



Religious Basis of Party Identification in Latin America: Denominations and Dimensions

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Received: 11 September 2019 / Accepted: 28 January 2020 / Published online: 10 February 2020
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Abstract

Religious denominations, such as Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Evangelicals, and religious dimensions, such as religiosity and moral traditionalism, emerge as predictors of identification with any political party in Latin America. Religious denominations are positively associated to partisanship when compared to those who do not belong to any church, arguably due to their role as social anchors. Religiosity increases party identification, whereas moral values diminishes it. The former arguably entails socialization and deliberation, enhancing identification with any political party, whereas the latter is associated to citizens who arguably see moral traditionalism as a nonpolitical issue. Data come from 18 countries of the 2016 round of the Americas Barometer surveys.

Keywords Party identification · Religiosity · Religion · Catholic · Moral traditionalism · Latin America

Introduction

This research note asks whether religion in Latin America relates to citizens' identification with any political party. I propose two bases of party identification in Latin America: denominations and dimensions. Religious denominations refer to group membership, that is, to what church people belong. Dimensions refer to expressions of religiosity and commitment to specific beliefs. The dependent variable, party identification, is defined as an "individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment" (Campbell et al. 1960: 121). This note inquires for

Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-020-00096-1>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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religious determinants of the root question, which asks for identification with any political party.

I tap religious denominations by considering belonging to one of six main groups: Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, other Christians, non-Christians, and those who do not belong to any church, as reference category. In addition, I measure religious dimensions using surveys questions to capture religiosity and moral traditionalism. Religiosity is comprised of church attendance, importance of religion in one's life, and attendance of religious meetings, whereas moral traditionalism includes attitudes toward homosexuals' political rights, same-sex marriage, and abortion.

Theoretical Framework

Belonging to religious denominations is a predictor of party identification, because religion represents a way to interpret the world. Some scholars claim that nonpartisan loyalties, such as religious membership, increase identification with political groups, because denominations represent a social group identification with affective and cognitive components, such as "hearts and minds," which tries to expand the individual's extension, going from the most personal to the more social, allowing individuals to identify with others (Green et al. 2002; Miller and Shanks 1996; Fiorina 1981; Converse 1966).

Examples include Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical's identification with the Democratic Party and the GOP in the USA (Goren and Chapp 2017; De Sipio 2007; Layman 1997; Converse 1966; Herberg 1955) and identification with a variety of political parties across Latin America, such as in Chile (Morales 2016; Navia and Osorio 2015; Morales and Poveda 2007), Argentina (Patterson 2004), Mexico (Barracca and Howell 2014; Camp 2008; Magaloni and Moreno 2003), and Brazil (Smith 2019; Sarmet Moreira and Belchior Mesquita 2016; Patterson 2005; Telles et al. 2014), among other Latin American countries (Parker 2016; Boas and Smith 2015; Ruiz 2014).

In addition to denominations, religious dimensions also explain identification with political parties. Regarding religiosity, church attendance and religious group involvement imply that parishioners meet each other on regular basis, providing opportunities for deliberation. This could lead to engagement in politics (Kaufmann 2004; Huckfeldt et al. 1993; Wald et al. 1988; Converse 1966). In this way, parishioners could develop a sense of belonging and an in-group loyalty (Marroquín 1996). Consequently, religious membership builds social networks with other people who share similar beliefs (Olson 2007; Suárez 2016). In Latin American countries, attendance to religious groups and importance of religion increase partisanship (Díaz Domínguez 2013: 29).

Parishioners who play an active role in church could benefit for deliberation, receiving information about different topics when attending to religious groups, which serve as channels of socialization. This would be the case regarding base communities in a liberation theology framework within the Catholic Church or Bible groups among Evangelicals (Suárez 2016; Hagopian 2008), despite pastoral limitations among ecclesial base communities (O'Shaughnessy 2016).

