



Religion

Between God and Emperor

On the Political Influence of Evangelical
Churches in Latin America

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The fast-expanding evangelical churches in Latin America are increasingly striving for political influence. So far, however, they have not yet been able to develop a common agenda. On the contrary, they are characterised by a high degree of fragmentation. In view of the growing evangelical voter potential, the influence of evangelical forces may continue to increase in the future.

"Everything begins with mysticism and ends in politics"

Charles Pierre Péguy

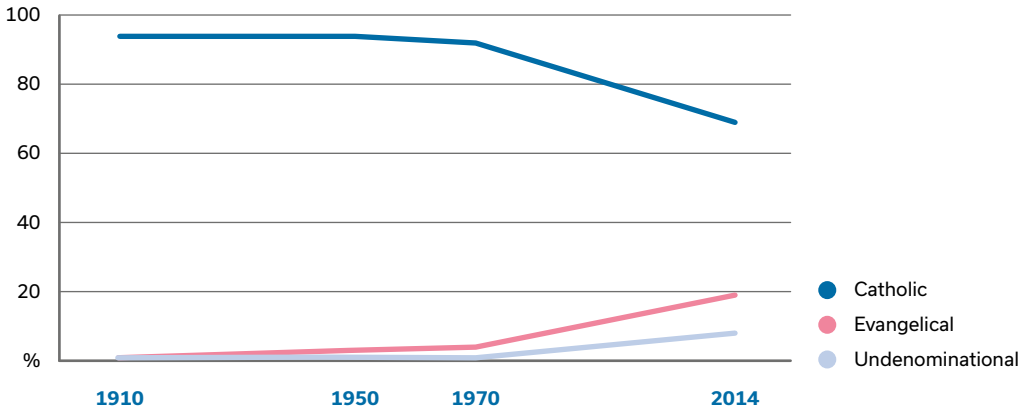
The missionary work on the American continent was the result of a political event five centuries ago.¹ Irrespective of whether it is considered a "fusion" or a "collision" of different cultures; whether we speak of "evangelism" or "conquest" – the Christianising of Latin America occurred in close collaboration with the Iberian colonial powers through the exercise of top-down political power. The fast-growing modern evangelical² movements have taken the opposite route in recent decades. Through intensive missionary work at the grass-roots level and with the use of sometimes thoroughly questionable methods they have "conquered" societies from the bottom up. In the process these "evangelical conquerors", who are strongly influenced by the New Pentecostal teaching, hold ever stronger economic and political control centres in various Latin American countries. They therefore contrast with their predecessors, who were influenced by European Protestantism and who for many years formed a social and religious minority on the continent and were largely disregarded by public opinion and the social elite.

After some remarks on the expansion and heritage of the evangelical churches in Latin America, this paper will discuss the logics of action that these new evangelical actors follow in the political arena. The study will examine both the strategies and the main features of the evangelicals' political actions and attempts to give a brief outlook for the future.

From a Minority to a Powerful Factor

Demographic surveys present a clear picture of a strong increase in significance of evangelical movements in Latin America in recent decades. According to data from the *Latinobarómetro*³ survey, the Catholic faith continues to be the dominant denomination on the subcontinent. Yet, with around 68 per cent of the population identifying themselves as Catholic today, the number has fallen significantly since 1970, when the number was still around 92 per cent. Parallel to the decrease of the proportion of Catholic Christians in Latin America, the proportion of evangelical believers has grown by a similar margin. In some countries, evangelical believers are almost as strongly represented in numerical terms as Catholics. This is more or less the case in Honduras (41 per cent evangelical and 47 per cent Catholic Christians), Guatemala (40 and 47 per cent respectively) or Nicaragua (37 and 47 per cent respectively). In Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico over 20 per cent of the population professes to belong to evangelical movements; in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela the number is over 15 per cent. In Brazil, the country with the largest number of Catholics worldwide, the proportion of Catholic believers in the population between 1995 and 2013 decreased by 15 percentage points, while the number of evangelical Christians rose by equal shares during the

