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Religious references in political campaigning: a comparative analysis of Latin America and Western Europe on social media

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The relationship between religion and politics is receiving increasing attention in political science, although the focus is often on voter attitudes. Despite secularization trends, scholars expect a resurgence of religion in Western European party politics, where Christianity as a native identity is opposed to non-native Islam by populist radical right parties. In this context, it is primarily hostility toward other religious groups that structures religious elements in political communication. In most Latin American societies, religiosity plays a much greater role for individuals, which is reflected in the discourses of political elites who use genuine religious references to appeal to religious voters ("sacralization of politics"). Using data from my own recent research on content analysis of parties' and candidates' Facebook profiles, this article compares how political actors in Latin America and Western Europe use religious references in electoral campaigns and how salient these discourses are. The results help to explain the different prominence of religious discourses in different democratic regions and religious markets. The article contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of religion in 21st century politics.

KEYWORDS

religion, social media, Western Europe, Latin America, populism, radical right

Introduction

Religion and politics in Western European and Latin American democracies

The academic debate on the role of religion in political competition in democracies has recently been revitalized by a growing body of empirical research. As recent work suggests, the role of religious discourses in political competition varies widely across democratic world regions. In Western Europe, for example, societies are increasingly secularized and religious values play little role in justifying one's political agenda (Minkenberg, 2018; Schwörer et al., 2020). Instead, religion is increasingly discussed in the context of the rise of populist radical right parties (PRRP). Although most of them do not have a religious ideology, they are expected to increasingly refer to religious in-groups and out-groups in order to promote a religiously and culturally homogeneous nation-state.

In Latin America, many societies are much more religious in terms of church attendance, belief in God, and other indicators (Figure 1). Moreover, the rise of evangelical denominations is expected to influence political decision-making and campaign discourse (Calderón Castillo, 2017; Lemaitre, 2017; Parker, 2016; Pérez Guadalupe, 2019). Alleged religious values and principles therefore continue to be a tool for justifying one's political positions and for other forms of political campaigning (Blofield et al., 2017; Garzón Vallejo and Rojas González, 2016; Melo et al., 2020; Rojas González, 2013; Siles et al., 2021).

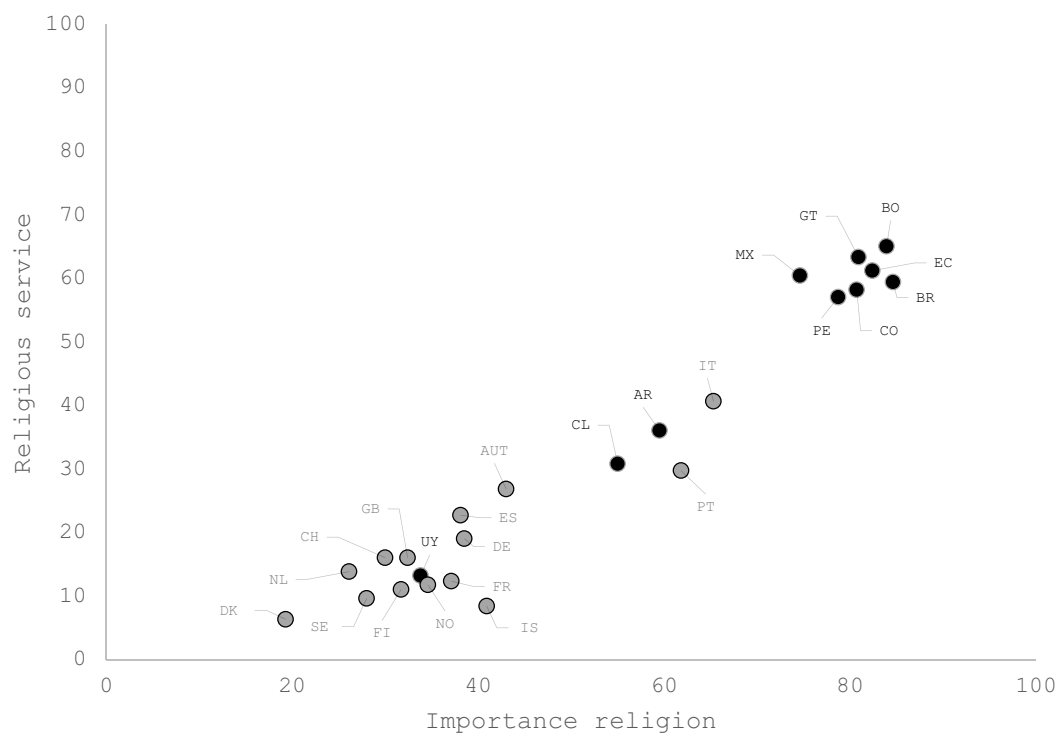


FIGURE 1

Religiosity in Western Europe and Latin America (2017–2022). Black dots = Latin American countries. Grey dots = Western European countries; Data: World Value Survey 2017–2022. Importance religion: ‘For each of the following aspects, indicate how important it is in your life. Would you say it is very important, rather important, not very important or not important at all?’ Religion. Percentages include respondents indicating ‘very important’ and ‘rather important’; Religious service: ‘Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?’ Percentages include respondents indicating at least ‘once a month’. Countries Latin America (ranked by importance of religion): Brazil (BR); Bolivia (BO); Ecuador (EC); Guatemala (GT); Colombia (CO); Peru (PE); Mexico (MX); Argentina (AR); Chile (CL); Uruguay (UY). Countries Western Europe (Ranked by importance of religion): Italy (IT); Portugal (PT); Austria (AUT); Iceland (IS); Germany (DE); Spain (ES); France (FR); Norway (NO); Switzerland (CH); Finland (FI); United Kingdom (GB); Sweden (SE); Netherlands (NL); Denmark (DK).

However, while the role of religion in political campaigning is increasingly attracting scholarly attention, with few exceptions there has been little comparison between democratic world regions on the function of religion among political parties and politicians (Ozzano, 2020)¹. This is especially true for comparative empirical analyses between Latin America and Europe—although these two regions are extremely interesting cases to compare, as they both represent democratic party systems where elites need to appeal to and convince voters in electoral campaigns, but with different degrees of religiosity among voters and with different religious market structures. In this article, I attempt to re-analyze my recently collected data on religion and politics in Western Europe and Latin America and to describe similarities and differences in the use of religious discourse between highly religious and less religious countries.

I address two interrelated questions: What is the function of religious discourses among political elites (1) and how salient are they in Western Europe and Latin America (2)? In doing so, I contribute to the discussion on the role of religion in politics in democratic world regions with different religious markets and different degrees of religiosity, explaining the different functions and salience of religion

in politics with reference to the literature on “unsecular” politics (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010) and the “sacralization” of politics (Domke and Coe, 2008), both of which implicitly share the spatial-theoretical assumption that parties and candidates adapt to changing public opinion as vote- and office-seekers (León Ganatios, 2013; Meguid, 2005). Similarly, the theory of religious market structures (Iannaccone, 1991; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994) argues that religious markets with low regulation and high pluralism, such as in Latin America, lead to higher levels of religious mobilization because competing religious “providers” need to appeal to the public with increased advertising, which may be reflected in more religious discourse by politicians.

The empirical part is based on content analysis of Facebook posts by political actors during election campaigns providing a good starting point for identifying the different uses of religious discourse in the two regions. In particular, Facebook is a good source for comparing content and salience between Western Europe and Latin America, as candidates and parties are active on the platform in both world regions (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023; Schwörer et al., 2020).

The findings show that religion and references to God are a crucial communication strategy in many Latin American countries to present oneself as a good Christian, as close to God, and to justify ultraconservative positions with supposed religious values. However, Latin America is very diverse, and religious discourses are most

¹ Latin America, however, is missing in this book.

prevalent in Central America and Brazil, due to the strength of evangelical pressure groups (and a pluralist religious market) and highly religious societies. In this context, a sacralization of politics—the intentional, and partisan use of religious references by politicians—is evident.

In secularized Western European societies, religion is mostly used by populist radical right parties to oppose religious out-groups (Islam) that allegedly threaten Europe's Christian identity, but without referring to actual religious values. However, in Western European countries with relevant ultra-religious organizations—notably Spain—populist radical right parties are particularly conservative and rely on the support of religious associations to oppose abortion and LGBTQI rights. In this respect, we may be witnessing a slight “Central Americanization” of radical right discourses in Southern Europe.

Religiosity in Latin America and Western Europe

Both Latin America and Western Europe are experiencing some form of secularization at the individual level (Bell and Sahgal, 2014; Bruce, 2011; Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023). However, in Western Europe, only a minority consider themselves religious and attend religious services regularly. In Latin America, it is still the majority. This is shown in Figure 1, which is based on data from the World Value Survey. With few exceptions, Latin American societies are much more religious than those in Western Europe on two common indicators of religiosity: the self-reported importance of religion in people's daily lives and the frequency of attending religious services. Italy and Portugal score as high as less religious Latin American countries such as Argentina and Chile. Uruguay stands out as the most secular society in Latin America, similar to Western and Northern European societies. Central American societies in particular, as well as Brazil and Paraguay, have highly religious populations (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023).

