

### Evangelicals and politics in Latin America: religious switching and its growing political relevance

Zilla, Claudia

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Stellungnahme / comment

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zilla, C. (2018). *Evangelicals and politics in Latin America: religious switching and its growing political relevance*. (SWP Comment, 46/2018). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-60520-9>

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# SWP Comment

NO. 46 OCTOBER 2018

## Evangelicals and Politics in Latin America

Religious Switching and Its Growing Political Relevance

*Claudia Zilla*

Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the former army captain and recently elected Brazilian president from the Social Liberal Party (PSL) with the campaign slogan “Brazil above everything; God above everyone”, is a paramount example of the linkage between politics and Evangelical values, interests, and actors in Latin America: In May 2016, Bolsonaro was baptised in the Jordan River by Pastor Everaldo Pereira, a prominent leader of the Assembly of God church and the head of the Social Christian Party (PSC); pictures and videos of the ceremony were circulated on the internet. Bolsonaro counted on the support of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the National Congress, comprising 199 deputies with diverse party affiliations and 60 percent of the Evangelical electorate’s voting intention for the electoral run-off. Edir Macedo, founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and owner of the second largest media network in Brazil, endorsed Bolsonaro’s candidacy and broadcasted a favourable interview with him on his TV programme. In Latin America, candidates with conservative-value agendas and strong positions on authority and order as well as against crime and corruption are especially attractive to the rapidly growing number of Evangelical churches and believers in the region. At the same time, they have become an important target group of politicians of different parties searching for support.

Although conservative political agendas and Evangelical values and interests converge strongly, leftist candidates in Brazil have nevertheless sought to gain Evangelical support – not without success. For many years, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and his Workers’ Party (PT) enjoyed great sympathy among Evangelicals. In 2014, the incumbent president, Dilma Rousseff (PT), attended the inauguration of the Temple of Solomon in São Paulo, a mega-church that accommodates 10,000 worshipers and is headed by Bishop Edir Macedo. Most Evan-

gelicals and PT voters stem from a common social sector: people with lower incomes and education levels. Moreover, a personal union between religion and politics has become a common feature in Brazil. For the 2018 general elections, more than 500 persons registered their candidacies while adding religious titles to their names – “pastor” being the most frequent. Today, Brazilian Evangelicals seem to be conquering the middle and upper classes and tipping the electoral balance in a more cohesive way in favour of right-wing candidates.



## The Silent Migration

A silent but increasingly visible religious transformation has taken place not only in Brazil but all over Latin America. Since the 1950s – and more intensively since the 1970s – the Roman Catholic Church has been losing members, not in favour of secularism but of a growing religious pluralism. Especially Evangelical churches have gained followers over the years. Only four countries in the region show different trends.

*Stable Catholicism.* In Mexico and Paraguay, the Catholic Church has not experienced (substantial) losses, as in the rest of Latin America, with 80 and 89 percent of the populations, respectively, defining themselves as Catholic, and only 5 percent as Evangelical.

*Growing secularism.* The number of atheists and agnostics has significantly augmented only in two countries: Chile (38%) and Uruguay (41%).

*Religious switching.* In most of Latin America, however, data evince a strong correlation between the declining number of people who describe themselves as Catholic and the rise of non-Catholic Christians, mainly Evangelicals. According to *Latino-barómetro 2018*, fewer than half of the populations of Honduras (37%), El Salvador (38%), Nicaragua (40%), Guatemala (43%), and the Dominican Republic (48%) regard themselves as Catholic. These same countries exhibit the highest rates of Evangelicals (in the same order: 39%, 28%, 32%, 41%, 21%) in Latin America. Although Brazil (54%), Panama (55%), and Costa Rica (57%) still retain a Catholic majority, more than a quarter of their populations consider themselves as Evangelical. Between 1995 and 2017, 10 countries saw their shares of Catholics reduced by between 22 and 39 percentage points. The decline has been especially substantial in Central America.