Examples of how religiosity shapes partisanship come from church attendance among Catholics and Evangelicals in the USA (Penning and Smidt 2006; Kaufmann 2004; Converse 1966), because religiosity represents a partial filter of party identification (Gershon et al. 2016; McDaniel and Ellison 2008; Layman 1997). This is the case in Latin America as well (Boas and Smith 2015; Díaz Domínguez 2006; Magaloni and Moreno 2003).¹

Regarding moral traditionalism, measured as attitudes toward homosexuals and abortion, it also relates to identification with any political party in the USA (Goren and Chapp 2017; Mockabee 2007; Layman 1997), Mexico (Díaz Domínguez 2006; Magaloni and Moreno 2003), Chile (Morales and Poveda 2007), and Brazil (Smith 2019; Ruiz 2014).

Theoretical developments in the USA emphasize how moral traditionalism shapes party identification and vice versa (Goren and Chapp 2017). In the Latin American context, this is arguably the case regarding public deliberation on abortion and same-sex marriage (Lodola and Corral 2013). If moral traditionalism is comprised of strong attitudes, rooted in a profound way at the individual level (Goren and Chapp 2017; Hetherington et al. 2016), then, it is plausible to assume that such attitudes will lead citizens to recalibrate their partisan affinities. It will depend on how salient moral issues are.

On the one hand, if moral issues are neither salient nor politically important, then those who favor moral traditionalism could prefer to get away from politics. On the other hand, if moral issues are salient, then those who favor moral traditionalism could engage in politics (Smith 2019; Telles et al. 2014; Campbell 2004). In this note, I will assume the former scenario.

Party identification is an enduring concept (Holmberg 2003; Bartels 2000; Campbell et al. 1960), but the decline of political parties' popular support has produced critiques about to what extent partisanship remains meaningful (Samuels 2006; Clarke and Stewart 1998). Additionally, there is a debate whether the concept travels outside of the USA. However, "researchers have found it difficult to develop plausible explanations of voting without referring to it in some way" (Sanders 2003: 260). Despite social and institutional barriers, party identification remains as a useful social indicator across countries (Johnston 2006). When a party system reaches institutionalization, partisanship remains meaningful for political elites and for the society at large (Lupu 2016; Carlin et al. 2015; Tomassi and Stein 2006; Mainwaring and Scully 1995, 2003).

In this note, party identification is measured through the root question, using a wording that separates strength from the object of the attachment. Some scholars think of this as a limitation to interpret the full effect of partisanship (Huber et al. 2005). However, separation between strength and party attachment is an accepted variant in the literature, because this approach captures the notion of party identification as proximity (Dalton and Weldon 2007). In fact, evidence suggests that there are not systematic differences among "identify yourself," "consider yourself as," and "sympathize with," when asking for party identification in Latin America (Castro Cornejo 2019).

¹ Among strict religious denominations however, withdrawal is also possible, given that time devoted to the church takes time away from politics, reducing levels of engagement in the USA (Campbell 2004) and in Latin America (Díaz-Domínguez 2013).

In the Americas Barometer surveys, the question wording reads: “Do you currently identify with a political party?”, which does not overestimate partisanship, an important concern among scholars (Sanders et al. 2002; Blais et al. 2001). LAPOP’s interviewer does not read political parties’ names, and the question wording includes a short-term filter, when using the adverb “currently.” This opens the door to concerns regarding underestimations of partisanship (Castro Cornejo 2019). Thus, the dilemma revolves around under- and overestimation, in which underestimation of party identification will be a tough test for religious variables.

Other Determinants of Partisanship

Evidence in Latin America suggests that education, sophistication, and political ideology are positive determinants of party identification (Morales 2016; Morgan 2007; Pérez-Liñán 2002), evaluations of the economy (Navia and Osorio 2015; Morgan 2007; Fiorina 1981), and news media consumption (Sarmet Moreira and Belchior Mesquita 2016; Lupu 2015; Pérez-Liñán 2002). Demographics also explain party identification, such as gender (Kaufmann 2004), wealth (Molina and Pérez 2004; Canache 2002), age (Dalton and Weldon 2007; Canache 2002; Tan et al. 2000), and urban inhabitants (Ruiz 2014; Ishiyama and Fox 2006).

