Evangelicals and Electoral Politics in Latin America

Why are religious minorities well represented and politically influential in some democracies but not others? Focusing on evangelical Christians in Latin America, this book argues that religious minorities seek and gain electoral representation when they face significant threats to their material interests and worldview, and when their community is not internally divided by cross-cutting cleavages. Differences in Latin American evangelicals’ political ambitions emerged as a result of two critical junctures: episodes of secular reform in the early twentieth century and the rise of sexuality politics at the turn of the twenty-first. In Brazil, significant threats at both junctures prompted extensive electoral mobilization; in Chile, minimal threats meant that mobilization lagged. In Peru, where major cleavages divide both evangelicals and broader society, threats prompt less electoral mobilization than otherwise expected. The multi-method argument leverages interviews, content analysis, survey experiments, ecological analysis, and secondary case studies of Colombia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.

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Evangelicals and Electoral Politics in Latin America

A Kingdom of This World

TAYLOR C. BOAS
Boston University
To Robert and Suzanne Boas
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Preface

In February 2006, while doing field research in Peru for the doctoral dissertation that would become Presidential Campaigns in Latin America (Boas, 2016b), I attended a rally for Humberto Lay, a neo-Pentecostal pastor and candidate in that year’s presidential elections. As a minor candidate, Lay was outside the scope of my research; rather, I hoped to make contact with his running mate, Máximo San Román, who had been elected vice president in 1990. Given Lay’s single-digit poll standings, I expected the rally to be a small affair and figured that I could easily corner one of his advisors in order to introduce myself. When I arrived, it was clear that I had severely underestimated the draw of the somewhat quiet and reserved evangelical politician. Thousands of Lay’s supporters filled Lima’s downtown Campo de Marte park, dancing to Christian rock artists performing on a massive stage. Lay’s attendance was noticeably better than that of Alan García, the eventual election winner, at another rally I attended at the same location during the campaign. Humberto Lay’s campaign rally in Lima taught me a clear lesson that night: One should not underestimate evangelical politicians in Latin America. This lesson was not one that I had learned in graduate school, in the discipline of political science, or in the broader Latin American studies community at the time. In 2006, most scholars’ attention was focused on other political trends in Latin America – the Pink Tide that was bringing left-of-center presidents to power throughout the region and the growing disillusionment with neoliberalism as an economic model. While most of us in graduate school instinctively rejected modernization theory, we seemed to have unconsciously internalized its “death of religion” arguments. Socially conservative evangelical politicians such as Lay seemed
Preface

like outliers or aberrations, likely to fade away as levels of religiosity in Latin America declined over time. To paraphrase Marx (1976), it would be secular Uruguay, and not the much more highly religious Brazil, that would show to the less developed the image of its own future.

Yet I had also experienced a different reality— one that took evangelical politicians quite seriously— while growing up in the South. As someone who had attended Christian private schools and, during my formative years, a politically conservative church, I was surrounded by both religion and politics while coming of age and trying to make sense of each. The Atlanta I grew up in during the 1990s was home to Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed, Chick-Fil-A founder S. Truett Cathy, and other icons of the religious right. While I ultimately rejected both conservative politics and conservative Christianity (before reengaging as an adult with a much more progressive version of the latter—yes, I am a case study of Margolis’s (2018) life cycle of religion theory), I never forgot what I had observed growing up about evangelicals’ political potential. And the more I learned about Latin American politics, the more it seemed that some version of what happened with evangelicals in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s was happening there as well.

This book is my attempt to make sense of evangelicals’ electoral ambitions in Latin America. I approach this topic first and foremost as a scholar who seeks to leverage the tools of social science to understand and explain a significant political phenomenon in the region. Yet my analysis is inevitably filtered through the lens of someone who, during his formative years, was (to paraphrase the Gospel of John) in their world, but not of it. When asked during fieldwork if I was evangelical, I always answered “yes, I am Anglican.” In Spanish and Portuguese, “evangélico” is effectively a synonym for Protestant, and as an Episcopalian, I would qualify in the Latin American sense, though never in the English-language one. If the question is intended as a more general one—“do you sympathize with us, do you see the world as we do?”—the answer is both yes and no. For more than a century, evangelicals’ principal political cause in Latin America was defending the secular state and the rights of religious minorities, a goal that I wholeheartedly endorse. Yet we part company with respect to the issues of gender and sexuality that most energize evangelicals in present-day Latin American politics.

All social scientists inevitably approach our research, and the human beings who are the subjects of our analysis, with the baggage of our own experiences, beliefs, commitments, and passions. I believe that having grown up around a much more conservative version of Christianity
has helped me to understand the worldview of many evangelicals in Latin America. At the same time, my present-day distance from this tradition, and especially its political positions, has helped me to approach the analysis as a dispassionate observer. That has been my goal, at least – to take Latin American evangelicals seriously, as neither an apologist nor a critic. The reader will be the judge of whether I have succeeded.
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This book is dedicated to my parents, Robert and Suzanne Boas. I am unlikely to have written it if not for my own religious upbringing, for which they deserve credit. But even more crucially, they taught me the importance of empathy – seeing the world through the eyes of others even when I disagree with them. That has been an invaluable skill as I have sought to understand evangelicals and electoral politics in Latin America.