

AmericasBarometer *Insights*: 2015

Number 113

Pastors and Politics: Brazilian Public Opinion Regarding Clergy Endorsements of Candidates

By Amy Erica Smith

aesmith2@iastate.edu

Iowa State University

Executive Summary: In the past two decades, observers have noted a steady rise in religious groups' engagement in Brazilian elections. Evangelical and Pentecostal clergy in Brazil often endorse or campaign for candidates, or even run for office. This raises questions about how citizens perceive such efforts. Are clergy endorsements seen as a normal part of the pluralistic give-and-take of democratic politics? Or are they viewed as violations of secular norms? In this report, I explore public opinion from the 2014 AmericasBarometer in Brazil, conducted several months before that year's presidential and legislative election campaign. At the time of the survey, Brazilians in all religious groups broadly opposed political engagement of clergy, yet minorities in each group felt clergy involvement in elections was justified. The analyses in this report show that support for clergy campaigning is related not so much to religious affiliation as to democratic attitudes and system support. Citizens who are more tolerant of contentious politics and more supportive of the current political system are more accepting of such involvement. However, citizens who more strongly support democracy in the abstract are *less* accepting of it.

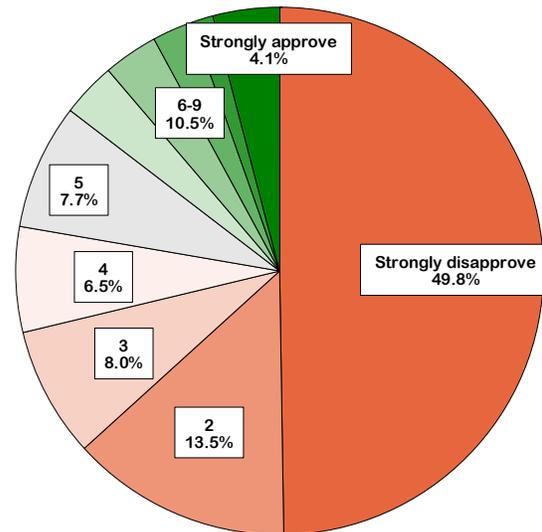
Brazil's October 2014 presidential and legislative elections were widely described in the media as a watershed for evangelicals, both politicians and voters. At the presidential level, Marina Silva, a born-again evangelical based in leftist and environmentalist movements, unexpectedly became a candidate a month and a half before the first round election, following the tragic death of Eduardo Campos, her running mate. She rocketed into second place behind the incumbent, Dilma Rousseff and stayed there for most of the remaining campaign, though she was overtaken in the final days before the election and failed to go on to the second round. At the level of congressional races, 2014 saw a 47% rise over 2010 in the number of candidates running using titles indicative of evangelical religious leaders, such as "pastor" (Tavares 2014). In the Chamber of Deputies, the evangelical caucus gained 10 seats over 2010, and now constitutes 16% of the lower chamber.¹ As one sign of the growing evangelical presence, an evangelical became president of the newly instated Chamber of Deputies on February 1, 2015.

Evangelicals' growing political presence was also felt among campaign activists and voters. As in other recent elections, many high-profile pastors made known in the media their preferences with respect to presidential and legislative candidates. Within many evangelical congregations, moreover, informal campaigns took place. While the 2014 electoral rules prohibited electoral propaganda and formal campaigning on church property, clergy were able to make their preferences known in both subtle and overt ways, and co-religionist candidates often attended services (*Instruções do TSE 2014*).² Data from the 2014 Brazilian

¹ In the Senate, where first-past-the-post rules disadvantage minority groups, only 4 evangelicals were elected, representing 5% of the body.

² The Superior Electoral Tribunal specifically forbade campaigns' use of loudspeakers on church property "when the churches are in operation" (*Instruções do TSE 2014*, 345). In addition, churches were covered by rules prohibiting the

Figure 1. Approval for Religious Leaders Campaigning for Candidates in Brazil



Support for religious leaders campaigning for candidates

Source: © AmericasBarometer, LAPOP, 2014; Brazil 2014 v1_W

Electoral Panel Study indicate that close to half of evangelicals across the country heard their pastor speak about the campaign in the weeks prior to the election (Ames et al. unpublished). While some activities certainly violated electoral rules, many or most of them likely refrained from crossing the lines drawn by the Superior Electoral Tribunal.