Hypotheses, Data, and Methods

There are three hypotheses regarding religion and party identification:

H1: Belonging to religious denominations will increase party identification.

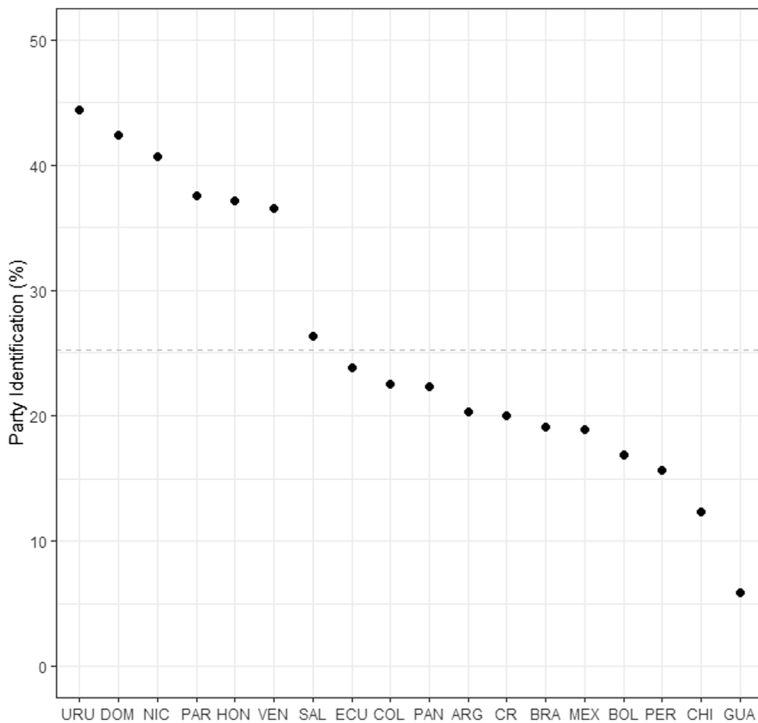
H2: Religiosity will increase party identification.

H3: Moral traditionalism will decrease party identification.

Data come from the 2016 Americas Barometer surveys using 18 countries.² The dependent variable is whether individuals report party identification or not (vb10), as shown in Graph 1. Cross-country variations suggest three groups: one at the top, which is comprised of countries between 35 and 45% of partisans, such as Uruguay and Venezuela. In the middle, the second group includes countries between 15 and 25% of sympathizers, such as El Salvador and Perú, whereas the last one, at the bottom, it is comprised of countries between 5 and 15% of identifiers, such as Chile and Guatemala. Regional average is 25%, as indicated by a dashed horizontal line, in which seven countries are placed above and 11 are placed below.

The explanatory variables of interest are denominations and dimensions. Denominations are binary variables identifying Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, other Christians, non-Christians, and those who do not profess any religion (q3c) that serve as reference category. This classification follows Díaz Domínguez (2009, 2010) based on

² I thank the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Vanderbilt University) for making the data available in the Americas Barometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at www.LapopSurveys.org.



Graph 1 Party identification in 18 Latin American Countries, 2016. Source: The 2016 Americas Barometer surveys. Question vb10. “Do you currently sympathize with a political party?”