Some scholars have long argued that individual secularization in Europe reflects more of a trend toward “believing without belonging”—in which individuals maintain personal religious or spiritual beliefs but do not actively participate in organized religion or religious institutions (Davie, 2002; Davie, 2007). Similarly, arguments from religious market studies have emphasized that smaller religious communities are growing significantly, almost unnoticed by scholars (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). Recent research, however, suggests that a significant portion of society is actually becoming secular, not just trading religiosity for spiritual beliefs (Kasselstrand, 2022; Wilkins-LaFlamme, 2021). In the face of this secularization and a small religious market, actual religious values may not be a relevant communication tool in the political campaigns of parties and candidates.

In Latin America, the dominant Catholic religion is increasingly challenged by secularization trends, but even more so by the rise of evangelical denominations (Bell and Sahgal, 2014). Evangelical groups are expanding particularly in Central America, Brazil, and to some extent in the Andean region (Figure 2). This religious pluralization is accompanied by secularization trends and increasing percentages of people who identify as agnostic or atheist, especially in Central and South America and to some extent in the Andean states, Mexico,

Colombia, and Brazil. Pluralization of religious markets can lead to an increased religious mobilization of societies as different religious “firms” compete for followers (Iannaccone, 1991; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). Scholars argue that the rise of evangelicalism, in particular, leads to increased pressure on politics, as evangelical leaders are highly engaged in political campaigns and politics and can mobilize relevant constituencies (Calderón Castillo, 2017; Pérez Guadalupe, 2019; Parker, 2016).

The role of religion in political campaigns

Latin America

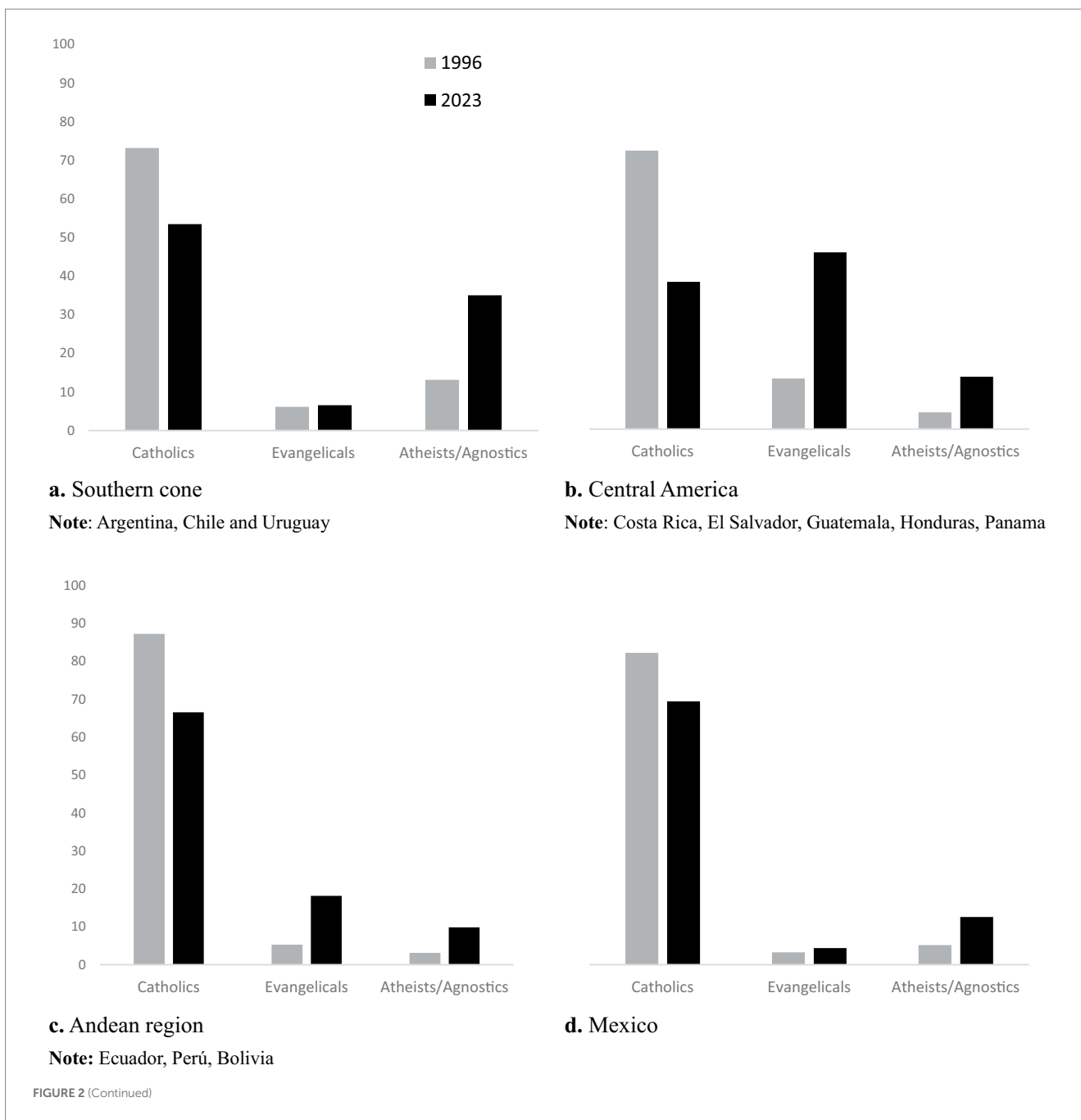
As noted above, Latin America is experiencing significant shifts in its religious landscape, with an increase in religious plurality marked by a surge in evangelical (especially conservative Pentecostal) groups and a simultaneous decline in Catholic influence. This change has been accompanied by a growing trend toward secularism.

Historically, the main religious divide in Latin America has revolved around the issue of establishment and disestablishment. Conservative and nationalist factions typically supported the Catholic Church and its privileges, while liberal and leftist groups favored secularization (Del Campo and Resina, 2020). In current discussions of religion and politics in Latin America, scholars distinguish between the *politicization of religion* and the *sacralization of politics* (Siles et al., 2021; Zúquete, 2017).

The *politicization of religion* involves religious (evangelical) institutions participating in politics and pushing a conservative agenda on moral issues (abortion, contraception, same-sex marriage, etc.) (Siles et al., 2021). Domke and Coe (2008) describe the *sacralization of politics* as the strategic, intentional, and partisan use of religious discourse by politicians. In order to appeal to a religious public and religious (often evangelical) interest groups, politicians publicly display their religiosity and alignment with God (Manjarrés, 2020). The influence and involvement of evangelical groups in politics, pressuring politicians to adopt religious and conservative positions, is particularly notable in Central America and Brazil (Levine, 2012).

The concept of the sacralization of politics is consistent with spatial approaches to party behavior, which view parties and candidates as vote-seekers who adapt to changing public opinion and interest groups (Meguid, 2005; Schwörer, 2024). Similarly, religious market theory suggests that the growth of religious market providers (e.g., evangelical groups) can lead to mobilization of individuals, as increased competition can require increased religious advertising (Iannaccone, 1991; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). This is likely to be reflected in political competition as parties and candidates need to appeal to mobilized religious voters. On the other hand, religious monopoly can create lazy monopolists, as Catholicism has long been, as there is little incentive for the dominant religion to contribute to religious mobilization (Levine, 2012). With the rise of Evangelical groups (and smaller religious denominations), both the Catholic Church and evangelicals now compete for conservative individuals by opposing liberal reforms on sexual mores, abortion, divorce, sex education in schools, remarriage, and contraception (Lemaitre, 2017; Parker, 2016; Vaggione, 2013), which is also reflected in respective discourses of politicians.

