1

Explaining Evangelical Representation

1.1 INTRODUCTION

In May 2011, the government of newly inaugurated Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff was planning to roll out an antihomophobia educational campaign in public schools. Then the evangelicals in Brazil's Congress, who held 14 percent of seats, sprang into action, threatening to block all future legislation and support a corruption investigation against the president's chief of staff if the plan was not withdrawn. Rousseff backed down, and the educational campaign was canceled.

In Chile, evangelical leaders similarly mobilized against a civil unions bill that was being debated in Congress in 2014–2015. Pastors led protests in front of the Congress building; one even got into a shoving match with a legislator while attending a committee hearing on the bill. Yet Chile's evangelicals, with only one representative in the 158-seat legislature, lacked influence within the halls of power. The bill passed and became law in April 2015.

In Peru's 2011 election, five out of nine evangelical representatives entered Congress as candidates of *fujimorismo*, a right-wing populist movement. Led by Congressman Julio Rosas, conservative evangelicals and Catholics united to block several civil unions bills. Yet factionalism and corruption scandals decimated *fujimorismo* in the latter half of the decade, and evangelicals' political representation suffered as a result. In 2020, only a single evangelical was elected to Congress, on a different party's list.

The culture wars are coming to Latin America, as issues of LGBTQ and reproductive rights rise to the forefront of the political agenda and prompt a socially conservative backlash. In many countries, the rapidly

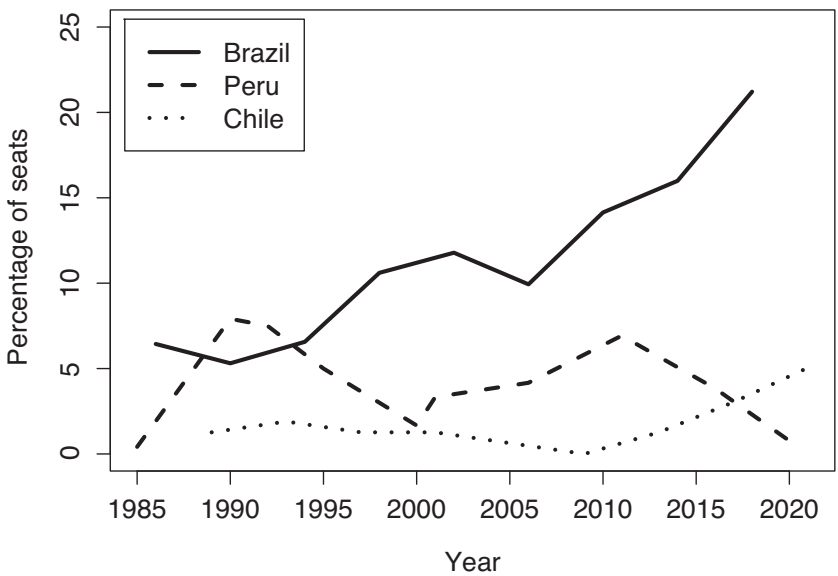

FIGURE 1.1 Legislative seat shares for evangelicals
See Appendix for a description of data sources.

expanding ranks of evangelical Christians are leading the political charge against this liberalizing trend. Costa Rica made headlines in 2018, when a decision in favor of same-sex marriage by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights immediately transformed the presidential race, boosting the fortunes of the previously minor candidate Fabricio Alvarado, an evangelical pastor. Alvarado lost in the runoff, but his National Restoration Party gained 25 percent of seats in the Legislative Assembly, giving Costa Rica one of the region's largest evangelical caucuses in percentage terms (Zúñiga Ramírez, 2018).

Yet evangelicals' engagement and success with electoral politics in Latin America also vary significantly across countries and over time. Figure 1.1 plots evangelicals' legislative seat shares over several decades in Brazil, Chile, and Peru, the three countries examined in detail in this study. In Brazil, evangelicals enjoy a decades-long influential presence in Congress, dating back at least to the 1986 Constituent Assembly election, and their numbers have continued to grow steadily. In Chile, the electoral representation of evangelicals has been much more modest, despite their mobilization for the 2017 and 2021 elections after a series of defeats on abortion, civil unions, and same-sex marriage. And in Peru, evangelicals'

electoral representation has come and gone in waves, following the fluctuating electoral fortunes of *fujimorismo*, their most reliable route to office since 1990.