Fig. 1: Share of the Denominations in the Total Population of Latin America



Just as in the article, “evangelical” is used here as an umbrella term for various Protestant groups. The numbers include 18 Latin American countries and the Spanish-speaking U.S. territory Puerto Rico. [Source: World Religion Database, official governments figures, Pew Research Center 2014. Compilation: José Luis Pérez Guadalupe.](#)

same period. Today, Ecuador and Paraguay are the only countries on the continent with a Catholic population of over 80 per cent.⁴

In terms of the political activities of the evangelical churches in Latin America, roughly three historical phases can be identified:

1. *Liberal Protestants:* The first Protestant missionaries came to Latin America in the mid-19th century. These represented traditional and historical trends that emerged from Protestant movements and which were dedicated both to evangelism and education. These liberal Protestants joined forces in most countries of the region on a national level with established political movements (for instance with the originally social-reformist APRA party in Peru) and actively supported issues such as religious freedom, the separation of Church and State, civil marriage and other liberal axioms. The weak point of these Protestant movements was, however, their marginal political significance in virtually all the countries on the continent. Even a century after their missionary activities began, the liberal Protestants in the 1950s made up less than one per cent of the

population. As a consequence, their political influence was restricted to the role of an admonishing social voice and ally for liberal political movements critical of the supremacy of the Catholic clergy.

2. *Conservative missionaries:* In the mid-20th century a new type of Protestantism emerged. It was more conservative in political terms and, in the context of the Cold War, anti-communist in sentiment and was more explicitly against any rapprochement with the Catholic Church. In contrast to their predecessors, these new conservative missionaries succeeded in attracting a significant number of followers owing to their clear strategies on evangelising, and the use of modern communications and information technology. This second wave of modern missionaries, evidently influenced by North American evangelicals, also contributed to anchoring the evangelical churches firmly in society. In doing so, the missionaries often concentrated their activity on economically and socially disadvantaged segments of the population, such as indigenous groups, which in many cases led to new forms of religious but also economic dependency.

From this point on they were no longer termed Protestants. Instead, the concept of the “Latin American evangelical corps” was coined. During this phase the Pentecostal communities expanded particularly rapidly. These groups had already been present in most countries in the region during the previous decades (especially in Brazil and Chile), but at that point they were operating in a largely isolated and anonymous manner, like other evangelical churches as well. In this second phase of the evangelical movement, a significant transition took place. Formerly the Protestants were groups that were strongly identified with foreign missionaries and immigrant communities, the new evangelical missionaries were increasingly native to the country and linked the religious with a stronger nationalist discourse. This new national aspiration of the churches at a time of booming follower numbers later formed the basis for their political ambitions. With this aspiration evangelical actors also began to take on a more pronounced role in the economy of their countries.

3. *Evangelical conquerors*: Lastly, in a third phase, a new social and political evangelical force emerged across the whole continent from these evangelical movements in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as from those groups already rooted in Latin America. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the anti-communist stance of these mostly conservative evangelical conquerors became less significant. Gradually, and owing to its own growth and increased self-awareness, the strongly anti-Catholic attitude also declined. Today, the modern evangelical churches have a large number of believers and significant voter potential. In contrast to Catholic believers, evangelical believers typically support their church overall with greater commitment, and identify with it more strongly. Instead of the erstwhile “backyard churches” many evangelical communities erected modern and spacious church buildings in affluent neighbourhoods and increasingly gained a foothold among the middle and upper social

classes. The increasing adaptation towards a “wealth gospel” discourse, often advocated by the New Pentecostals, also acted in part as a theological door-opener in these strata. This way of thinking was developed in the USA in the 1960s and assumes that, because they are children of God, all Christians are destined to reign over the world and all available goods and possessions. For the faithful, wealth is therefore claimed as compensation for their beliefs and trust in God. If a believer fulfils his duty and is faithful to God, God will accordingly grant him all types of blessings in return, including financial. Conversely, poverty and sickness can quickly be seen as a curse and punishment to be overcome through stronger faith and trust in God. These mindsets formed the theological justification for the emergence of evangelical veritable controlled business empires, which can be found in Brazil in particular. Probably the most prominent example in connection to this is the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), which has one of the largest media empires in Brazil and follows a strategy more similar to a company with consumers than that of a church with believers.⁵ The church is expanding this model in other countries too. In Peru, for example the *Igreja Universal* operates under the name of *Pare de sufrir* (Suffer no more). The founder of this church, Edir Macedo, who advocates for an offensive offertory collection from his often poor church members, was named on the billionaire’s list in Forbes magazine in 2015 with assets of 1.1 billion U.S. dollars.⁶

