than in others.

While an evangelical candidate could potentially gain office by winning votes from any segment of the electorate, most scholars have focused on the question of whether “brother votes for brother.” Some have argued that evangelicals engage in identity voting for evangelical candidates in Brazil (Fonseca, 2002; Fernandes, Sanchis, Velho, Carneiro, Mariz, & Mafra, 1998, p. 127). In general, however, much of the literature has been skeptical of this notion. In Guatemala, Smith and Grenfell (1999) argue that evangelicals do not vote as a bloc for co-religionists. In Chile, Fediakova (2014) maintains that they do not follow instructions from pastors on how to vote. López (2004, 2008) and Barrera (2006) suggest that there is no evangelical identity voting in Peru because evangelical candidates' vote totals are much lower than the estimated number of evangelical voters. Likewise, Pérez Guadalupe (2017) argues that the radical fluctuations in the vote for certain evangelical candidates across successive elections shows that there is no evangelical vote per se.

Most skeptical arguments about evangelical identity voting confront something of a straw man: they assume that if “brother votes for brother,” a candidate's religion or a pastor's endorsement must be the *only* factor driving voting behavior for virtually the entire community of evangelical voters. This is an unrealistically high bar. A candidate's party affiliation can matter for voting behavior without 100 % of partisans blindly supporting its nominee; the same is true of candidate religion. The relevant question is not whether all or

even most evangelical voters support an evangelical candidate, but rather whether such a candidate wins more support—from either fellow believers or voters in general—than an otherwise similar politician of a different religion.

Studies using survey data to examine voting behavior in elections with evangelical candidates suggest that brother does tend to vote for brother. In Brazil's 2002 election, evangelicals were more likely than Catholics to support co-religionist Anthony Garotinho for president, but their voting behavior was indistinguishable in 2006, when no evangelical was on the ballot (Bohn, 2004, 2007). In 2010 and 2014, Brazilian evangelicals were more likely than those of other faiths to support Marina Silva for president (Smith, 2019). Likewise, Pentecostals were more likely than Catholics to vote for Francisco Rossi in the runoff for governor of São Paulo in 1994 (Gaskill, 2002). Moving beyond the Brazilian case, surveys from Costa Rica's 2018 election suggest that evangelicals were significantly more likely than those of other faiths to vote for Fabricio Alvarado (Murillo, 2018).

Survey-based analysis of single elections offer important insights, but they also have their limitations. Such studies are designed to estimate the effect of a voter's religion on support for specific candidates rather than the effect of a candidate's evangelicalism on the voting behavior of fellow believers. It is certainly suggestive that Brazilian evangelicals voted differently from those of other faiths when an evangelical candidate was on the ballot and were indistinguishable from other voters when one was not. Yet we cannot say for certain whether it was Anthony Garotinho and Marina Silva's religion—as opposed to their charisma, status as outsiders, policy proposals, or some other characteristic—that explains why evangelical voters were disproportionately likely to support them.

Analyses that move beyond single elections with specific evangelical candidates can offer greater insight into this question of how a candidate's religion affects voting behavior. If we find a relationship between candidate religion and support from evangelical voters across multiple politicians who vary in terms of party affiliation, gender, political experience, and so on, we can be more certain that the relationship is a function of what these candidates and voters do have in common—their religion. Based on a pooled analysis of six evangelical candidates running for president in five elections, each in a different Latin American country, Boas and Smith (2015) argue that evangelicals are significantly more likely than Catholics to vote for an evangelical candidate when one is on the ballot.

Shifting to the legislative level, Boas (2018) uses ecological analysis to examine the relationship between evangelical share of the population and municipal-level vote share for hundreds of evangelical candidates across multiple elections in Brazil, Chile, and Peru. He shows that in each country, evangelical candidates do tend to win more votes in places with more evangelical voters, though the effect is strongest in Brazil, moderate in Peru, and weakest in Chile. These findings match the relative presence of evangelicals in each country's national legislature, suggesting that cross-national differences in identity voting may be part of the explanation for differences in evangelical political representation across these three cases.