What explains why Latin America's evangelicals have become political power brokers in some countries and are largely relegated to the sidelines in others? Existing research on this question has focused primarily on formal political institutions. Following the broader literature on the descriptive representation of minority groups, permissive party and electoral systems that are open to new entrants are seen as favorable to evangelicals' electoral prospects. Hence, the traditional argument goes, they have faced fewer barriers to representation in Brazil than in Chile, with Peru falling somewhere in between. Another set of arguments focuses on voting behavior, claiming that evangelicals are simply more willing to vote for coreligionists in Brazil than they are in other parts of Latin America.

In contrast to the formal institutionalist bent of the existing literature, I argue that the most important factor in explaining evangelicals' political representation is the degree to which their religious identity has been politicized by threats to their interests and worldview. Historically, most evangelicals in Latin America preferred to live their lives apart from mainstream society, practicing their religion and focusing on the afterlife without engaging in "worldly" pursuits such as politics. Where they have overcome this reluctance and thrust themselves into the electoral sphere, it has been to fight legislative battles in two areas at the core of evangelical interests and identities: legal equality with the Catholic Church and sexuality politics issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. My comparative historical explanation thus focuses on a factor, the politicization of a group identity and consequent motivations to seek representation, that is logically prior to any barriers imposed by political institutions or voting behavior.

I argue that cross-national differences in the politicization of evangelical identity emerged as a result of two critical junctures: disestablishment of the Catholic Church or major episodes of secular reform in the early twentieth century and the arrival of sexuality politics on the political agenda at the turn of the twenty-first century. Where an aggrieved Catholic Church mobilized politically to recoup privileges that had been lost via disestablishment, as in Brazil, evangelicals perceived material threats and mobilized politically in response. Where the Catholic Church was more accepting of disestablishment, as in Chile, the lack of a major threat to evangelical interests meant little political mobilization. Once

sexuality politics arrived on the political agenda, coalitional possibilities shifted, and historical adversaries became potential allies in a shared effort to oppose progressive policy initiatives. Where evangelicals were already better positioned to lead this battle than conservative Catholics – as in Brazil, thanks to their prior mobilization on behalf of religious equality – they sought to further expand their electoral representation to defend against a new set of threats. Where conservative Catholics had a stronger position, as in Chile, evangelical electoral mobilization lagged.

Threats to material interests or a conservative worldview help explain the politicization of evangelical identity, but cleavages potentially serve as a brake upon this process. Where salient divides within the evangelical community have coincided with broader political cleavages – as in Peru, with the split over *fujimorismo* – conflict along other dimensions may displace the collective struggle to defend against material or worldview threats. Thus, in Peru, evangelicals have been less mobilized, and less successful in obtaining electoral representation, than one would expect based on threats alone.

1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION

If politics is about who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936), there are many different ways for groups to pursue their interests, including behind-the-scenes political pressure, formal lobbying, and promises of support in exchange for policy concessions. Descriptive representation – putting group members in public office to advocate for concerns directly – is but one option among many. So why should evangelicals in Latin America seek to elect fellow believers as a means of pursuing their interests? And why should scholars care about this outcome?

Historically, most religious organizations that exerted political influence did so via their close ties to the state. Weberian traditional authority (Weber, 1978) is the oldest justification for a ruler's monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force, underlying the divine right monarchies of early modern Europe. Secularism subsequently challenged this fusion of religion and politics, with the emergence of republics such as France, Turkey, and the United States that sought to separate church and state (Kuru, 2009). Yet dominant religious institutions often retained considerable political influence behind the scenes. In cases where churches were closely associated with the national identity – such as Ireland and Poland, where they defended against foreign-imposed regimes – they were able

to cultivate a suprapartisan form of "institutional access" to formally secular states (Grzymała-Busse, 2015).

Dominant religious institutions may often enjoy behind-the-scenes political influence, but most organized interests are forced to more openly pursue their objectives. Some groups may engage in lobbying, especially those whose causes cut across partisan divides, as with the American Association of Retired Persons in the United States. Others may cultivate an alliance with an ideologically sympathetic political party, a tack that dominant churches have often taken when they do not have a plausible basis for claiming to represent the national interest (Grzymała-Busse, 2015). Lobbying and partisan alliances are most effective for groups that have numbers on their side, but some well-resourced minority groups may succeed with these strategies as well, as with the pro-Israel lobby in the United States (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007). Neither of these forms of influence requires placing group members in office; rather, they seek to persuade those who already hold power.