This includes Brazil's former far-right president, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, who used religious narratives to support anti-abortion and



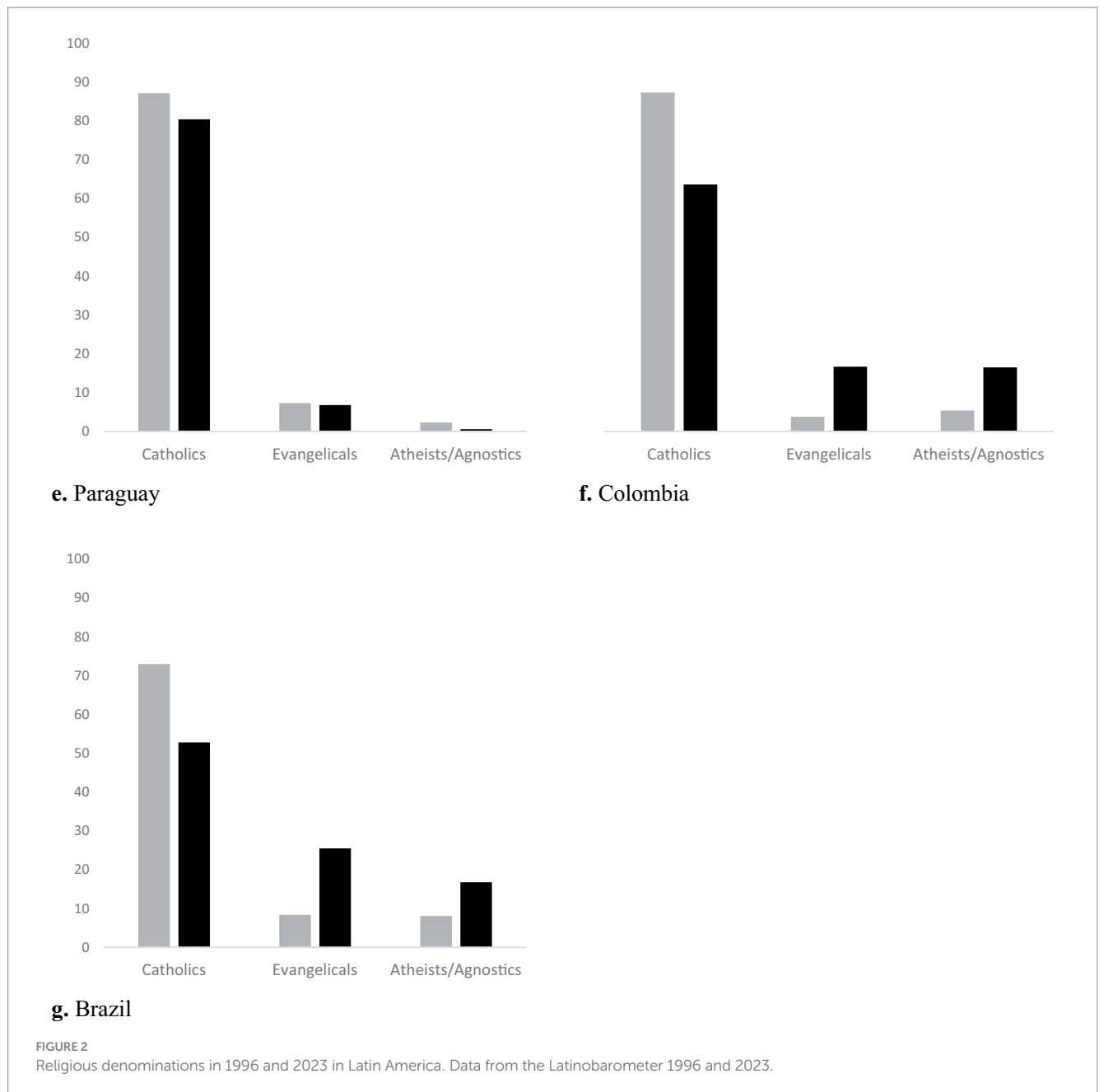
anti-same-sex marriage views and received support from major evangelical churches (Pérez Guadalupe, 2019). Politicians in Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil have used Christian and biblical references to oppose same-sex marriage and homosexuality (Garzón Vallejo and Rojas González, 2016). Religious discourses can also merge with populist elements in Latin America, as seen in Costa Rican Fabricio Alvarado and El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele, who presented themselves as devout Christians opposing corrupt elites (Siles et al., 2021).

However, religious references are not exclusive to the conservative right. Leftist leaders also use them to connect with the predominantly Christian electorate. Hugo Chávez and his references to liberation theology is an oft-cited example in this regard (Levine, 2012). The Brazilian Workers’ Party, rooted in liberation theology, emerged under

authoritarian rule with the support of the church. Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico was backed by the Evangelical Social Encounter Party and proclaimed a moral agenda and constitution (Pérez Guadalupe, 2019).

Nevertheless, left-wing candidates and parties are less likely to invoke a conservative moral agenda with religious arguments, but typically advocate for women’s and gay rights (Melo et al., 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015). However, there is considerable variation in the left’s position on moral issues across countries, in part because they have played a rather secondary role for the Latin American left, which has prioritized socioeconomic issues (Blofield et al., 2017).

In sum, political figures in Latin America frequently use religious references, especially in contexts with significant religious influence



and strong evangelical interest and pressure groups (indicating a more pluralistic religious market). These references are used to emphasize personal religiosity or to create a particular form of populism. Conservative leaders, in particular, may use religious discourse to promote ultraconservative viewpoints.

Western Europe

Religious cleavages have long divided the political landscapes of European countries. The roots of this conflict go back to the Protestant Reformation, which sparked conflicts between Protestants and Catholics (Knutsen, 2004; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The French Revolution later reignited these disputes, but in a new context, as religious groups—both Protestant and Catholic—united against the push by liberal and secular forces to reduce the influence of the church in politics. Such confrontations were not confined to France but

spread across Europe, sparking debates about the relationship between church and state, the introduction of compulsory state education, and the separation of church and state affairs (Knutsen, 2004; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

Countries such as Germany and Switzerland witnessed particularly fierce disputes that led to the emergence of parties representing Catholic or religious interests by the early 20th century (Knutsen, 2004). Although religious cleavages became less prominent in postwar party politics, religion remained important among individuals and as a determinant of party unity (Ozzano, 2019). In terms of party discourse and electoral campaigns, religious issues have become largely absent (Knutsen, 2004). Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen (2010) argue that Christian Democratic parties' modern references to religion are limited to broad, simplistic statements about "religious inspiration" or "values

of Christian civilization.” It was Van Kersbergen (2008) who developed the concept of modern “unsecular” politics, a form of politics that represents the often challenging attempt to remove explicitly religious elements while simultaneously creating a new set of beliefs, values, and norms inspired by Christianity. As noted by Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen (2010: 204), Christian Democratic parties adapt their religious norms and values to make them compatible with modernity, often using terms other than traditional religious ones to appeal to voters: “The modern version of unsecular politics is the often uneasy attempt to strip off the explicitly and exclusively religious ideological baggage, while at the same time constructing a new religiously inspired package of beliefs, values, and norms.”

Similarly, Engeli et al. (2012a: 13) note that Christian Democrats have gone “beyond their confessional offspring in order to present a new political platform inspired by religion without directly referring to it.” This may be the case on issues related to the social market economy and the welfare state, where traditional Christian principles of solidarity and social justice can be linked to the issue without the need to appeal explicitly to religion. On moral issues, on the other hand, “Christian Democratic parties have the most difficulty in avoiding the focus on their confessional background, so the most tempting strategy for them might often be to avoid these issues completely or only pay limited attention to them” Engeli et al. (2012a: 16). In sum, it is difficult to speak of a “sacralization of politics” in Western Europe in this context, since religion as such does not seem to mobilize relevant constituencies—even for Christian Democrats. Speaking with religious market theory (Iannaccone, 1991; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994), this can be explained by the fact that Western Europe is less competitive than Latin America in terms of religious markets because state support and regulation of established churches (like through church taxes and subsidies in some countries) reduce the incentives for religious organizations to actively compete for members. Additionally, the strong secularization and lack of pluralistic competition among various religious groups in Western Europe further diminish the need for religious mobilization.

When religion in Western European party politics is discussed today, the focus is not on Christian Democratic parties but on the populist radical right. Although most of these parties have no religious origins, and some were even inspired by anticlerical and pagan ideas (Brubaker, 2017; Minkenberg, 2018; Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou, 2013), they increasingly divide society into religious in-groups and out-groups. The nativist core ideology of these parties, which aims at a culturally homogeneous nation-state (Mudde, 2007), is applicable to any exclusionary discourse against ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities.

In this debate, nativist parties sometimes advocate the protection of Western civilization, European identity, Christian faith, Judeo-Christian heritage, or humanist and secular principles (Bar-On, 2018). The most important event that led to this discursive development was the September 11 attacks (Bleich, 2009; Cesari, 2011; Kallis, 2018). After these attacks, fear of Islam increased and Muslims could easily be portrayed as a dangerous outgroup. The series of jihadist incidents across Europe, such as in European capitals over the years, has contributed significantly to public anxiety (Kaya and Tecmen, 2019). Another window of opportunity for anti-Muslim discourse opened

with the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015. The radical right, but also some mainstream media and political actors, considered the religious and cultural attitudes of Muslim refugees as a source of crime and terror (Osiewicz, 2017).

The threatened in-group, on the other hand, is increasingly framed as “Christian.” The supposedly Christian values and identity of Western civilizations are under attack by an “aggressive Islamic invasion” and become the radical right’s new religiously framed ingroup (Brubaker, 2017; Forlenza, 2019). It is crucial to recognize that the radical right’s invocation of Christian references reflects their civilizational concerns about Islam rather than their religious beliefs and serves to advocate for stricter policies against Muslims (Brubaker, 2017; Rosenberger and Hadj-Abdou, 2013). In sum, religion is “on the rise” in Western Europe (Minkenberg, 2018: 366), not because religious groups are pressuring politics to follow a moral agenda, but simply because of nativist opportunities for ingroup and outgroup construction. However, if the “sacralization of politics” is understood as a purely strategic use of religious discourse, the concept may apply not only to political elites in Latin America, but also to PRRP in Western Europe.