Surveys confirm that most Evangelicals have converted from the historically dominant religion. Normally, they have turned from being “passive Catholics” into “active Evangelicals”, since Evangelicalism is not a question of birth but of conscious decision-

making by adults who are associated with a stronger commitment to the religion, their own church, and their community.

## Evangelical Diversity

Evangelicals (Spanish: *evangélicos*) constitute an ambiguous and contested concept that refers to a heterogeneous group of largely independent Protestant churches associated with different national and regional federations. Nomenclatures and classifications within this religious universe are not strictly consistent across languages, religious authorities, or research. In this article, “Evangelical” is used as an umbrella concept that includes first and foremost Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, and Neo-Charismatic movements. Members of the historical Protestant churches, such as Lutherans and Calvinists, that is, the so-called immigrant’s churches or transplantation churches in Latin America, are not covered by the term. Rather, Evangelical designates a wide range of indigenous churches of a more recent date that share several of the following features: They have a literal approach to the Bible, believe that Jesus will return during their lifetime, and that God intervenes in daily life, for example granting good health and material wealth to Christians of strong faith (prosperity gospel). Worship services often involve experiences considered as “gifts of the Holy Spirit”, such as divine healing, speaking in tongues, exorcism, and receiving direct revelations from God. Although the Vatican and the Catholic Church in Latin America adopt a similarly conservative stance regarding moral questions and social issues, Evangelicals are usually more strongly opposed to abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, artificial means of birth control, sex outside of marriage, and drinking alcohol. This difference remains valid between Catholics and Evangelicals with the same levels of religious observance. Among Evangelicals, especially Neo-Pentecostals, charity – and, in particular, missionary work – is of great importance and widespread. For this reason, and because of

their numerical growth, the expansion of Evangelical churches in the region has been called the “second evangelisation”.

Some Evangelical, mostly Neo-Pentecostal communities headed by charismatic leaders have transformed themselves from “garage temples” into “mega-churches” located in former theatres and new monumental buildings. The Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God as well as the Assembly of God church, which have spread all over the region, illustrate this development. From a theological perspective, it is questionable whether these movements qualify as religions, since they lack a coherent and substantial doctrine. They frequently resemble family enterprises, featuring relatives as appointed managers at the top of different “business branches”: the temples (event centres), media (newspapers, radio, TV), religious merchandising, etc. They show a special interest in entering the middle and upper social classes and winning the endorsements of prominent and popular individuals.

## Religious and Political Motivations

According to a 2014 survey of the Pew Research Center, when asked about the reasons for their Evangelical conversion, former Catholics most commonly chose the following options: seeking a personal connection with God (81%); enjoy style of worship at new church (69%); wanted greater emphasis on morality (60%); found church that helps members more (59%); outreach by new church (58%). Thus, non-material reasons clearly dominate over material interests. Qualitative studies reveal that Evangelical churches seem to promote a sense of belonging, a relational proximity, and an emotional connection that neither the Catholic Church nor the state can provide. Families from precarious and vulnerable social groups that join Evangelical churches tend to find a way out of alcoholism and domestic violence and into the workforce to establish an orderly life. The widespread prosperity gospel only reinforces

the experiences concerning economic progress and social advancement.

After having supported the liberal political forces that defended religious freedom and the separation of state and church during the process of state-building in Latin America, the Protestant churches in the region broadly divided into two sectors with contrary orientations: more autochthonous churches that addressed social questions and engaged in charity work on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those churches influenced by US Evangelicals that were socially and theologically more conservative and dedicated to evangelisation. Whereas the former were traditionally prone to a closer church – world relationship, and thus to politics, the latter turned their backs on the world (*fuga mundi*). Yet, over the years, the conservative groups represented by Neo-Pentecostals have become prominent and partly adopted a more open attitude towards the world that is compatible with political intervention. As a consequence, they now enjoy greater visibility.