Historically excluded and socioeconomically marginalized actors, including evangelicals in Latin America, have fewer options for direct political influence. In such circumstances, descriptive representation – placing group members in office – can be particularly valuable for achieving their aims. Legislators from politically underrepresented gender, racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic categories are likely to adopt similar positions as their descriptive constituents on core issues of concern for the community (Boas and Smith, 2019). By contrast, traditional partisan forms of interest representation have not served marginalized communities particularly well, at least in Latin America (Htun, 2016). For this reason, subaltern communities have not historically been content with mere alliances and word-of-mouth guarantees from out-group politicians seeking their support. For example, successful Latin American populist parties such as Argentina's Justicialist Party and Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party not only made commitments to prolabor policies but gave allied unions the right to name candidates for public office, including many from their own ranks (Collier and Collier, 1991; Levitsky, 2003).

Latin American evangelicals have often sought electoral representation after concluding that mere alliances were not good enough. In 1958, Brazilian Pentecostal pastor Manoel de Mello promised to deliver votes for São Paulo mayor Adhemar de Barros in exchange for a piece of land for a new church building, but pressure from the Catholic Church eventually convinced Barros to renege on the deal and tear down the newly

constructed building (Freston, 1993*b*; Gaskill, 2002; Read, 1965). In the next election, Mello shifted to a different approach – sponsoring the candidacy of one of his own assistant pastors. In a 2017 speech, making a pitch for evangelicals to elect their own representatives, Chilean congressional candidate Eduardo Durán Salinas opined: "Enough of those politicians that visit our temples and claim to defend our values and principles and then … promote laws that go against everything we believe as Christians!"[1] Electoral representation is not a foolproof guarantee of interest representation; in Peru, in the early 1990s, Alberto Fujimori's authoritarian turn effectively hobbled the country's largest-ever evangelical caucus. But under conditions of democracy, descriptive representation provides the best prospects for the substantive representation of most minority group concerns.

My focus in this book is on descriptive representation in national legislatures, the most promising option for members of minority groups, especially under proportional representation (PR).[2] Latin American countries have presidential systems of government with some of the most powerful executives in the world, and legislatures play a subordinate political role compared to the United States, which has a stronger separation of powers. But while the legislative branch generally does not set the political agenda, well-organized congressional caucuses often have effective reactive power to block bills that they oppose (Cox and Morgenstern, 2001; Saiegh, 2010; Shugart and Carey, 1992). Presence in Congress also positions minority group representatives to line up broader support for their goals by engaging in practices such as logrolling, or reciprocal trading of votes. Descriptive representation has thus allowed Latin American evangelicals to defend against perceived threats to their interests and way of life by blocking legislation they oppose, as with the example of Brazil's evangelical caucus and the 2011 antihomophobia campaign in public schools.

While this book focuses on evangelicals in Latin America, the descriptive representation of minorities is a broader theme with relevance for democracies around the world. From European Muslims to American

[1] www.youtube.com/watch?v=wK_6qQGiPYc, at 7:10 (accessed February 11, 2021).

[2] District magnitude, which varies across the cases I examine and also at the subnational level, conditions the viability of minority groups obtaining seats through PR, as discussed in Chapter 2. Yet I argue that variation in evangelicals' motivation to enter the electoral sphere, which depends upon threats that politicize evangelical identity and cleavages that divide the community, better explains cross-national variation in their descriptive representation.

Jews, religious minorities have often sought descriptive representation to advance their interests and defend against threats. The same is true of racial and ethnic minorities, including Afro-descendants and Indigenous communities in the Americas. Yet the descriptive representation of a particular minority group can differ dramatically across countries, as with the cases of Black representation in Brazil versus the United States (Telles, 1999) or Indigenous representation in Bolivia versus Peru (Madrid, 2012; Van Cott, 2005). And these differences in descriptive representation have policy consequences, such as the advances in Indigenous rights legislation in Bolivia under the government of Evo Morales. Hence, my argument about how politicized group identities facilitate minority descriptive representation has relevance beyond the specific case of evangelicals seeking elected office in Latin America.