Weber’s original conceptualization (1905/1958); Layman’s classification for the USA (1997); and Gill (2002), Sherman (1997), and Hallum (2002) debates about Pentecostals.³

Religious dimensions are comprised of two additive indexes, (a) religiosity, which includes church attendance (q5a), attendance to religious groups (cp6), and importance of religion (q5b); and (b) moral traditionalism, which includes attitudes toward homosexuals’ rights to run for office (d5), same-sex marriage (d6), and abortion when the mother’s health is in danger (w14a).⁴

³ Mainline Protestant is comprised of Protestant non-Evangelical, Protestant, Christian Protestant, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Episcopalian, and Moravian. Evangelical and Pentecostal are comprised of Evangelical, Pentecostals, Church of God, Assemblies of God, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, Christ Pentecostal Church, Christian Congregation, Christian Reformed Church, Charismatic non-Catholic, Light of World, Baptist, Nazarene, Salvation Army, Adventist, and Seventh-Day Adventist. Other Christians: Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah’s Witness. Non-Christian religions are comprised of Traditional, Jewish, and non-Christian Eastern religions. Traditional: Candomblé, Voodoo, Rastafarian, Mayan Traditional Religion, Umbanda, Maria Lonza, Inti, Kardecista, Santo Daime, and Esoterica. Jewish: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Non-Christian Eastern: Islam, Buddhist, Hinduism, Taoist, Confucianism, and Baha’i.

⁴ In order to verify whether religiosity and moral traditionalism are tapping different religious dimensions, results from a factor analysis suggest that although the analyzed variables are somewhat interrelated, for the most part, church attendance, attendance to religious groups, and importance of religion belong to one component, whereas homosexuals’ rights, same-sex marriage, and abortion belong to another one (see online [Appendix](#)).

Models also include demographic and cognitive variables as controls. Demographics are gender (q1, female); age cohorts (q2); levels of education (ed); quintiles of wealth (according to Córdova 2009); urban (ur); and employed, unemployed, and taking care of the home (ocup4a). Cognitive variables are news consumption (gi0) and ideology in politics on the left-right continuum (l1), and in economics on the role of the State as owner of the most important industries (ros1).⁵ Finally, models include retrospective evaluations of the national economy (soct2) and three measures of social capital: attendance to meetings of a parents' association at school (cp7), meetings of a community improvement committee or association (cp8), and interpersonal trust (it1). The measure at the country level is the 2014 Gini index. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1. Estimations come from multilevel binary logistic models (Bates et al. 2015), and I calculated corresponding predicted probabilities for significant variables (Lüdtke 2018).

Discussion

Although there are limited empirical effects of religious determinants on party identification when compared to secular variables, effects mainly confirm hypotheses. In Table 2, there are four models, the baseline model and three more models, one for each interaction term between one denomination and each one of the two dimensions.

Religious denominations slightly shape party identification when compared to those who do not profess any religion, as shown in the baseline model of Table 2. Belonging to the Catholic, Evangelical, and non-Christian churches increases partisanship two points, whereas to Protestant churches increases 5 points, but belonging to Other Christian religions (LDS and JW) decreases party identification 3 points.

Regarding religious dimensions, religiosity and moral traditionalism have a positive and negative impact, respectively. Those who hold the lowest levels of religiosity are less likely to identify with any political party (21%), whereas those who hold the highest levels of religiosity are more likely to identify with political parties (27%). In contrast, those who hold the highest levels of moral traditionalism are less likely to identify with a political party (22%), whereas those who hold the lowest levels are more likely to report identification (28%), as shown in panels a and b of Graph 2.

The next three models in Table 2 show combinations between religious denominations and dimensions. Model 2 shows interaction terms between Catholics and religiosity and Catholics and moral traditionalism, whereas model 3 shows these combinations for Protestants, and model 4 for Evangelicals. Overall, religiosity among Catholics increases the likelihood of identification with any political party, going from 21 to 29%, as shown in panel c of Graph 2, whereas the higher levels of moral traditionalism among any religious denomination are statistically insignificant, as shown in Table 2.