Yet even if these activities did not actually violate laws, questions remain regarding what the Brazilian public thinks about clergy endorsements. In this *Insights* report,³ I explore data from the 2014 LAPOP AmericasBarometer survey in Brazil,⁴ which asked citizens whether

"transmission of political advertising" such as signs, flags, or banners in "goods of common use" such as parks and gymnasiums ["*Nos bens...de uso comum...é vedada a veiculação de propaganda de qualquer natureza, inclusive pichação, inscrição a tinta, fixação de placas, estandartes, faixas e assemelhados*"] (206). The question, of course, is what counts as "advertising"; electoral rules and courts have focused largely but not exclusively on churches' display and distribution of printed materials advertising candidates.

³ Prior issues in the *Insights* Series can be found at: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights.php>.

The data on which they are based can be found at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/survey-data.php>.

⁴ Funding for the 2014 survey mainly came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

they approve or disapprove of the following scenario:

BRAREL1. A priest or pastor supporting or campaigning for a certain candidate at election time.

The scenario described here neatly captures the ambiguity with respect to the legality of church-based and clergy campaigning. Off church property, clergy members' endorsements are covered by free speech protections, though still subject to other electoral norms such as ones related to electoral calendars. On church property, clergy can make their preferences known in many ways without engaging in the kinds of overt "advertising" (much less using a microphone or loudspeaker) prohibited by electoral regulations. At the same time, it is certainly possible to imagine clergy "supporting or campaigning for a certain candidate" in ways that would violate electoral rules.

In Figure 1, I examine citizens' responses on a scale from 1-10, where 1 indicates strong disapproval and 10 indicates strong approval.⁵ Note that this survey was conducted in March and April, several months prior to the actual election campaign. It is possible that many citizens' attitudes towards campaigning within churches changed in the run-up to the election, as they themselves became more mobilized, and as they saw their own or other trusted clergy become engaged in elections. Nonetheless, these data provide insights into baseline attitudes.

It is evident that most Brazilian citizens are wary of the involvement of clergy in elections. Half of respondents give the hypothetical

scenario the very lowest approval rating, and more than three-quarters give the scenario a rating below 5. At the same time, a small group of Brazilians is accepting of, or even enthusiastic about, the prospect of clergy campaigning.

Religious Affiliation and Support for Clergy Campaigning

Brazil's religious landscape has changed dramatically in the past several decades. Census data show that the percent identifying as Protestant/evangelical rose from 5% in 1970 to 22% in 2010, at the same time that the percent identifying as Catholic fell from 90% to 65%.⁶ The growing engagement of churches in elections in Brazil is often perceived as a product of the growth in the number of evangelical congregations, and of evangelicals' increasingly activist political theology. Indeed, research in Catholic parishes indicates that Catholic clergy are much less likely both to make their political views known to congregants, and to run for political office (Oro 2006).

Hence, it would be reasonable to expect norms towards clergy campaigning to vary by religious affiliation, with evangelicals more supportive of such activities. Two alternative mechanisms would lead to such a correlation. Evangelicals might adjust their norms to their actual experiences with their own church leaders. Alternatively, the greater political engagement of evangelical clergy might *result* from lay evangelicals' more permissive attitudes towards clergy politicking.

This *Insights* report is solely produced by LAPOP and the opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the point of view of USAID or any other supporting agency.

⁵ Because of the very small percentage of citizens in categories 6-9, Figure 1 combines the percent in all four groups; in total, 10.5% of citizens gave a response of 6, 7, 8, or 9.

⁶ Brazilians typically use the term "*evangélico*" for all Protestants and Pentecostals, including members of denominations termed "mainline Protestant" in the United States. The AmericasBarometer question Q3C sorts Protestant respondents by denomination (e.g., Methodist, Baptist) into the broader categories of "evangelical" and "traditional Protestant," yet in most analysis there is little difference in the behavior of these two groups. Throughout this report, I combine the two categories.