Evangelicals as Political Actors

The political transition of the evangelical churches in Latin America over time was drastic. While the first Protestant missionaries wanted to improve society in Latin America through the Gospel, without really playing a fundamental political and social role, the evangelicals of today no longer talk of the “if” but only about the “how” of their political actions. Key influences of this stronger orientation

towards politics derived from the growth of the charismatic church movement and the New Pentecostal Church within the historical evolution of the church spectrum, not to forget the evangelical movement in the United States. Especially in New Pentecostal circles there is a reliance on patterns of legitimation from “Reconstructionism”. This political arm of “prosperity theology” sees Christians as destined to stand at political and social control centres.

The new evangelical movements, which belonged more to the conservative end of the political spectrum, no longer sought to practice their religion undisturbed from an escapist perspective (*fuga mundi*), but aspired increasingly to penetrate the political circles in their societies. This led to a redefinition of the positioning of the evangelical churches across the entire continent – away from rejecting politics to moving towards using it for evangelising. This Christian motivation melded over time with the worldly interests of evangelical leaders, which in some cases resulted in political support for dictatorships or non-constitutional governments in Latin America.

While Protestant Christians at the start of the last century only called for constitutional guarantees regarding freedom of religious worship, evangelicals today demand equal treatment with regard to other denominations. It is evident that the evangelical churches are thus not only preparing to break through the five-hundred-year denominational monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church, but also call into question its religious and political hegemony on the continent. The growth of the evangelical church communities from the ground up, accompanied by the strong roles of the respective clerical leaders and with the explicit support of the believers, consequently means that, on a political level, some evangelical leaders also want to assert their religious leadership politically. They are thereby attempting to capitalise politically on their hard-won religious followers.

Within this new political and religious environment, governments and parties in various Latin

American countries are considering the pros and cons of an informal or formal rapprochement to evangelical churches. The political assessment politics makes of evangelical churches therefore follows a different pattern in comparison to the case of the Catholic Church. While the strict Catholic hierarchy and tradition offer politics the advantage of greater stability and the Vatican’s diplomatic service with its many years of experience in international negotiations, the political weight of the modern evangelical churches is that of a rapidly-growing number of often very active religious followers, which thereby adds great voter potential. In addition, the leading evangelical figures are to a great extent able to influence the individual members of their church communities directly.

The voting behaviour of evangelical Christians can tip the electoral balance, as the recent past demonstrates.

The strong growth of the voter potential of evangelical Christians became clearly evident in several recent Latin American electoral processes. The Colombian government was also defeated in the referendum over the peace agreement in 2016 because it did not succeed in its communication to dispel the doubts of evangelical groups over many socio-political aspects of the agreement. At the same time, evangelical leaders mobilised “their” believers in significant numbers to reject the peace agreement at the ballot boxes.⁷ Also in 2016, Marcelo Crivella, a bishop at the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, was elected mayor of the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro. In 2015 the evangelical former television entertainer Jimmy Morales was the clear winner of the presidential elections in Guatemala, also due to his strongly moralising discourse and public display of his religious affiliation.



On the decline: Over the last decades, the amount of Catholics in Latin America has fallen by about 25 per cent, while the amount of evangelicals has increased substantially. [Source: © Andrew Medichini, Reuters.](#)

Moralists instead of Administrators

Despite a few exceptions, especially in Brazil, the political influence of evangelical Christians in Latin America focuses more on the mobilisation of votes than entering politics actively themselves. Up until now evangelical churches have rarely been able to or wanted to establish structured and stable political parties of their own. One reason for this is undoubtedly the weak cohesion of various evangelical churches and the competition between them, which is further reinforced by the strong personality-based nature of many churches. Despite their strong growth, the evangelicals in Latin America remain a heavily fragmented religious movement, both in organisational and pastoral terms,

which is also manifested in their socio-political ambitions and patterns of behaviour. Evangelical political engagement is mostly driven by individual leaders (pastors or laymen) rather than by the churches themselves. It certainly should be noted that the evangelical churches in Latin America are an important religious, social and political factor, but, on the other hand, that they are not in any sense a unified body that can be directed like a cohesive (political or religious) organisation.