⁵ Ideology measures are folded by subtracting the extreme poles and dividing this result by two. For example, ideology in politics is measured using a 10-point scale: $(10-1) = 9/2 = 4.5$, $(9-2) = 7/2 = 3.5$, and so successively. DK and DR answers were excluded as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

| Variable | Mean | Std. dev | Min | Max | Pct. valid |
|------------------------------------|------|----------|------|------|------------|
| Party identification | 0.25 | 0.43 | 0 | 1 | 99.05 |
| Catholic | 0.62 | 0.49 | 0 | 1 | 97.16 |
| Protestant | 0.04 | 0.20 | 0 | 1 | 97.16 |
| Evangelical | 0.18 | 0.38 | 0 | 1 | 97.16 |
| LDS/JW | 0.02 | 0.14 | 0 | 1 | 97.16 |
| Non-Christian | 0.05 | 0.22 | 0 | 1 | 97.16 |
| Religiosity * | 0.56 | 0.30 | 0 | 1 | 97.83 |
| Moral traditionalism ** | 0.57 | 0.34 | 0 | 1 | 92.67 |
| Female | 0.50 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 | 100 |
| Age | 0.40 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | 99.93 |
| Urban | 0.71 | 0.45 | 0 | 1 | 100 |
| Wealth | 0.48 | 0.35 | 0 | 1 | 98.93 |
| Education | 0.55 | 0.24 | 0 | 1 | 98.20 |
| News consumption | 0.83 | 0.27 | 0 | 1 | 99.57 |
| Ideology folded politics *** | 0.45 | 0.40 | 0 | 1 | 89.92 |
| Ideology folded economics *** | 0.55 | 0.38 | 0 | 1 | 96.70 |
| Retrospective economic evaluations | 0.26 | 0.34 | 0 | 1 | 98.40 |
| Employed | 0.44 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 | 99.44 |
| Unemployed | 0.11 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | 99.44 |
| Take care home | 0.20 | 0.40 | 0 | 1 | 99.44 |
| Meetings of parents association | 0.27 | 0.33 | 0 | 1 | 98.65 |
| Meetings of community improvement | 0.18 | 0.29 | 0 | 1 | 99.06 |
| Interpersonal trust | 0.57 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 | 97.53 |
| Gini index 2014 | 0.47 | 0.05 | 0.38 | 0.54 | 100 |

Source: The 2016 Americas Barometer surveys by LAPOP, 18 countries, 29,064 respondents. Gini 2014 from the World Bank indicators

*Additive index comprised of church attendance (q5a), importance of religion (q5b), and attendance to religious groups (cp6), Cronbach's alpha = 0.759. Variables rescaled to run in the same direction

**Additive index comprised of disapprove homosexuals run for office (d5), disapprove of same-sex couples having the right to marry (d6), and it is not justified to have an abortion when the mother's health is in danger (w14a), Cronbach's alpha = 0.599. Variables rescaled to run in the same direction

***Ideology measures are folded by subtracting the extreme poles and dividing this result by two

All variables at the individual level were rescaled from 0 to 1. Models only use valid cases

Although religiosity among Evangelicals is statistically significant, this is due to combinations between religiosity and other denominations, as shown in panel d of Graph 2. When levels of religiosity increase, it is more likely that other denominations identify with any political party, whereas partisanship among Evangelicals remains the same (26%), regardless of any levels of religiosity.

In relation to control variables, as shown in Table 2, they behave in the way hypothesized by the literature. Women, respondents who take care of home, and those who live in countries with the greatest inequalities are less likely to identify with a