Research design

I use data from the datasets of our existing empirical research on the role of religion in Latin American and Western European politics (primarily: Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023; Schwörer et al., 2020). In particular, I aim to identify differences and similarities in the *use* and *content* of religious references in both world regions by analyzing communication of political actors on Facebook. I also draw some conclusions on the question of the *salience* of such discourses. The latter is particularly challenging because different time periods were analyzed between the two regions—yet the methodology itself was the same and, despite the challenges, the data allows for comparisons between Latin America and Western Europe.

We conducted partly dictionary-based content analyses of party communication platforms. In Western Europe, we analyzed Facebook posts of political parties and election manifestos (Schwörer et al., 2020). I will focus primarily on our Facebook analysis in our cross-country comparative study of seven Western European countries, as these data are comparable to the Latin American data. We selected Facebook posts from the most relevant political parties in the 8 weeks before national elections between 2015 and 2018 (Schwörer et al., 2020). In Latin America, we analyzed Facebook posts 5 months before the election.² To compare the different data, I will use relative scores (see unit of measurement/analysis below).

Our dictionary approach included religious keywords (e.g., Islam; religion) and was used to find religious references (see [Supplementary material](#)). The dictionaries were created through theoretical reasoning and extensive pretesting with the sample material. It is important to note that we used the dictionary only to identify potential Facebook posts/passages with references to religion in order to avoid a time-consuming reading of the entire

² See the [Supplementary Appendix](#) for the case selection.

TABLE 1 Category system for measures of religious elements.

Category	Operationalisation	Example sentence
Pro Christianity; God; church; Catholicism; Evangelism; (non-specific) religion	<p>Attribution/mentions of positive characteristics, values, actions</p> <p>Religion/actor/group is made responsible for a positive development or situation</p> <p>Religion/actor/group is portrayed as victim; unfairly or badly treated</p> <p>Speaker is in favor of supporting religion/religious group or illustrates the its importance</p> <p>Speaker mentions own closeness to religion/actor/group</p>	<p>After God, the family is the most valuable thing we have in this life. (Sebastián Piñera, 8-27-2017)</p> <p>We are united by our love for God and our desire to soon have an El Salvador from which our children will not have to leave to achieve their dreams. I thank the leaders of the churches of San Miguel who received me and gave me their support yesterday. (Carlos Calleja, 11-1-2018)</p> <p>That the SPD is more inclined to Islam than to Christianity or Judaism is no secret (AfD, 30-8-2017)</p>
God/Christianity/ religion and traditional morality	<p>Speaker refers to religious elements (associations; persons; values; God...) in order to strengthen its own conservative position towards moral issues (e.g.: gender equality; rights for homosexuals; abortion...)</p> <p>Speaker claims that religious groups agree with its conservative agenda</p> <p>Speaker mentions the religious environment where conservative standpoints have been formulated (e.g.: arguing against same-sex marriage at a religious event)</p>	<p>I call on all people of principles and values to march in defense of Life, which is God's gift, and the Family, which is the MOST IMPORTANT INSTITUTION OF THE STATE AND COSTA RICAN SOCIETY. (Partido Restauración Nacional, 12-3-2017)</p>
Pro/contra secularism	<p>Support/rejection of secular principles; support/rejection of the implementation of religious principles in treaties, law, public institutions, education, etc.; general commitment to/rejection of the idea of secularism and separation of church and state; support/rejection of the right to criticize religions</p>	<p><i>Pro</i>: I vote Macron for secularism that protects freedom (En Marche, 26-4-2017)</p> <p><i>Contra</i>: Dirty campaigning by insulting God is something we will not allow (Carlos Calleja, 6-11-2018).</p>
Pro Islam	See the operationalization of the "Pro-Christianity" category	<p>This party [AfD] is unrestrainedly inciting hatred against minorities, Muslims and people seeking refuge from war and persecution in our country (SPD, 20-9-2017)</p>
Contra Islam ¹	<p>Attribution of negative actions, behaviors/negative traits, values; actor is blamed for a negative development or situation</p> <p>Religious group is portrayed as receiving preferential treatment; too powerful</p> <p>Denying rights or privileges and questioning the positive contributions of a religious group and its membership in society</p> <p>Describing alleged consequences of accepting religious groups, such as terror, lack of security, or negative financial situations</p>	<p>A woman in a burka beats a lingerie saleswoman because lingerie is not 'haram' (AfD, 6-9-2017)</p>

¹We further distinguished between rejection of Islam as a religion/moderate Muslims and rejection of Islamist fundamentalism.

text corpus. It is therefore not necessary for each term in the dictionary to have a distinct meaning, as we *manually* reviewed and analyzed every instance where a term appears in the corpus (see Table 1 for the category system with the main categories). We manually coded all passages containing religious keywords in order to categorize the concrete context and meaning. The same was done in our empirical analysis in Latin America, albeit with a slightly adapted dictionary (see also the [Supplementary material](#)). The units of analysis were all Facebook posts during election campaigns. The unit of measurement was the individual post.

We tested the inter-coder reliability for the measurement of religious references using Cohen's Kappa. To do this, we selected a sample of election manifestos coded by the second author using the same codebook and categories, and had the sample independently coded by the first author ([Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2020](#)). The Cohen's Kappa scores consistently exceed 0.8 and are mostly statistically significant, suggesting that inter-coder reliability can be considered almost perfect ([Landis and Koch, 1977](#)). This result is not particularly surprising, as the dictionary approach facilitates the detection of religious content, and references to Islam and Christianity are relatively straightforward to code.

Analysis

Western Europe

The data collected from Facebook posts for our comparative study of Western Europe ([Schwörer et al., 2020](#)) show that religion is used by political parties in very limited contexts. It is mainly the populist radical right that refers to religion. Unsurprisingly, however, they do not promote allegedly religious values as a guideline for politics or present themselves as religious or close to God. Instead, they refer primarily to religious groups that either represent the country's culture (in-group) or pose a fundamental threat to it (out-group). [Figure 3](#) shows the salience of the two religious discourses based on our comparative analysis of Facebook posts in seven countries ([Schwörer et al., 2020](#)).

PRRP regularly refer to Islam. This is the dominant "religious" category. Among PRRP, almost all references to Islam are negative, meaning that they reject Islam. The radical right is, not surprisingly, the party family that most often rejects Islam and most often "praises" Christianity. The anti-Islam references include opposition to radical or fundamentalist Islam as well as to Muslims in general and to Islam as a religion. One example comes from the German AfD reporting

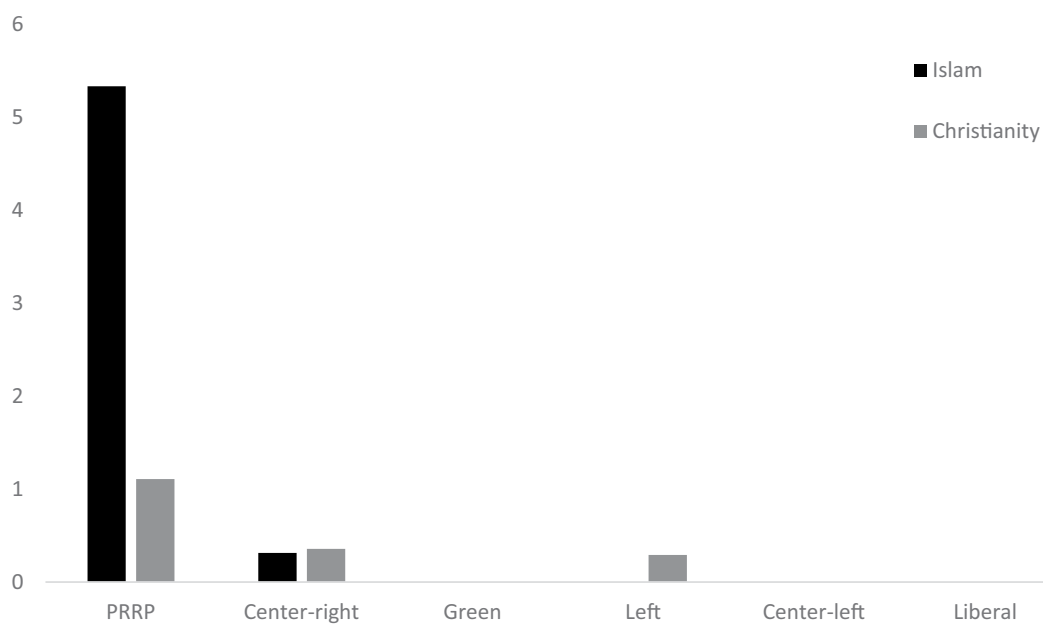


FIGURE 3

Salience of different “religious” references on Facebook. Data from Schwörer et al. (2020). Numbers shows the salience (share of posts with respective content on all posts published in the eight-week-period prior the respective election).

that “A woman in a burka beats a lingerie saleswoman because lingerie is not ‘haram’” (AfD, 6-9-2017). The Austrian FPÖ states “If [...] Islam ‘naturally belongs to Austria’, then the widespread death torture of many animals before the Islamic festival of sacrifice is the logical consequence” (FPÖ, 2-9-2017). References to Christian values or identity are much less pronounced, but PRRP use them more often than any other party family and often to oppose it explicitly or implicitly with Islam. The AfD, for example, rages against the political mainstream: “That the SPD is more inclined to Islam than to Christianity or Judaism is no secret” (AfD, 30-8-2017). UKIP portrays itself as defender of Christianity against Islam: “Margot Parker MEP standing up for persecuted Christians in the Middle East” (UKIP, 16-5-2017).