In Figure 2, I examine the percentage of citizens in each religious group who approve of clergy campaigning. “Approval” is coded as any response between 6 and 10 on the original response scale. The vertical lines with “whiskers” extending on either side of the estimates represent 95% confidence intervals. The confidence intervals indicate that, contrary to expectations, there are no statistically distinguishable differences across religious groups in acceptance of clergy campaigning.⁷ Between 12 and 15% of Catholics, Protestants, and respondents of “other” religions support clergy campaigning, while the great majority of each group reject this behavior. Rejection is even greater among Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, though because of small numbers of individuals in these categories, the confidence intervals are far too large to draw inferences.

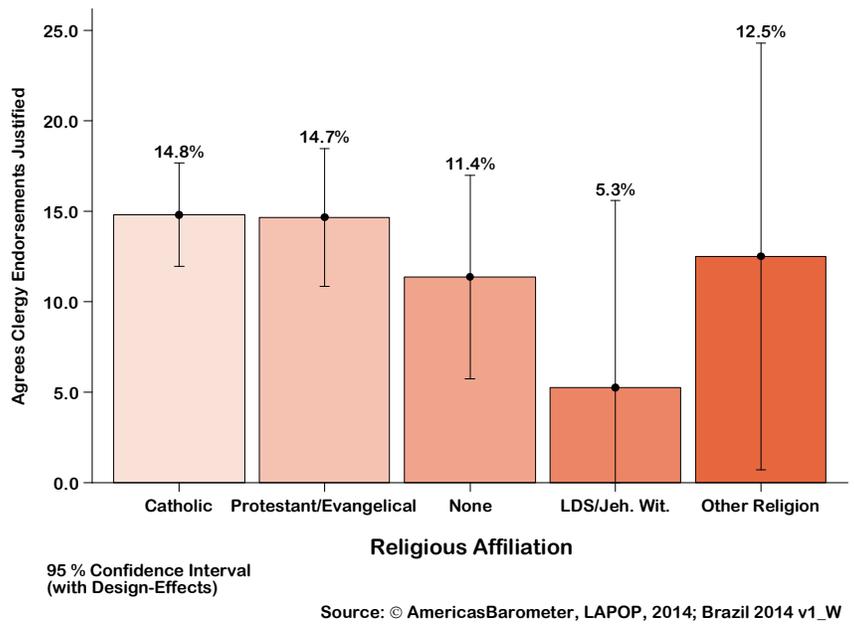
If Not Religion, What Explains Support for Clergy Campaigning?

Thus, we have a puzzle: if religious affiliation does not explain why some people find clergy campaigning acceptable and others find it unacceptable, what does?

An answer may lie in understandings of secularism; in attitudes towards democracy; and in perceptions of the legitimacy of the current political system. While Roman Catholicism was the state religion of Portugal and was given privileged status in Brazil’s Imperial Constitution of 1824, the Republican Constitution of 1891 legally divorced the state

⁷ Conclusions are broadly the same if we instead examine mean response on the 1-10 scale by religious group. The dependent variable is dichotomized in this analysis simply for ease of presentation and discussion.

Figure 2. Percent Approving of Clergy Campaigning, by Religious Affiliation



from the church, and also established citizens’ rights to free exercise of religion. These two aspects of state secularism have been adopted in every subsequent democratic and non-democratic constitution.

Still, citizens today may perceive state secularism as an aspect of democracy. First, actual respect for civil liberties such as freedom of association, which is key to the free exercise of religion, is better protected under democracy. Second, the procedural legitimacy of democratic politics relies on free and fair competition. Regardless of the actual regulations governing particular elections, many people may perceive churches’ “meddling” in elections as democratically illegitimate. In principle, separation of church and state requires only that the *state* neither favor nor repress any religious group, barring a legitimate public reason; it does not necessarily entail that *churches* not take an interest in who wins office, or in what the state does. Nonetheless, many Brazilians may understand the norm that churches should stay out of elections as a component of secularism, and an

element of democratic procedural “fair play.” At the same time, those who more strongly believe in the legitimacy of the current political system, independent of democracy in the abstract, may be more likely to support clergy campaigning, since clergy campaigning is an actual feature of Brazil’s current political landscape.