Table 2 Determinants of party identification in Latin America, 2016

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Catholic | 0.08 (0.06) | − 0.04 (0.08) | 0.08 (0.06) | 0.06 (0.07) |
| Protestant | 0.27** (0.10) | 0.37** (0.11) | 0.29 (0.25) | 0.25** (0.10) |
| Evangelical | 0.10 (0.08) | 0.21** (0.09) | 0.10 (0.08) | 0.24 (0.15) |
| LDS/JW | − 0.14 (0.14) | − 0.04 (0.15) | − 0.14 (0.14) | − 0.16 (0.15) |
| Non-Christian | 0.07 (0.10) | 0.15 (0.10) | 0.07 (0.10) | 0.05 (0.10) |
| Religiosity | 0.30** (0.07) | 0.14 (0.11) | 0.30** (0.07) | 0.36** (0.07) |
| Moral traditionalism | − 0.31** (0.06) | − 0.36** (0.09) | − 0.31** (0.06) | − 0.33** (0.06) |
| Cath X religiosity | | 0.25* (0.13) | | |
| Cath X moral trad. | | 0.08 (0.11) | | |
| Prot X religiosity | | | 0.02 (0.30) | |
| Prot X moral trad. | | | − 0.05 (0.27) | |
| Ev X religiosity | | | | − 0.36** (0.17) |
| Ev X moral trad. | | | | 0.15 (0.15) |
| Female | − 0.22** (0.04) | − 0.22** (0.04) | − 0.22** (0.04) | − 0.22** (0.04) |
| Age | 0.89** (0.06) | 0.89** (0.06) | 0.89** (0.06) | 0.89** (0.06) |
| Urban | − 0.08* (0.04) | − 0.07* (0.04) | − 0.08* (0.04) | − 0.08* (0.04) |
| Wealth | 0.10* (0.05) | 0.10* (0.05) | 0.10* (0.05) | 0.10* (0.05) |
| Education | 0.23** (0.09) | 0.23** (0.09) | 0.23** (0.09) | 0.22** (0.09) |
| News consumption | 0.63** (0.07) | 0.63** (0.07) | 0.63** (0.07) | 0.63** (0.07) |
| Ideology folded politics | 0.79** (0.04) | 0.79** (0.04) | 0.79** (0.04) | 0.79** (0.04) |
| Ideology folded economics | 0.28** (0.05) | 0.28** (0.05) | 0.28** (0.05) | 0.28** (0.05) |

Table 2 (continued)

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Retrospective economic evaluations | 0.56** (0.05) | 0.56** (0.05) | 0.56** (0.05) | 0.56** (0.05) |
| Employed | -0.12** (0.04) | -0.12** (0.04) | -0.12** (0.04) | -0.12** (0.04) |
| Unemployed | -0.04 (0.06) | -0.04 (0.06) | -0.04 (0.06) | -0.04 (0.06) |
| Take care home | -0.24** (0.06) | -0.24** (0.06) | -0.24** (0.06) | -0.24** (0.06) |
| Meetings parents association | 0.08 (0.05) | 0.09 (0.05) | 0.08 (0.05) | 0.08 (0.05) |
| Meetings community | 0.64** (0.06) | 0.64** (0.06) | 0.64** (0.06) | 0.64** (0.06) |
| Interpersonal trust | 0.19** (0.05) | 0.19** (0.05) | 0.19** (0.05) | 0.19** (0.05) |
| Gini index 2014 | -5.65** (2.79) | -5.69* (3.07) | -5.65** (2.74) | -5.69* (2.98) |
| Constant | -0.23 (1.32) | -0.17 (1.45) | -0.23 (1.30) | -0.22 (1.42) |
| Log likelihood | -11,174.6 | -11,172.1 | -11,174.6 | -11,172.3 |
| Country variance | 0.33 | 0.33 | 0.33 | 0.33 |

Multilevel logistic models, 21,664 respondents, 18 countries; entries are coefficients and standard errors in parentheses