Besides PRRP only few center-right parties (CVP in Switzerland and the Conservative Party in the UK) refer to Christianity and Islam. References to Islam are also negative among center-right parties, but unlike PRRP, they reject Islamic fundamentalism rather than Islam as a religion. The only (positive) references to Christianity come from Italy’s Forza Italia and the Bavarian CSU.

While the Facebook analysis shows that religion hardly plays a role in Western European online campaigning, there are some other contexts where religion plays a role in *election manifestos*, which talk not only about the main issues during an election campaign, but about a wider range of issues. I will touch on this briefly to give a broader picture. Unlike on Facebook, parties occasionally address the church-state divide by referring to secular arguments, especially left-wing and liberal parties but almost exclusively in France. Interestingly, some PRRP occasionally contrast Islam with “Western secular values” and accuse Muslims of rejecting these “native” values. On the other hand, parties that emphasize pro-Christian discourses and identities in their manifestos, such as the Swiss SVP, occasionally reject secular values. For example, in the context of criticizing Islam, the party (2015) “is

calling for crosses [...] to be respected and tolerated in public spaces as symbols of our Western Christian culture and our religion.”

While we find mostly the same pattern of anti-Islam messages in election manifestos as on Facebook, the center-right ÖVP stands out in its 2017 manifesto. The party rejects not only fundamentalist or terrorist Islam, but Muslims as such, stating that “In some countries of the world, Muslims wage wars against people of other faiths,” without distinguishing between terrorists and peaceful Muslims.

The manifesto analysis also supports the findings from the Facebook study that rejection of Islam is much more important than positive reference to a Christian in-group. Moreover, only PRRP refer to Christianity at least occasionally. This is true even in very secular Sweden (not part of our original study), where the 2014 election manifesto of the radical right Sweden Democrats emphasized supposed Christian roots, aiming for “a Sweden that is aware of its place in the Nordic, European, Western, Christian and human community.” Eight years later, in the 2022 program, they continue to argue that “Swedish democracy and secular society [are] rooted in a Christian ideology.”

In summary, it is mostly PRRP who use references to religions in Western Europe. They do so mostly by rejecting Islam and much less often by emphasizing a Christian identity and principles as the origin of Western civilization. However, positive references to Christianity are usually not independent of outgroup constructions. It therefore seems unlikely that PRRP are truly convinced of a Christian heritage (or of secular values).

For some parties in Western Europe, however, religion seems to play a somewhat larger role in their communication and for their voters, especially in Southern Europe as our Spanish case study revealed (Schwörer et al., 2020). Vox in Spain, for example, not only uses references to Christianity in its discourse, but also enjoys the support of ultra-religious actors such as “Opus Dei,” “Camino

Neocatecumenal” or “los Kikos” and “HazteOir” because of its ultraconservative agenda. In particular, Vox is strongly opposed to abortion at any stage, same-sex marriage, laws against gender violence, and any feminist and LGBTQI movement. The party emphasizes the protection of what it calls the “natural family” and calls for tax breaks for large “natural families.” Parents should raise their children according to their own values, and children should be protected from feminist values in school. Instead, Catholic values should be more present in public schools and the state should cooperate more with the Catholic Church.

While conservative positions on moral issues can be found in other PRRP in Western Europe as well, the degree of ultra-conservatism in Vox is outstanding, as is the party’s relationship with ultraconservative evangelical groups, especially in Andalusia (Ramis-Moyano et al., 2023). It is precisely this outstanding ultra-conservatism that makes Vox attractive for religious voters, as put by Ruiz Andrés (2022: 257): “Vox’s position against everything that is related to gender questions, sexual and reproductive rights, the so-called ‘trans law’ or euthanasia, links up with an important sector of Catholicism whose religious identity has been determined by the centrality of these debates.” The party openly rejects secular principles and regards Catholicism as a fundamental Spanish value. Not surprisingly, in contrast to many Western European countries, Vox voters are much more religious than those of most other parties and church attendance and confession can explain voting behavior for Vox to a significant extent (Schwörer et al., 2020).³

Similarly, the comparatively new radical right party Chega in Portugal, which won 7.2% of the vote in the 2022 general election, is pursuing an ultraconservative agenda and increasingly attracting evangelical supporters and highly religious men (Heyne and Manucci, 2021; PRRUK, 2023). The party even introduced its 2022 election manifesto with the words “For a new democratic regime: God, Country, Family and Work.” In January 2021, Chega’s leader André Ventura declared: “I am very religious and I believe that what happened to me and also to Chega, considering the history of Portugal [...] was a miracle [...] it was a sign from God” (quoted in Pimenta David and Zúquete, 2022). This kind of discourse is not very different from that of conservative actors in parts of Latin America.

Latin America

We divided candidates and parties into ideological categories based on a binary classification between conservative and progressive actors. Using data from the V-Party dataset, we calculated a score based on the parties’ positions on “social equality for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community,” the extent to which they promote the “cultural superiority of a specific social group or the nation as a whole,” and the “equal participation of women in the labor market” (Lührmann et al., 2020).⁴ In the absence of data on individual candidates, we also used the party scores for their candidates.

First, conservative actors use religious references much more often than progressive ones as indicated in Figure 4. However, this is mostly true for parties, while the difference between progressive candidates and parties is not significant, as shown by an independent t-test (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2023). We argue that candidates may act more independently of their parties and may hold different ideological and religious beliefs than the parties they are running for. Applying party ideological scores to candidates may therefore be problematic.

In most cases, religion is used to present oneself as a good Christian, as close to God, or to express support for religious associations and churches (Figure 4, category God/Christianity). Occasionally, and mostly among conservative parties, political actors use alleged religious values and principles to justify ultra-conservative and illiberal positions. Particularly in regions such as Central America, Brazil and Paraguay, efforts are being made to mobilize Christian voters against the so-called “gender and LGBTI ideology.” This is largely limited to conservative actors, as shown in Figure 4. A case in point is Costa Rica’s National Restoration Party (Partido Restauración Nacional, PRN), which claims: “PEOPLE OF PRINCIPLES AND CHRISTIAN VALUES... your vote cannot be for people who support the Gender Ideology and LGBT” (October 5, 2017). Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil is another example, railing against “the depiction of Jesus Christ as a transsexual” and rhetorically asking, “Is this freedom of expression? Is it art? Is it culture?” (June 30, 2018).

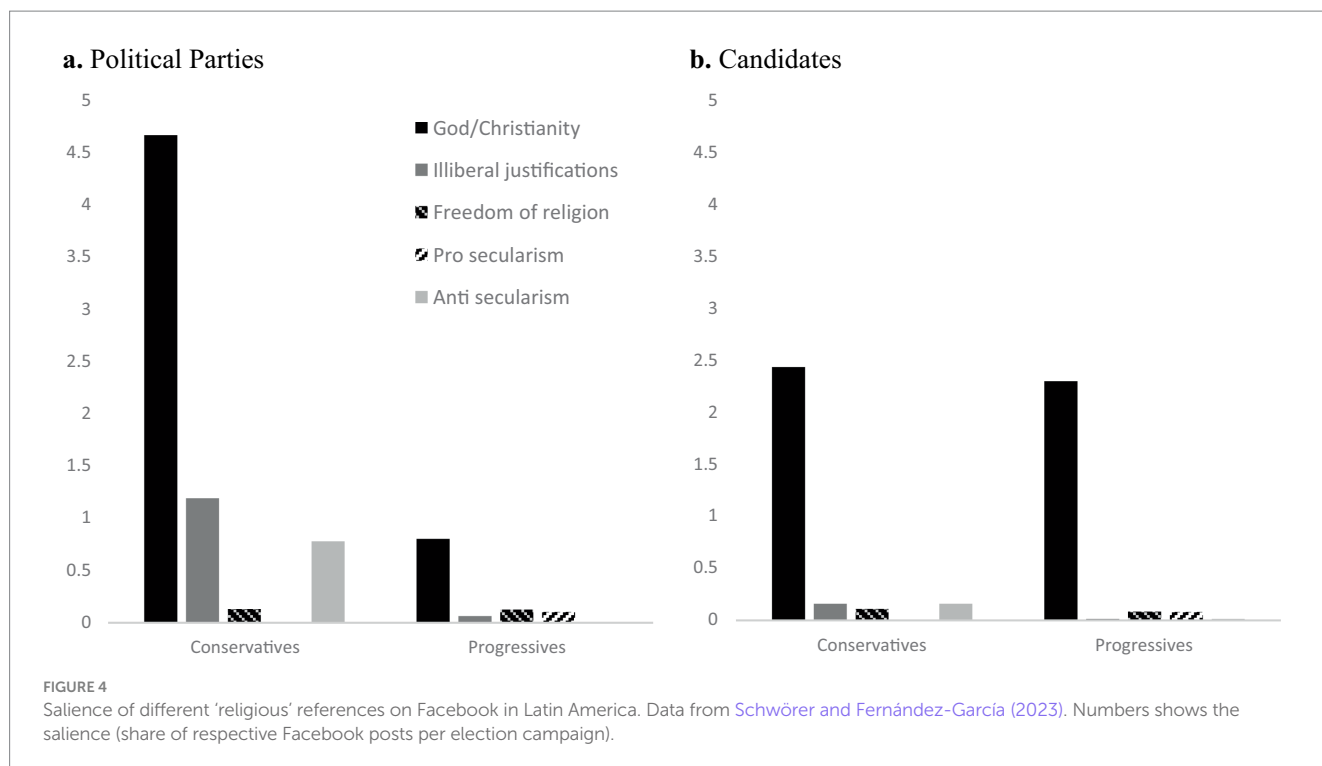
Such mobilization occasionally includes the display of endorsements from local religious figures who oppose LGBTQI groups and gender activism. For example, Costa Rican candidate Fabricio Alvarado emphasized the alleged support of local religious authorities for his ultraconservative positions (“Together with Father Sergio Valverde, from the Asociación Obras del Espíritu Santo, I reiterate the invitation to participate tomorrow, Sunday, in the march for life and family. #YesToLifeAndTheFamily #NoToGenderIdeology”; December 2, 2017).