Despite this, it can be observed how different political forces in all the countries in the region are showing a growing interest in garnering the votes of evangelical believers for themselves. This leads to a significant influence of

evangelical churches on how parties and governments structure their manifestos. Time and again, political parties, including those of a Christian-Democrat orientation that are more closely aligned to the Catholic Church, seek to tap into this reservoir of voters for themselves. Parties are often under the mistaken belief that the evangelical churches are structured in a similarly hierarchical way to the Catholic Church; or, still further from the reality, that the voting behaviour of this group of voters is purely linked to their denomination and therefore relatively simple to influence.

The political behaviour of evangelical Christians in Latin America to date can be roughly categorised into three basic models. As already mentioned, the founding of evangelical parties as agglomerative political movements for evangelical believers has so far had no resounding political success. The model of inclusive political movements led by evangelical Christians but also encompassing other people is a template that evangelical churches frequently aspire to, but which has not been very successful to date. The most common model thus far has been the 'evangelical faction' in the form of an



Inner contemplation: The new evangelical movements no longer aim for an undisturbed practice of their own religion within the framework of escapism, but increasingly aspire to gain political influence. Source: © Nacho Doce, Reuters.

evangelical group operating from within a larger party or political movement not led by evangelical individuals and thereby gaining a certain level of influence over the party manifesto. Each of the three options mentioned has its limits and weaknesses, however. Some experts therefore believe future political action by evangelical Christians could be to set up – in a national context of even several – evangelical minority parties that could tip the balance of power and thereby assert their own interests. In contrast to the idea of an agglomerated evangelical party, this type of approach would accommodate the extremely differing political history of the evangelical movements in Latin America and their diverse approaches to issues of faith, development, organisation and their vision for the future more effectively.

On examination of the political concerns of evangelical churches, the promise of an ethically flawless, moral government leadership and the head-on fight against corruption stands out. Of course, this is of great importance in all Latin American countries, but it does not in any way form a sufficient basis for a government programme. Moreover, the majority of evangelical movements are united by what is known as the “moral agenda”. This includes a commitment to a traditional understanding of marriage and family, the rejection of abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as a mission against so-called “gender ideology”. The aspects that are usually absent from evangelical political movements include policies for the economy, society, culture, security, etc. that could form the basis of a possible government programme; not least, the urgently required expertise in these areas for leading a government. Over the past, nothing developed that came close to a unified evangelical social doctrine. Evangelical candidates in elections are less experienced professionals than religious leaders who promise to moralise politics instead of governing more efficiently. They are, therefore, moralists rather than administrators. If the outcome is negative for them, many evangelical candidates will withdraw from politics after the elections and return to their churches until the next election.

In principle they therefore primarily remain “soldiers of the church” rather than becoming “party soldiers”. This constitutes an important difference compared to the Catholic Church in Latin America, which supported the development of political programmes based on the Church’s social doctrine and encouraged Catholic believers to set up political parties on this basis. Institutionally independent of the Church, these consequently won the presidency in their countries.

The question remains whether the entry of the evangelical churches into politics, at present mainly with a “moral agenda”, could lead to a more broadly diversified movement in future – similar to the pattern of the “green” parties, who, at the start of their political career trajectory, likewise concentrated on a single issue but then broadened their approach and underwent a process of political growth. Despite the history of aversion between the evangelical churches and the Catholic Church, recently, at least on a political level, rapprochement can be seen between these two spheres. This is occurring between an important sector of the Catholic Church and the more conservative evangelical movements, with the aim of defending and promoting “Christian values” publicly in society and politics. At the same time, evangelical church communities are converging with some of the most elitist social groups in the region, who have long observed and disregarded these evangelical movements from afar. These sorts of historically unexpected twists are often only brought about by politics.