** $p < 0.05$

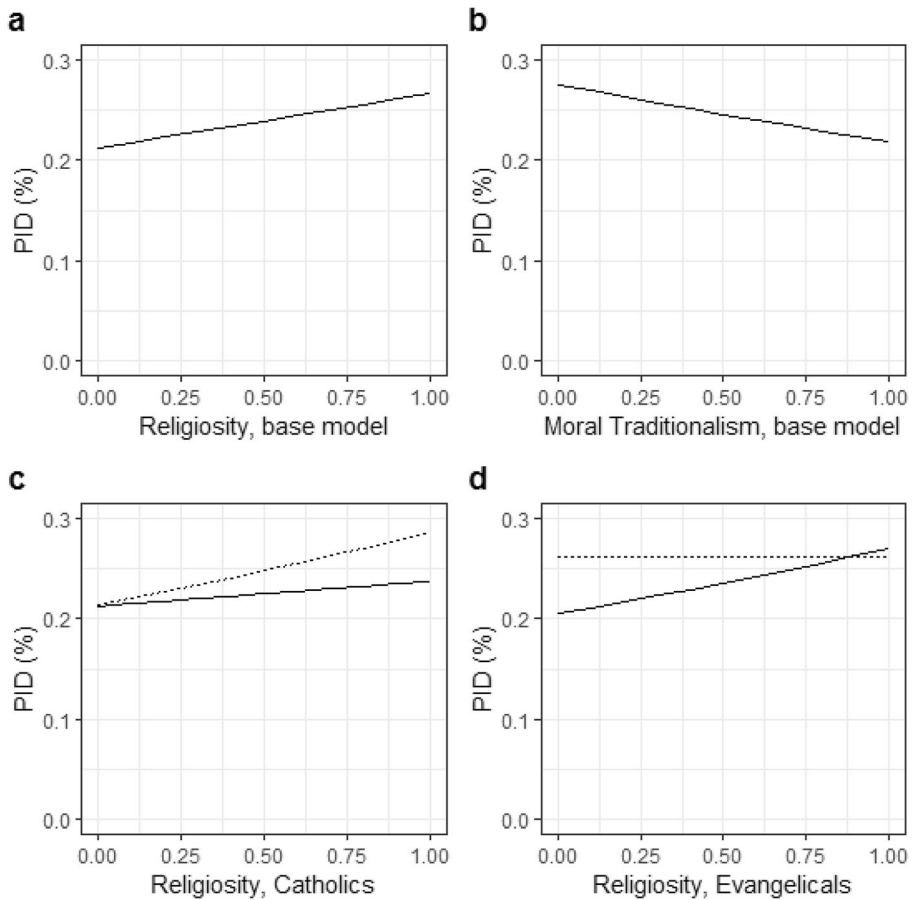
* $p < 0.1$

political party, whereas partisanship is fueled by age, education, rural inhabitants, interpersonal trust, community meetings, evaluations of the national economy, news consumption, and the two folded ideology measures.⁶

Conclusions

The impact of religious variables on party identification is significant but limited, given that religious dimensions, such as religiosity and moral traditionalism seem to have a greater effect on partisanship rather than denominations. In addition, secular variables shape party identification, in line with theoretical expectations.

⁶ Additional controls for social capital variables, such as attendance at municipal meetings (np1) and meetings of a political party or political organization (cp13), were excluded because attendance to municipal meetings was not asked in Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, whereas meetings of a political party significantly correlate with party identification.



Graph 2 Predicted probabilities. **a** Religiosity from Model 1; **b** moral traditionalism from Model 1; **c** interaction term between being Catholic and religiosity from Model 2; and **d** interaction term between being Evangelical and religiosity from Model 4. Catholics and Evangelicals in dashed lines, other denominations in solid lines

Additional theoretical and empirical work is required to fully understand the mechanics of the negative impact of moral traditionalism on party identification. Although the withdrawal hypothesis seems to find preliminary support, research could benefit from comparing scenarios in which moral traditionalism is salient.

Modeling could also benefit from including additional countries in the Americas, going beyond the traditional group of 18 nations analyzed here, to verify whether in the Caribbean these mechanics are similar or whether there are other important insights to consider when studying identification with political parties in English-speaking countries in Latin America.

Finally, although religiosity alone and among Catholics seems to enhance partisanship, it is not the case among Evangelicals. This suggests the need for specific studies, from a quantitative, cross-national perspective to tackle the religious bases of the root question on party identification and the ideological orientation of the preferred political party.

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