Only few progressive actors occasionally use religious references to strengthen their political position in favor of left-wing economic policies or, more rarely, in favor of gender equality and LGBTQI rights. Alejandro Guillier from Chile, Daniel Martínez Villaamil from Uruguay and the Chilean Christian Democratic Party refer to religious values or figures to support their demand for social justice. Ernesto Talvi from Uruguay even refers to religious principles to support the rights of LGBTQI groups (“With the humanity that characterizes him, Cardinal Daniel Sturla said that trans people deserve to be taken into special account because of the discrimination they suffer”; July 24, 2019). However, the use of religious principles by left-wing actors to support social justice or the rights of sexual minorities is rather exceptional.

Returning to conservative actors, some of them distinguish themselves from perceived corrupt and dishonest elites by emphasizing religious beliefs and supposed Christian principles. This religious populist rhetoric is in line with the observations of Siles et al. (2021). Specifically, Costa Rican candidate Fabricio Alvarado expressed his vision for the country in a statement on November 8, 2017: “I do not want them to talk about it [Costa Rica] as the land of corruption and cement. [...] The people are tired of seeing how politicians betray their vote. I am not and will not be one of them! With God’s help we have managed to do a clean job for the benefit of the country.” Another example is Carlos Calleja of El Salvador who

³ However, voters of the conservative People’s Party (PP) are more often religious than Vox voters.

⁴ On a scale from 0 (opposing LGBTQ rights, opposing women in the labor market, and supporting cultural superiority) to 4 (supporting LGBTQ and women’s rights; opposing cultural superiority), an actor is considered rather conservative with a value below 2 and rather progressive with a value above 2.



positioned himself against his opponents by appealing to religious values as a marker of integrity, stating on October 22, 2018, “WE WILL HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TWO WAYS. The one of deceit and lies, or the one we want: the one of honesty and faith in God.”

In sum, ideology seems to partially explain the salience and use of specific religious references by political actors in Latin America but does not explain the whole picture. An equally important factor is the regional distribution of religious references. We identify three main regional religious clusters: Brazil, Central America, and other Latin American countries, as shown in Figure 5. All Central American countries, along with Brazil and Paraguay, are among the seven most religious party systems in our sample, based on average scores of pro-religious discourse. Paraguay is a notable religious exception in South America, although it has a lower score than Brazil. In Central America, political actors incorporate pro-religious elements in about 3.15% of their Facebook posts, with a high degree of variability (standard deviation, $SD = 5.54$; sample size, $n = 35$). Brazilian political actors use pro-religious rhetoric in about 4.66% of their Facebook posts ($SD = 7.23$; $n = 11$), while in the rest of Latin America, the use of religious communication drops to only 0.63% ($SD = 1.08$; $n = 41$).

This regional pattern can be explained by the proportion of evangelicals in each country and by the general level of religiosity, as shown in Figure 6. Based on Latinobarometer data, evangelical denominations are particularly prevalent in Central America, with an average presence of 28.1% (standard deviation, $SD = 7.89$), in contrast to the rest of Latin America, where the average is 8.56% (including Paraguay; $SD = 4.64$). These differences are statistically significant, as shown by an independent t-test (p -value < 0.01). Besides Central America, Brazil also has a significant evangelical presence, with 24.7% of the population identifying as evangelical.

Moreover, 2018 Latinobarometer data on religious self-identification (“How religious do you consider yourself?”) show that Central American and Brazilian societies are not only more evangelical, but also more religious overall (Brazil = 47.64%; Central America = 45.5%, $SD = 3.56$; rest of Latin America = 35.2%, $SD = 14.43$). Central American societies show particularly high levels of religiosity, with at least 42% of respondents practicing their faith. In contrast, in the rest of Latin America, only Paraguay, Colombia, and Ecuador have comparable levels of religiosity. The specific case of Paraguay can be explained by the fact that it is the most religious country in the sample (52.7%) and has the most conservative political parties $n = 3$; all scoring below 1.61 on the scale from 0 (conservative) to 4 (liberal). Despite the absence of relevant evangelical lobby groups, the combination of a highly religious society and a conservative political climate may explain the salience of religious discourse in Paraguayan politics.

The comparative perspective: religious communication in Latin America and Western Europe

Table 2 summarizes the function of religious references in Western Europe and Latin America. As we have seen, political actors in Western Europe use references to religions almost exclusively to exclude religious groups (Islam), mostly populist radical right parties. This sometimes goes hand in hand with positive references to Christianity as the supposed origin of European civilization threatened by Islam in radical right discourse. By rejecting Islam as a religion, PRRP also reject the principle of religious freedom. Occasionally, left/liberal parties in Western Europe support secular principles, but this is not very common and shows that the original church/state cleavage is no longer salient (except perhaps in France). Even conservative and Christian Democratic parties hardly use religious references, in line

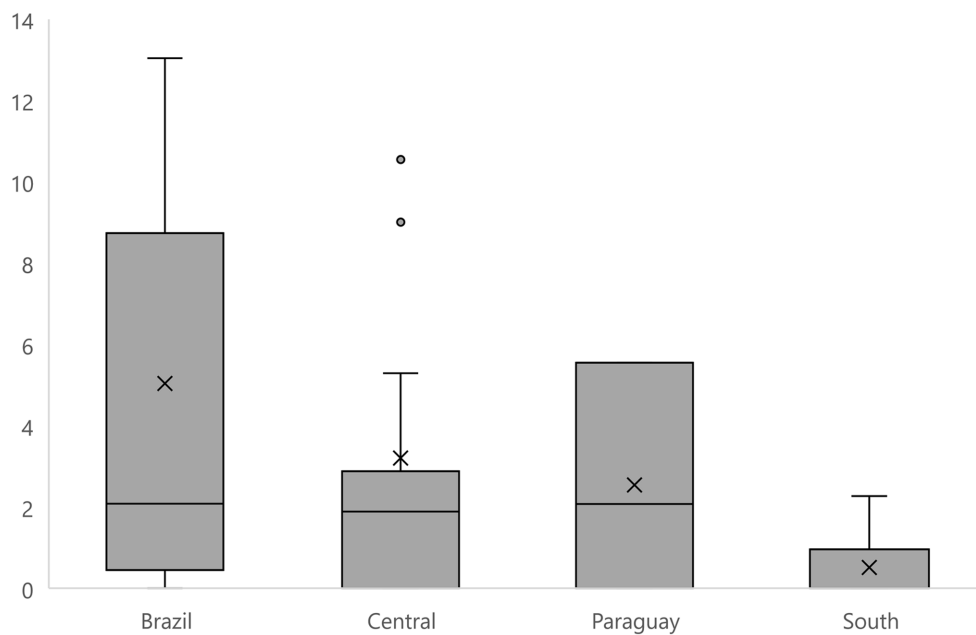


FIGURE 5 Religious discourse scores Brazil, Paraguay, Central and non-Central America (ordered by mean). x = mean; outliers not illustrated for Central America: 26.25 and 19.64. For Brazil: 22.4.