1.3 EXPLAINING EVANGELICAL REPRESENTATION

Evangelicals' entrée into Latin American electoral politics has garnered significant media attention in recent years. Figure 1.2 plots a smoothed trend line showing the percentage of all stories about "elections" in the Factiva database that also include the term "evangelical." The level and trend in coverage of this phenomenon in Latin America outpaced that of

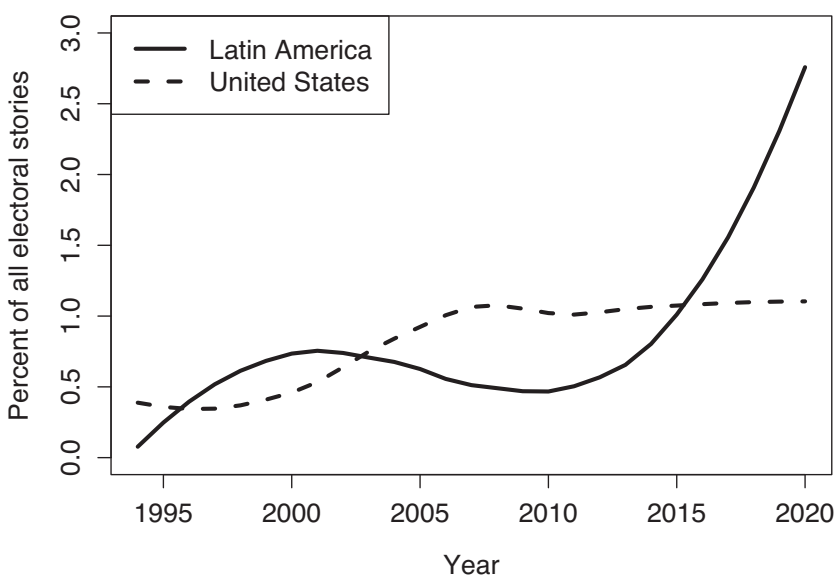

FIGURE 1.2 Newspaper coverage of evangelicals and elections

the United States in the latter half of the decade, despite significant media attention to the role of evangelicals in the election of Donald Trump. Evangelical voters have been highlighted as a key factor in the outcome of the 2018 presidential elections in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Brazil as well as the 2016 plebiscite on a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Bedinelli, Marcos and LaFuente, 2018; Cosoy, 2016; Reyes, 2018).

Despite substantial news coverage of Latin American evangelicals' electoral ambitions, there has been little attention to this phenomenon from within political science or the subfield of comparative politics. The substantial and long-standing literature on Protestantism in Latin America often touches upon religious groups' political ambitions, but most contributions have come from other disciplines, such as history, sociology, and religious studies (Algranti, 2010, 2012; Bastian, 1999; Cleary and Stewart-Gambino, 1997; Freston, 2001, 2004, 2008; Garrard-Burnett and Stoll, 1993; Goldstein, 2020; Hartch, 2014; Ireland, 1992; Lalive d'Epinay, 1969; Lehmann, 1996; Martin, 1990; O'Neill, 2009; Pérez Guadalupe, 2017; Pérez Guadalupe and Grundberger, 2018; Smith, 1998; Steigenga and Cleary, 2007; Stoll, 1990; Willems, 1967). Comparative work has mostly taken the form of edited volumes, which typically lack a single, unifying theoretical framework. To my knowledge, only an unpublished doctoral dissertation in political science has used systematic, cross-national comparisons to explain variation in the electoral ambitions of this faith community (Mora Torres, 2010). The opinions and voting behavior of Latin American evangelicals have attracted somewhat greater attention from political scientists, though cross-national comparative work is still limited (Aguilar et al., 1993; Boas, 2014, 2016*a*; Boas and Smith, 2015, 2019; Bohn, 2004, 2007; Camp, 2008; Patterson, 2004, 2005*a*,*b*; Rink, 2018; Smith, 2019*b*; Smith and Boas, 2020; Steigenga, 2001; Valenzuela, Scully and Somma, 2007).