Thus, I hypothesize that two psychological orientations long studied by LAPOP and others via its AmericasBarometer may predict acceptance (or the lack of acceptance) of clergy campaigning. The first is support for democracy in the abstract; I expect that those who support democracy more strongly may be *less* accepting of clergy engagement in elections.⁸

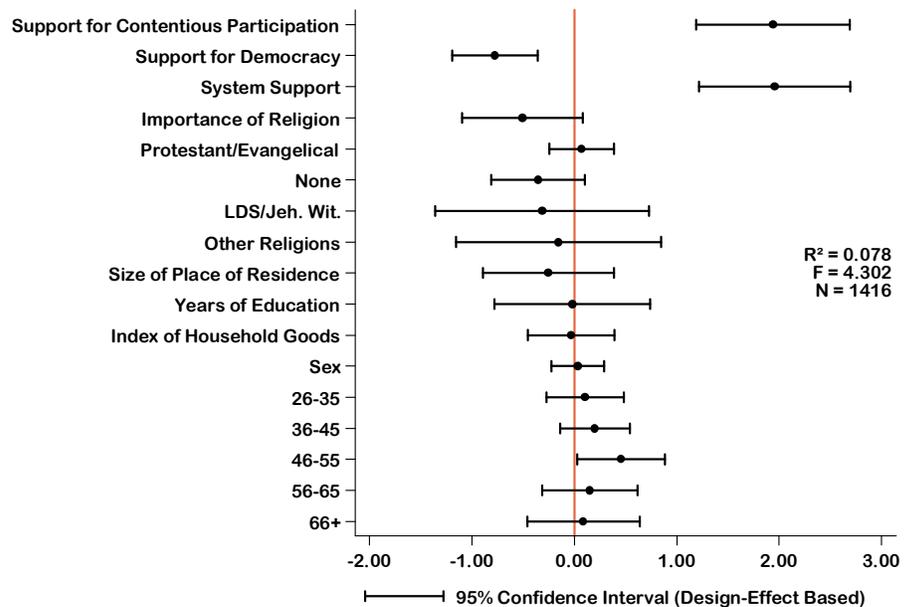
The second is perceptions of the legitimacy of Brazil’s current political system; I expect that those who support Brazil’s current political system more strongly will be more accepting of clergy endorsements.⁹

Yet other citizens may hold alternative visions of churches’ proper role in democratic politics. These people may view churches not as illegitimate meddlers in secular democratic processes, but rather as one civil society actor among many in a contentious, pluralistic

⁸ This is measured using question ING4, which asks respondents to what extent they agree, on a 1-7 scale, that “democracy may have problems, but it is better than the alternatives.”

⁹ The AmericasBarometer measures *system support* using responses on a 1-7 scale to questions B1, B2, B3, B4, and B6. In Brazil, these ask to what extent the respondent “believes the courts in Brazil guarantee a fair trial”; “respects Brazil’s political institutions”; “believes citizens’ basic rights are well-protected by the Brazilian political system”; “feels proud to live under the Brazilian political system”; and “believes people should support the Brazilian political system.”

Figure 3. Determinants of Support for Clergy Endorsements of Candidates: Political Attitudes, Religious Background, and Demographics



Source: © AmericasBarometer by LAPOP, 2014; Brazil 2014 v2_temp

electoral marketplace. These citizens may view democratic contests in terms of interest-based competition for resources among diverse constituencies. For these people, religious communities and identity groups constitute simply one more competitor. Thus, I also hypothesize that those who are more tolerant of confrontational participation will be *more* accepting of such politicking.¹⁰

I also examine the extent to which support for clergy endorsements of candidates is associated with demographics and political socialization. Those living in larger urban areas may be more accepting of clergy campaigning, as religious pluralism is more pervasive in those areas. Those with higher levels of education and greater wealth may be *less* accepting of clergy