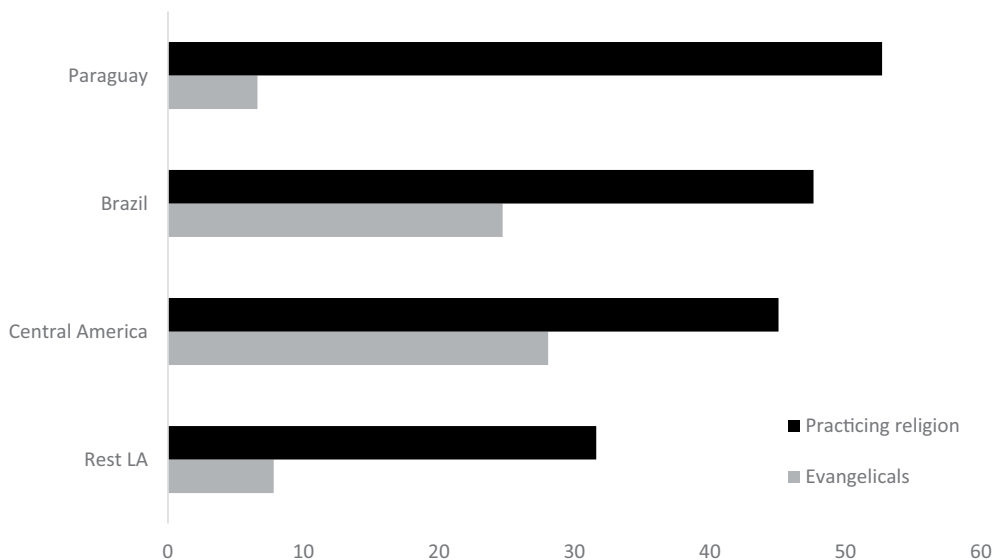


FIGURE 6 Share of religious and Evangelical populations in Latin America. Data based on Latinobarometer 2018.

with Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen's (2010) thesis of “unsecular” politics.

In Latin America, we observe a number of different functions that religion plays in political discourses. But let us first talk about some common patterns. As sometimes found in Western Europe, some Latin American progressive parties support secular principles, especially fewer privileges for the church. Conservative actors in Latin America sometimes question secular principles—this is rarely but occasionally also done by Western European radical right parties,

sometimes seeing Christianity as a guideline for society and politics in opposition to Islam. Religious freedom is emphasized by conservative actors in Latin America who, unlike PRRP in Western Europe, clearly support this principle—as evangelical communities also do to challenge the dominance of Catholicism (Pérez Guadalupe, 2019). By rejecting Islam as a religion, Western European PRRP often reject religious freedom. Again, this is only the case for PRRP in Western Europe—other parties rarely refer to secularism or religious freedom, and when they do, they support it.

TABLE 2 Comparison of the function of religion in political discourses.

	Western Europe	Latin America
Excluding religious groups	+++	–
Positive references to religious groups	+	+++
Pro secular discourses	+	+
Anti secular discourses	+/-	+
Freedom of religion	+ (PRRP: rejection)	+
Portraying oneself as close to Christianity/God	–	+++
Justifying ultraconservative positions with religion	–	++
Justifying left positions with religion	–	+
Religious populism	–	+

+++ = very frequently; ++ = frequently; + = observable; +/- = hardly/rarely observable; – = not observable.

Portraying oneself as close to religious principles, communities or God is particularly important for candidates and parties in highly religious societies in Latin America. The majority of candidates/parties mention religious principles or God at least occasionally in their discourse. However, it is mainly conservative actors who do so. They regularly invoke religious principles, even to support their ultra-conservative positions on moral issues such as (anti-)LGBTQI rights, “gender ideology” or (anti-)abortion. This is almost completely absent in Western Europe. It should be noted, however, that parties such as Vox in Spain and Chega in Portugal have similar ultra-conservative positions on moral issues to Latin American conservatives, although explicit religious arguments are not often used to justify these positions—but individual statements such as the quote from Chega’s André Ventura (“I am very religious and I believe that what happened to me and also to Chega, considering the history of Portugal [...] was a miracle [...] it was a sign from God”) reflect a religious self-representation similar to that of Latin American conservatives. It could be argued that in the case of Chega and Vox, pressure from ultra-religious groups (though not only evangelicals) could have a similar effect as in Latin America: an ultra-conservative program in line with the positions of religious pressure groups. The emergence of the PRRP in Southwest Europe could therefore be interpreted as a “Central Americanization” of radical right discourses (at least in terms of content).

Interestingly, religion is also used to support left-wing ideas such as social justice, but this is only rarely done among the Latin American left. Another specific Latin American pattern is the combination of religion and populist discourse. Competitors are sometimes described as corrupt and immoral because of their lack of religious faith. While PRRP in Western Europe also use a strong anti-elitist and populist discourse, it is clearly secular and does not accuse the establishment of lacking religious principles (but prioritizing “non-native” Islam instead of the native “Christian” population).

While I have summarized the different functions of religious discourses, there are also considerable differences in the salience of religious discourses between Latin America and Western Europe. Unfortunately, a comparison based on the available data is somewhat difficult. Although we analyzed Facebook posts in both Western

Europe and Latin America, the time periods are slightly different. In Latin America, we analyzed a five-month period, while in Western Europe we analyzed only 8 weeks before national elections. Nevertheless, because the scores are based on the share of religious references in the total number of posts per period and not on absolute numbers, the relative data shown in Figure 7 (by region) and Figure 8 (by ideological group) still give a good estimate of the frequency of religious discourse.

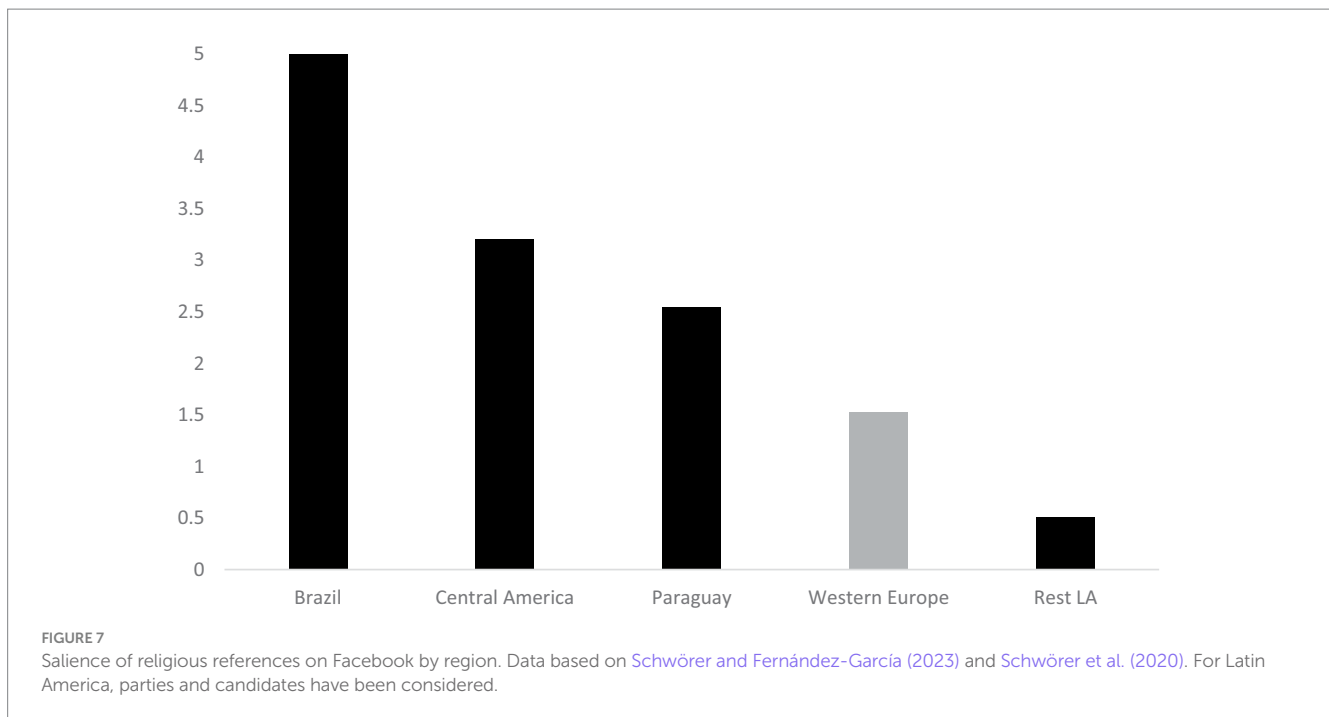
Compared to the different Latin American regions, parties in Western Europe talk about religion much less on Facebook. However, in much of South America, religion is used even less in election campaigns than in Western Europe, while in Central America, Paraguay, and especially Brazil, religious references are an integral part of online political campaigns. However, comparing conservative actors from Latin America with PRRP in Western Europe, the picture is very different.

On average, Western European PRRP use religious references much more often than conservative actors in Latin America, which at first glance seems rather surprising (Figure 8A). However, if we compare only the positive references to the religious in-group (Christianity or God), we see that Latin American conservatives use these discourses much more frequently (Figure 8B). This is due to the fact that most of the religious references among PRRP are exclusionary references to Islam, without explicit religious messages or values, while Latin American parties and candidates do not construct religious out-groups, but conduct genuine religious discourses praising God and Christianity. It is therefore extremely important to delve into the concrete content of religious references, as I have done above, in order to avoid drawing false conclusions based on purely quantitative numbers.