Another way to examine the effect of a candidate's religion on voting behavior is to use survey vignette experiments that ask about vote intention for hypothetical candidates, varying the candidate's religion while keeping other factors constant. While potentially limited in terms of external validity, this approach ensures that any differences in vote intention in the treatment versus control conditions can be attributed to the treatment, such as describing the hypothetical candidate as evangelical. Using this technique, Boas (2016, 2018) presents evidence of evangelical identity voting in Brazil, Chile, and Peru. Likewise, Boas (2014) shows that a hypothetical Brazilian candidate using "pastor" in his official electoral name can expect less support overall but more support from evangelical voters and especially Pentecostals.

While numerous studies suggest that Brazil's evangelical candidates win support from evangelical voters, identity voting in Brazil appears to fall primarily along denominational lines (Pérez Guadalupe & Grundberger, 2018). Cerqueira do Nascimento (2017) shows that candidates from the Brazilian Republican Party, often considered the political wing of the IURD, receive higher vote share at polling stations that are close to a IURD church location, which is suggestive of effective denominational campaigning. Likewise, Boas (2018) shows that the relationship between share of the population belonging to a particular evangelical church and vote share for that church's candidates is strong for AD and particularly strong for the IURD. Hence, any overall evangelical identity voting effect in Brazil may be primarily composed of separate denominational voting effects, in which the faithful support candidates endorsed by their churches.

In sum, the balance of evidence from analyses of survey data, survey vignette experiments, and electoral results suggests that, compared to candidates of another religion, evangelical candidates do tend to win more support from evangelical voters. Moreover, at least some of these studies provide a relatively strong basis for concluding that a candidate's religion has a causal effect on the support of fellow believers.

Whether evangelical identity voting helps explain cross-national differences in evangelicals' political representation is a separate question. Boas (2018) suggests that variation in the strength of evangelical identity voting may at least partially explain why evangelicals are well represented in Brazil, poorly represented in Chile, and moderately well represented in Peru. Denominational campaigning in Brazil may be largely responsible for the strength of the relationship in that country. Meanwhile, in Chile, socially conservative Catholics are well represented among the political class, and their positions on values issues might make them attractive to evangelical voters, reducing the magnitude of any "brother votes for brother" effect (Boas, 2018).

## Conclusion

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While evangelical Christians have made headlines for certain high-profile electoral victories in Latin America, their success with electoral politics is neither a uniform trend across the region nor a development of the last several years. On the contrary, evangelicals' electoral presence in Latin America varies significantly across countries as well as over time. In some

places, such as Brazil and Guatemala, evangelicals have a substantial and long-standing political presence; in others, such as Costa Rica, major electoral success is a more recent phenomenon; and in still others, such as Chile, evangelical representation has always been fairly limited.

To succeed in placing representatives in elected office, any newcomer to the political scene needs numbers, motivation, opportunities, and an ability to win votes. Explanations for evangelical political representation in Latin America have generally fallen into one of these categories. Sociological explanations based on evangelical shares of the population or political elite have an attractive simplicity and may work for some cases, but they fail to distinguish among varied levels of political representation in the countries where evangelicals are most numerous. Historically-grounded arguments focused on motivations—in particular, threats to evangelicals' way of life or worldview that might serve to politicize their religious identity—fare better in this respect. Arguments focused on the enabling or constraining effects of electoral and party systems also tell an important part of the story, though they could benefit from leveraging within-case evidence. Finally, the question of voting behavior for evangelical candidates merits greater attention in the future, especially using research designs that can better isolate the causal effect of a candidate's religion.

Examining cross-national variation in evangelicals' political representation can also shed light on why we also see an apparent surge in their electoral success in the second decade of the 21st century. Policy-diffusion effects, cross-border legal processes, and transnational advocacy networks for women's and LGBTQ rights may mean that issues such as same-sex marriage, gender identity, and the liberalization of abortion laws are arriving on national political agendas at roughly the same time. The same-sex marriage ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which provided such as boost to Fabricio Alvarado's presidential candidacy in Costa Rica, is technically binding for all signatory countries. States may vary in their judicial and political response to this decision, but it certainly has the effect of placing the issue on the agenda in a number of countries simultaneously. While religious freedom as a motivation for evangelical political organizing varied significantly across countries in response to the details of church-state separation, the strength of the rule of law, and other factors, the rise of values issues appears to be more of a cross-national commonality. The electoral success of evangelical communities will still depend on favorable institutional environments and voting behavior, but common motivations should go a long way toward explaining evangelical electoral mobilization in Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and others.

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