In recent years, a new generation of political scientists (and some economists) has turned its attention to evangelicals in Latin America, with many focusing explicitly on the question of their political ambitions and electoral representation (Cerqueira do Nascimento, 2017; Costa, Marcantonio and Rocha, 2019; Lacerda, 2017*a*, 2018; Reich and dos Santos, 2013; Rink, 2018; Rodrigues-Silveira and Cervi, 2019; Smith, 2019*b*). They are joined by a new wave of scholars looking at the Catholic Church in the region (Hale, 2018; Mantilla, 2021; Smith, 2019*b*; Trejo, 2012; Tuñón, 2019; Ziegler, 2020), often examining the political implications of Catholic–Protestant competition for the faithful. In keeping

with methodological trends in the discipline, much of this newer work is particularly attentive to questions of causal inference, and some studies have found creative sources of exogenous variation in aspects of religion or factors that influence it (Costa, Marcantonio and Rocha, 2019; Rink, 2018; Tuñón, 2019; Ziegler, 2020). Yet recent studies are almost exclusively focused on single-country cases, primarily Brazil. As such, while they may yield important insights or suggest hypotheses that could explain cross-national variation in evangelicals' political representation, none seeks explicitly to account for this outcome.

The paucity of cross-national comparative research on evangelicals and politics in Latin America stands in contrast to the much more extensive literature on related topics. The Roman Catholic Church has been a perennial topic of research in Latin American politics, with many studies focused on its varying political roles across countries and over time (Cleary, 2011; Fleet and Smith, 1997; Gill, 1998; Hagopian, 2008, 2009; Levine, 1992; Mainwaring, 1986, 2003*b*; Mainwaring and Wilde, 1989; Trejo, 2012). There is also a burgeoning comparative literature on the political representation of other historically excluded groups in the region, including women, Afro-descendants, and the Indigenous (Barnes, 2016; Bueno and Dunning, 2017; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Htun, 2016; Madrid, 2012; Schwindt-Bayer, 2010, 2018; Van Cott, 2005; Yashar, 2005). Likewise, a growing research agenda seeks to explain cross-national variation in the electoral representation of European and North American Muslims (Aktürk and Katliarou, 2021; Dancygier, 2013, 2014, 2017; Hughes, 2016; Sinno, 2009), whose rise – both demographically and politically – is a more recent phenomenon than that of evangelicals in Latin America.

In advancing an explanation for cross-national variation in the political representation of evangelicals in Latin America, I seek to contribute to these diverse bodies of literature. As a political scientist, I bring to the table different approaches than those that have been prominent in other disciplines, including survey experiments to examine voting behavior and the analysis of electoral results to study the influence of party and electoral systems. As a multimethod comparativist, I situate these more microlevel analyses of particular elections and institutions within a broad comparative historical analysis that seeks to account for varying outcomes across countries and over time. As a Latin Americanist, I seek to draw connections between the political incorporation of evangelicals and other new forms of inclusion that are not often thought of as being similar phenomena (Boas, 2021; Boas and Smith, 2019). Finally, as a scholar

of religion and politics, I aim to contribute to the broader understanding of how religious identities and interests translate into concerted political action in some contexts but not in others.

1.3.1 Defining "Evangelical" and Disaggregating Religion

In this book, I use the term "evangelical" in the same way that *evangélico* is used in Spanish and Portuguese: to refer to all Protestants, regardless of denomination.[3] This usage differs from the more common English-language meaning of "evangelical," denoting a form of Protestantism that stresses personal salvation (being "born again"), missionary or conversion efforts, and a literal (albeit typically selective) interpretation of the Bible (Balmer, 2006, xviii–xix). My usage thus includes members of historical or "mainline" denominations, such as Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, alongside many other groups, including Pentecostals, who would more readily be classified as evangelical by the North American definition. Some scholars writing for an English-language audience translate *evangélico* as "Protestant," but the literal equivalent in Spanish and Portuguese, *protestante*, is much less commonly used. While "evangelical" means slightly different things depending on which language one is speaking, the majority of *evangélicos* in today's Latin American would qualify as evangelical in the English-language sense based on their beliefs and practices.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the composition of the "evangelical" category has changed significantly over two centuries of Latin American independence. The first Latin American evangelicals were mainline Protestant immigrants from northern Europe who established expatriate communities, often worshiping in their native languages. Missionaries arrived in the latter half of the century, initiating efforts to convert local residents, especially the Indigenous. Pentecostalism, a form of Christianity that emphasizes mystical gifts of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues and faith healing, reached Latin America in the early 1900s and spread rapidly throughout the continent; today, a majority of Latin

[3] Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses merit special mention. While these groups are descended from the Protestant Reformation, they grant authority to scriptures other than the Bible, and their theology deviates from that of other Protestant denominations in significant ways. They are thus excluded from the "evangelical" label in this study, unless otherwise noted (e.g., in a survey question where they are lumped together with other non-Catholic Christians and cannot be separated out).