Fragmentation as Opposed to a Monolithic Electorate

In conclusion, we can observe that the evangelical churches in various countries in Latin America have abandoned their original philosophy of spiritual escapism and are now preparing to conquer the social, economic and, increasingly, the political arena as well. While they have deferred their pure focus on evangelism with this change of heart, evangelical groups were so far not in a position to develop a political platform that goes beyond a “moral agenda”. Undoubtedly,

however, they succeeded in influencing the political arena and public opinion with their concerns, especially in countries in Central America and Brazil, but also in countries like Colombia.

The strong fragmentation of evangelical movements has hampered the formation of evangelical parties so far.

What remained an important basic pattern is the marked fragmentation that characterises all religious and political actions of evangelical Christians in Latin America, which so far appears to be in the DNA of all evangelical movements on the continent. This has as yet hampered any shared political strategy of evangelical believers, as well as the formation of joint evangelical political movements. At best, some evangelical leaders succeeded in attaining a certain degree of (not always flattering) national prominence outside the four walls of their church. Even though the proportion of evangelical churches within Latin America's population has been able to expand significantly at the expense of the Catholic Church, and they have established themselves increasingly at the heart of society, their marked religious and political fragmentation resulted in a wide chasm between their own political demands in the eighties and nineties and their present successes. If the evangelical churches want to achieve their aim of gaining political clout in society they will need to develop new strategies.

What is certain is that the political representation of evangelical Christians in Latin America, with the exception of Brazil, does not (yet) represent the proportion of population. In the region's elections it is, therefore, virtually impossible to establish a clear correlation between the numerical strength of the evangelical population and voting behaviour. Also the successful control of evangelical citizens' votes by their churches is not empirically verifiable. Nonetheless, evangelical swing voters certainly have the opportunity

to strategically support certain candidates who make concessions to their moral convictions, irrespective of which party they belong to. Evangelical voters can, therefore, transform themselves into a "voter force" that has a pivotal influence on electoral processes, as was the case with the referendum on the Colombian peace agreement.

It is certainly to be seen positively when citizens of a nation, for various reasons, avail themselves of their civic rights and responsibilities instead of adhering to sectarian philosophies of spiritual escapism. History has so far shown that the great majority of evangelical citizens in Latin America – just like the majority of all Latin Americans – do not act like a monolithic electorate at all, but are definitely capable of separating their religious denomination from their political behaviour. Opportunistic politicians as well as religious leaders should heed this insight.

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- 1 The conclusions of this paper are predominantly based on the findings of Pérez Guadalupe, José Luis 2017: *Entre Dios y el César – El impacto político de los evangélicos en el Perú y América Latina* (Between God and Caesar: the political influence of evangelical churches in Peru and Latin America), Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, office Peru / Instituto de Estudios Social Cristianos (eds.). This publication was presented in Lima on 26 Oct 2017.
- 2 In this article all Christian Protestant groups in Latin America are termed “evangelical”, as they are dedicated to a greater or lesser extent to evangelism or the conversion of people to their faith. Regardless of their different respective doctrines, “missionary churches” with voluntary followers, “groups centred on Christ” and “groups centred on the Bible” are included. Within these categories we find more traditional churches that have emerged historically, e.g. Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist, but also Pentecostal, New Pentecostal and Free Churches (or independent churches).
- 3 All data quoted in the present paper come from the *Latinobarómetro* survey 2014.
- 4 In addition, Latin Americans who profess no denomination are the second fastest-growing segment of the region’s population. According to *Latinobarómetro*, in some countries on the continent the proportion of those professing no denomination is growing even faster than the proportion of evangelical believers, especially in Uruguay, where 38 per cent of the population does not belong to any faith community.
- 5 On the Pentecostal church in Brazil cf. Lingenthal, Lukas 2012: Pentecostalism in Brazil: Churches, Businesses and Political Parties, in: KAS International Reports, 1/2012, pp. 41-58, <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.29975> [5 Dec 2017].
- 6 Cf. Antunes, Anderson 2015: Brazil’s Richest People: Facts and Figures, in: <http://bit.ly/2knloD6> [30 Oct 2017].
- 7 Cf. Cosoy, Natalio 2016: El rol de las iglesias cristianas evangélicas en la victoria del “No” en el plebiscito de Colombia, BBC, 5 Oct 2016, in: <http://bbc.in/2AxFHly> [30 Oct 2017].