

# Why Catholic countries are suddenly debating abortion

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On Wednesday night, the Argentine Senate voted 38-31 to reject a bill that would have legalized abortion up to 14 weeks. Before its defeat, the bill had garnered substantial political and social movement support. When the bill passed the Chamber of Deputies (Argentina's lower house) in June, conservative President Mauricio Macri had committed himself to signing the bill if it passed the Senate, despite his personal opposition to abortion. And in recent days, a self-named "Green Tide" of women bedecked in green scarves have taken to plazas across the country to support legalization.

**MISCHIEFS OF FACTION**

This latest wave of mobilization has emerged out of a larger social movement called #NiUnaMenos (Not One Less) protesting violence against women. It seems likely that last night's vote is not the last we will hear of either the women's movement or abortion legalization in Argentina.

But Argentina is not alone. Similar debates have been occurring in other countries. In the past week, Brazil's Supreme Federal Court has held hearings on the possibility of decriminalizing abortion, which is presently legal only in exceptional circumstances. Across the Atlantic, Ireland voted in late May to overturn a constitutional amendment that had outlawed abortion. And a year ago this month, Chile's legislature legalized abortion in limited cases.

What's especially striking is that Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Ireland are all majority-Catholic countries where the Roman Catholic Church has historically been a dominant force. Despite Pope Francis's light touch on culture war issues, both the pope and the church more broadly remain strongly opposed to abortion. For instance, in June, shortly after the Irish vote, Francis equated abortion with "white glove" Nazism.

What explains the newly vigorous debate over abortion? Is there something in the (holy) water? Is this a sign the Catholic Church is losing its power?

We can quickly dismiss the most obvious possibility — that citizens are simply losing their religion. Though one might think the abortion debate signals the declining importance of Catholicism, interestingly, there is only limited evidence of this notion. It is true that identification with Catholicism is on the decline throughout South America, including Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. However, the proportion of the population saying that "religion is very important" in their lives has gone *up* in the past decade in the AmericasBarometer surveys in Brazil and Argentina.

This is true not only for the population as a whole but for Catholics specifically. And trust in the Catholic Church has also risen in Argentina. Ireland's abortion vote might have resulted from the declining political power of the Catholic Church, but this explanation does not seem to fit the other cases.

So if declining religion doesn't explain the growing public debate over abortion, what does?

Two speculative answers come to mind. First, since 2010, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil have all seen waves of social movements, facilitated in part by new communications technologies. Argentina's #NiUnaMenos movement is an example of how social movements adopt feminist demands. The abortion debate, then, might be a sign not of the decline of religious conservatism, but of the increasing sophistication of leftist movements.

The second answer relates once again to religion. In my forthcoming book and a recent paper, I have found that Brazilian clergy are very sensitive to religious competition and the threat of membership loss. When reminded (i.e., primed) that they face these challenges, they ease up on "fire and brimstone" teachings. That is, they give lower priority to topics such as "God's wrath" and the need for chastity, apparently in an attempt to keep the faithful in the pews.

If some Catholic clergy deliberately deemphasize abortion, there is no need for citizens to reject church teachings. And indeed, observers have noted the church's reticence to speak out in the abortion debate in both Argentina and Ireland.

What does the future hold? In the short term, abortion policy is unlikely to change in Chile, Argentina, or Brazil. In the long term, though, abortion will remain on public agendas, as both social movements and religious competition continue to grow.