¹⁰ This is an index based on questions E5, E11, and E15. These questions asked to what extent respondents approved, on a 1-10 scale, of people’s participation in “protests permitted by law”; in “electoral campaigns for a party or candidate”; and in “blocking streets or highways for protest.” The alpha reliability coefficient is .49. This variable is correlated at .16 with support for democracy.

activism, as they may have absorbed more fully democratic secular norms. I also control for religious denomination and for a measure of the importance of religion in the respondent's life. Finally, I test whether attitudes vary by gender and age cohort.¹¹

In Figure 3, I present the results of a linear multiple regression model examining how all of these variables are together associated with support for clergy campaigning.¹² The dot corresponding to each variable listed on the left-hand side of the figure represents the variable's regression coefficient, while the horizontal lines with whiskers stretching to either side of each dot represent the 95% confidence intervals of the coefficients. If a variable is to the left of the "0" line, it is negatively correlated with support for clergy campaigning; if it is to the right, it is positively associated with this attitude. When the 95% confidence interval does *not* cross the "0" line, this indicates that we can be 95% confident the relationship found represents one that exists in the general population. When the confidence interval *does* cross the "0" line, however, we cannot reject the possibility that there is no relationship between the variable in question and support for clergy endorsements. All of the independent variables (i.e., the ones listed on the left of the figure) have been recoded on a 0 to 1 scale. Thus, the size of the coefficient represents the number of points we could expect support for clergy campaigning to rise (on a 1-10 scale) if a hypothetical citizen were to move from the minimum to the maximum level of that variable.

¹¹ *Size of place of residence* is based on survey item TAMANO, and is coded so that higher values represent larger areas. *Years of education* is based on item ED. The *index of household goods* is based on items R4, R5, R6, R7, R15, R16, and R18, measuring whether the respondent's household has a landline phone, a car, a washing machine, a microwave oven, a computer, Internet, and a flat screen TV. As discussed above, religious denomination is based on Item Q3C; the *importance of religion* is based on Q5B, and is coded so that higher values represent greater importance of religion. Finally, age cohorts are based on question Q2, and are coded so that respondents aged 16-25 are the baseline category.

¹² See the appendix for full regression results.

Importantly, in Figure 3 we find that nearly the only variables statistically significantly associated with support for clergy campaigning are those related to democracy and the legitimacy of the political system. As hypothesized, those who are more supportive of contentious political participation and of the current political system have higher levels of support for clergy campaigning, while those who are more supportive of democracy in the abstract have lower levels of support for this behavior. Moving from the minimum to the maximum levels of support for contentious participation and support for the current political system is associated with about a two-point rise in support for clergy campaigning, on the 1-10 scale. Meanwhile, moving from the minimum to the maximum level of support for democracy is associated with about a one-point drop in support for clergy endorsements on that scale.

By contrast, none of the religious variables is significantly associated with support for clergy campaigning; neither is the size of the place of residence, education, household wealth, or sex. The analysis does indicate that those aged 46-55 have significantly higher levels of support for clergy campaigning than do those in the youngest age cohort (aged 16-25); why this occurs will remain a question to explore elsewhere.

Conclusion

As Brazil's evangelical groups have grown not only in numerical prominence but in their social and political presence, they have become increasingly politically assertive in electoral campaigns and in policy advocacy. Elsewhere, I have explored the extent to which this advocacy persuades church members and non-coreligionists (Boas and Smith Forthcoming). Beyond effectiveness, though, there are broader questions regarding how such advocacy shapes attitudes towards evangelical groups and politics more generally.

Writing in the mid-1800s, following his stays in the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville noted the strength of religious communities in the United States. He argued that this strength was a product of churches' refusal to get involved in politics, and warned that religious groups ultimately hurt their own long-term sustainability when they take sides in partisan politics. In de Tocqueville's words, "When a religion...comes to be united with a government, it must adopt maxims that are applicable only to certain peoples. So, therefore, in allying itself with a political power, religion increases its power over some and loses the hope of reigning over all" (2000 [1840], 284). Writing nearly two centuries later, Putnam and Campbell (2011) argue that the increasing alignment between evangelical Christianity and the Republican Party in the United States has led many young people who reject the politics of the Christian Right to reject Christianity altogether.