Discussion and conclusion

Religion plays a very different role for political actors in Latin America than it does in Western Europe. At the same time, religious references are much more important for political actors in Latin America than in Europe. While this is not surprising, it is important to note that Latin America is not a monolithic block, but at least four subregions can be identified that are characterized by a different salience of religious discourse. In Central America, Brazil, and Paraguay, religion is ubiquitous in political discourse. These regions are characterized by a large evangelical population and/or a highly religious electorate. In the rest of Latin America, where societies are less religious and political actors are less conservative, religion plays little role in political campaigns.

The latter also applies to Western Europe, with one exception: The rejection of religious out-groups (Islam) is a very prominent discourse, especially among populist radical right parties. However, if we look at other religious references in Western Europe, we mostly find occasional discourses about Christian identity and national and European traditions (threatened by Islam) that are far from salient. The findings suggest that PRRP in Western Europe do not actually share religious origins and beliefs, but use religious elements in a purely nativist sense (Brubaker, 2017; Minkenberg, 2018). This may also be due to the lack of powerful religious interest groups in most of Western Europe. Ultra-religious communities, such as evangelicals in Central America and Brazil, do not have the potential to mobilize



significant numbers of voters in Western Europe. The religious market in Western Europe is less competitive than in Latin America and therefore does not contribute to religious mobilization through offensive advertising by relevant religious providers (Iannaccone, 1991; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994).

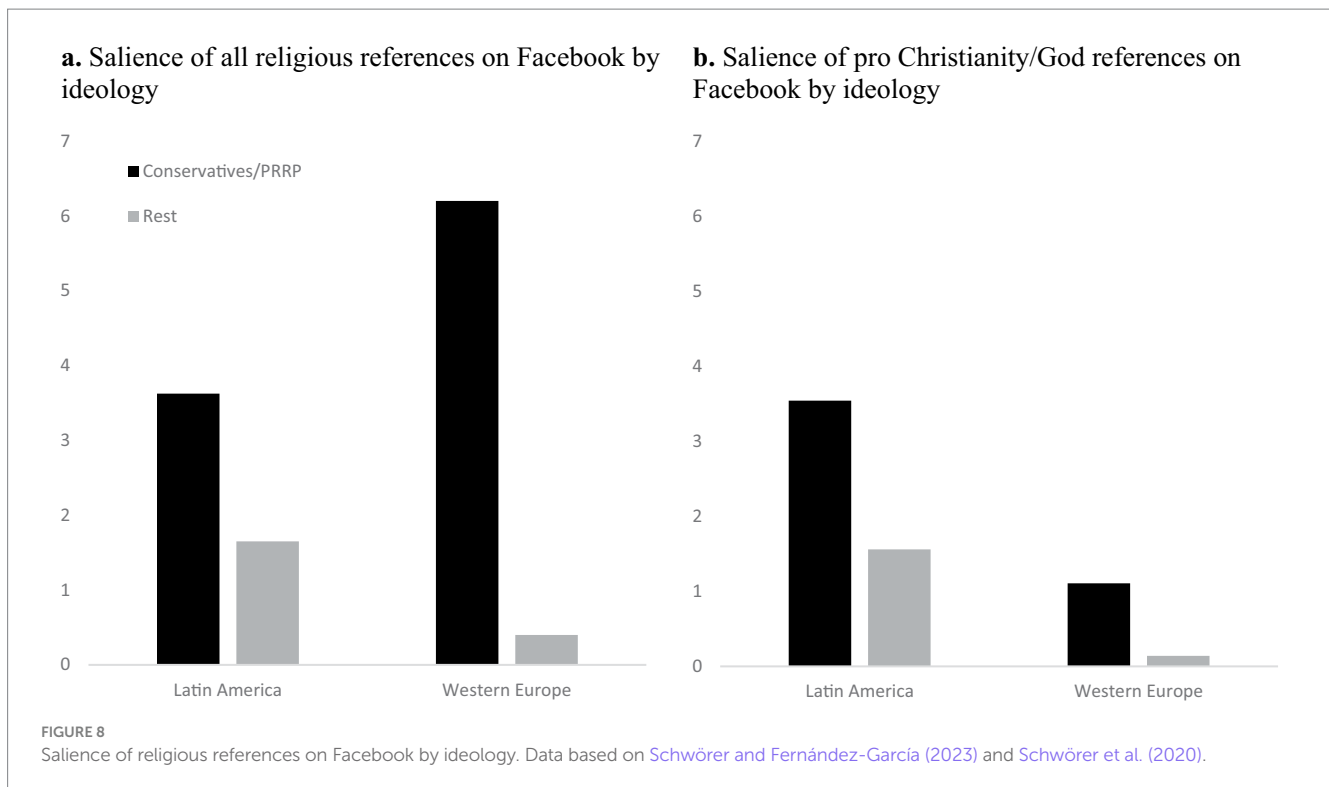
An exception of sorts, however, are PRRP in Southern Europe, especially in Spain and Portugal, where these parties strongly emphasize ultra-conservative values regarding LGBTQI rights, abortion, and gender mainstreaming. Because of its focus on traditional authoritarian values, Vox in particular is closely linked to ultra-religious groups and relies on the support of particularly religious voters. In contrast to many other Western European countries, religion still plays a role in voting in Spain, and while Christian Democratic parties struggle with moral issues (Engeli et al., 2012a), the radical right becomes the main advocate of traditional morality.

The discourses of radical right politicians at least occasionally point to a sacralization of politics—as evidenced, for example, by Chega’s reference to God and the religious self-representation of its leader—but still to a very different extent than in many Latin American countries. Thus, although Chega and Vox stand out for their ultra-conservative agendas, links to religious groups and occasional references to God or Christianity, religious self-representation is not a particularly prominent discourse, nor do these parties regularly justify their political positions with genuine religious principles, as we observe in Latin America. Nevertheless, some of the discourses of these parties are striking and similar to those of conservative actors in Central America and could therefore be interpreted as a new “Central Americanisation” of radical right discourse in Southern Europe.⁵

⁵ This does not mean that PRRP deliberately adopted these discourses from Central American political actors, but rather that the discursive content is similar.

The content and function of religious discourses are very different in Latin America and Western Europe. As mentioned above, apart from the rejection of religious out-groups and the occasional construction of religious in-groups, we did not find dominant religious references in Western Europe [nor did we in our longitudinal study of election manifestos, Schwörer and Fernández-García (2020)]—again with the small exception of Vox and Chega. In Central America, Brazil and Paraguay, support for Christian values and principles and an emphasis on one’s own closeness to God and religious beliefs are very present, especially among conservative parties and candidates. Alleged religious values are also used to justify political positions, especially conservative ones against abortion, gender equality and LGBTQI rights—something almost unthinkable for Western Christian Democratic parties practicing “unsecular” discourses avoiding explicit religious content (Engeli et al., 2012a; Engeli et al., 2012b; Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010). In contrast to Western Europe, religious principles are also sometimes used to make populist accusations against competitors, who are portrayed as corrupt due to a lack of religious principles.

The results can be interpreted in such a way that politicians in democracies respond to some extent to the religious convictions of the electorate, but also to the strengths of powerful interest groups. In particular, evangelical denominations are highly engaged in politics, have a huge impact on electoral outcomes by supporting or rejecting certain candidates (Bermúdez, 2018; Calderón Castillo, 2017; Lemaitre, 2017; Parker, 2016; Pérez Guadalupe, 2019) and may also pressure the Catholic Church (and others) to become more engaged in religious advertisement. Therefore, a stronger “sacralization of politics” (Domke and Coe, 2008; Siles et al., 2021) than a politicization of religion can be observed in Latin America. Politicians consciously and calculatedly use faith for electoral purposes, an assumption shared by spatial theory, which views parties primarily as vote- and office-seekers responding to public



opinion and interest groups (Downs, 1957; León Ganatios, 2013; Meguid, 2005).

In Western Europe, individual secularization trends make it difficult for traditional Christian Democratic parties to maintain religious discourses but force them to use an alternative communication strategy without explicit religious references (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010; Van Kersbergen, 2008). To some extent this is also true for the radical right, that uses religious references mainly in a nativist in- and outgroup framing hardly referring to genuine Christian values and principles. However, future research could focus on whether candidates' religious discourses in Latin America also correspond to a genuine religious conviction and not only to tactical considerations, for example using data from elite surveys (Zúñiga Ramírez, 2018).

Author's note

Jakob Schwörer is a researcher and policy advisor at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Stockholm, working on party politics, migration, the mainstreaming of radical right discourse and security policy in Western Europe and beyond. He has been a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Political Science at Leuphana University Lüneburg and a visiting scholar at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at Oslo University and at the Department of Government at Uppsala University. He was a visiting scholar at the University of San Francisco in Quito and is a research fellow at the Cologne Forum for International Relations and Security Policy (KFIBS).

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: own data collected for previous research and re-analyzed. Available on request. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to jakob.schworer@leuphana.de.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

JS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1470264/full#supplementary-material>

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