## Going into Politics

In the 1980s and 1990s, Guatemala provided the first two Evangelical heads of state in Latin America – General Efraín Ríos Montt and the democratically elected Jorge Serrano Elías – decades before Jimmy Morales came to power in 2016. Since the third wave of democratisation in the 1980s, several Evangelical political parties have been founded (and disappeared) in many Latin American countries. However, most of them were not able to achieve political relevance. Nowadays, Evangelical candidates for executive positions as well as mobilisations against the extension of rights are earning renewed international attention. Brazil has had some recent notorious examples: the establishment of the cross-party Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress, the election of Bishop Marcelo Crivella as mayor of Rio de Janeiro in 2016, and the election of Bolsonaro as president in the recent general elections.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 1861-1761

SWP Comment 46  
October 2018

Evangelicals across Latin America have also been protesting and voting against diversity politics and affirmative action: in Colombia against the plebiscite of 2016 on the peace agreements because of what they allegedly perceived as “gender ideology” in the Peace Treaty; in Mexico against same-sex marriage; in Argentina against the decriminalisation of abortion; and in Uruguay against the integral law in favour of transgender people, to name but a few examples. In their claims “for life and family”, Evangelicals strongly converge with Catholic groups and right-wing political forces. However, some Evangelical churches and parties have also explicitly supported candidates of the left. For instance, the Mexican Social Encounter Party (PES) attached itself to the Evangelical right and backed the candidacy of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, leader of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), for the presidency.

## Growing Political Impact

In a context of pronounced religious pluralism, freedom of religion has become equality of religion only in exceptional cases where Evangelical churches have been put on the same level as the Catholic Church. For instance, in Chile, Evangelical churches obtained legal status as institutions of public law in 2000. In most Latin American countries, however, they remain civil associations under private law that lack the privileges of the Catholic Church. The Evangelical churches' atomised organisation as well as lower degrees of hierarchisation undermine their lobbying capacity. By now, Evangelical churches enjoy less institutional power than numerical weight showing a growing awareness of their social and political leverage potential.

*Mobilisation power.* Although Evangelical churches normally lack an elaborated social doctrine and genuine political programmes, they can shape social preferences, have sought to put forward moral agendas, and

are willing to join forces with Catholic and conservative groups.

*Electoral power.* Evangelicals do not vote as a monolithic block; parishioners still retain relative political autonomy. However, Evangelical leaders have become more outspoken in terms of their endorsements of parties and candidates, and believers' voting preferences have become more homogeneous. At the same time, non-Evangelical politicians of diverse ideological provenience have aspired to attract Evangelical leaders and voters by adopting their discourse.

*Dogma and contingency.* In a region plagued by high levels of corruption, militant religiosity provides legitimacy to the discourse on the imperative moralisation of politics. Yet, religious convictions and argumentations are based on dogmatic truth and, once inside the political arena, they may turn political preferences into non-negotiable positions, thereby reinforcing polarisation and intolerance and paving the way for the political instrumentation of religion.

*Politics of religion.* Evangelical incursions into politics have been dominated by pragmatic Neo-Pentecostal actors seeking to translate religious activism into electoral support. In some cases, Evangelical identity has also served as the foundation for building parliamentary groups and, consequently, for the political articulation of corporate interests transversally to party affiliation in congress committees.

*Elite convergence.* In Latin America, the convergence of political and economic elites is not exceptional. When Evangelical leaders of mega-churches are simultaneously rich businessmen that go into politics or endorse candidates, the religious factor completes the “power trinity”, eroding the diffusion of power conducive to democracy.

Promoting broad social and political dialogue mechanisms that include multiple churches may bring them into public fora where there is an opportunity to foster direct exchanges, confer greater transparency on the linkages between politics and religion, and enhance social accountability.

*Dr Claudia Zilla is Head of SWP's The Americas Division.*