In this report, I consider churches' political engagement in a different country context, one Telles (2004) famously called "another America." At baseline before the 2014 Brazilian election campaign started, I find strong resistance to clergy politicking in all religious groups. Here, I ask how this political involvement is related not to the legitimacy of those religious groups, but to that of democratic politics and of the political system. I find that those who more strongly support democracy in the abstract have lower levels of support for clergy engagement in elections, though support for the current political system is *positively* related to acceptance of political engagement by clergy. I argue that such patterns stem from citizens' understandings of the meaning of secularism and of democratic competition and pluralism.

If evangelicalism continues to grow in Brazil, it seems likely that church-based politicking will only become more prominent in the medium-term. Moreover, observers note that evangelical political activism is increasingly ideological and policy oriented, focused on sexual politics

and maintaining traditional social hierarchies, rather than simply on promoting evangelical interests. With growing exposure to evangelical activism and ideology, some citizens' attitudes towards such politicking could become more permissive. However, it is also possible – and perhaps more likely – that many citizens will continue broadly to reject such church-based activism. If this is the case, it seems likely that polarization related to religion, politics, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions in Brazil will also rise.

References

- Ames, Barry, Fabiana Machado, Lucio Rennó, Amy Erica Smith, and César Zucco. (unpublished). Brazilian Electoral Panel Study 2014.
- Boas, Taylor C., and Amy Erica Smith. 2015 (Forthcoming). "Religion and the Latin American Voter." In *The Latin American Voter*, edited by Ryan E Carlin, Matthew Singer, and Elizabeth Zechmeister. University of Michigan Press.
- Fonseca, Alexandre Brasil. 2008. "Religion and Democracy in Brazil: A Study of the Leading Evangelical Politicians." In *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America*, edited by Paul Freston, 163–206. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Instruções Do TSE: Eleições 2014: #vempraurna*. 2014. Brasília: Tribunal Superior Eleitoral of Brazil.
http://www.tse.jus.br/hotSites/CatalogoPublicacoes/pdf/instrucoes_eleitorais/instrucoes-tse-eleicoes-2014.pdf.
- Oro, Ari Pedro. 2003. "A Política da Igreja Universal e Seus Reflexos nos Campos Religioso e Político Brasileiros." *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 18 (53).
- Oro, Ari Pedro. 2006. "Religião e Política no Brasil." In *Religião e Política no Cone Sul*:

Argentina, Brasil e Uruguai, edited by Ari Pedro Oro. São Paulo: Attar Editorial.

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. 2011. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Tavares, Flávia. 2014. "O Jeito Evangélico de Pedir Votos e Fazer Política." *Época*, September 21.

Telles, Edward Eric. 2004. *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 2000 [1840]. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Appendix

Table 1. Determinants of Support for Clergy Endorsements of Candidates, Brazil 2014

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t	p
Support for Contentious Participation	1.937	0.379	5.120	0.000
Support for Democracy	-0.777	0.211	-3.690	0.000
System Support	1.954	0.373	5.230	0.000
Importance of Religion	-0.508	0.297	-1.710	0.090
Protestant/Evangelical	0.072	0.160	0.450	0.656
No Religion	-0.354	0.231	-1.530	0.127
LDS/Jehovah's Witness	-0.317	0.527	-0.600	0.549
Other Religion	-0.154	0.505	-0.310	0.761
Size of Place of Residence	-0.253	0.322	-0.790	0.433
Years of Schooling	-0.020	0.384	-0.050	0.959
Index of Household Goods	-0.031	0.214	-0.140	0.885
Sex	0.033	0.131	0.250	0.804
Age 26-45	0.105	0.192	0.550	0.585
Age 36-45	0.201	0.172	1.160	0.247
Age 46-55	0.457	0.216	2.120	0.036
Age 56-65	0.152	0.235	0.650	0.518
Age 66+	0.088	0.277	0.320	0.75
Constant	1.991	0.465	4.290	0.000
Number of Observations	1416			
R ²	0.08			
F	4.30			

All variables were recoded from 0-1, with exception of the dependent variable (1-10)