

Culture Wars in Latin America: Religion and Attitudes toward Homosexuality and Abortion in Four Countries

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ABSTRACT

The effects of religious affiliation and attendance on attitudes toward abortion and homosexuality in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay are examined. In general, Protestant affiliation is a stronger predictor of conservative attitudes on these issues than is Roman Catholicism. This finding provides support for market models of religious socialization, in which religious values are more easily transmitted to denominational adherents in religiously pluralistic environments.

INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the 21st century, issues involving the politics of sexual orientation and morality have continued to occupy center stage in the politics of the United States, and in other nations throughout the world. Among the most prominent regions in which such changes are taking place is Latin America (Corrales and Pecheny 2010). The recent election of Francis I as the first Pope from this largely Roman Catholic area has drawn attention to trends in Latin American religious politics which have been taking place for decades.

Two of the most prominent shifts in Latin America are the decline of a formerly hegemonic Catholicism, and increasingly progressive opinions and policies in the area of “morality politics,” including such lifestyle issues as abortion and LGBT rights (including same-sex marriage). Largely as the result of missionary activity from North America (including the United States), citizens of Latin American countries, while still predominately Roman Catholic, are increasingly likely to identify with Protestant (usually Evangelical) denominations, or as religious non-affiliates (Gustafson, 2014; Allen, 2006, Kearney, 2006; Freston, 2008; Gomez, 2014). The rapid growth in Evangelical denominations has been particularly striking in Brazil, where the proportion of Brazilians identifying as

Evangelical increased from 9 to 20 percent between 1991 and 2009 (Neri, 2011: 8).¹ Similarly, a Pew survey in Guatemala found that 34 percent of respondents identified as Evangelical in 2006 (as cited in Smith and Campos, 2012: 204). Although the shift from monopolistic Catholicism to religious pluralism has not been consistent across the countries south of the Rio Grande, it remains the case that Latin American mass publics are not uniformly Catholic, as was often the case in the past.

Further, there has been a general trend toward liberalization of policies toward abortion and same-sex orientation.² Changes in attitudes and policies toward same-sex relations in Latin America have been rapid and relatively consistent throughout the region (Gomez and Gelles, 2014). By contrast, there has been substantial variation in national and subnational policies toward abortion. While some Latin

¹Neri’s (2011) analysis draws on data from the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), as analyzed in studies by the Fundação Getúlio Vargas.

²In this paper, we use the terms “homosexuality” and “same-sex orientation” in an equivalent manner. We acknowledge that the literature on gender and sexuality studies offers a more varied and nuanced conceptualization of identities. Because the World Value Survey employs the term “homosexuality” in its item, we follow the convention and use the WVS term when discussing the results.

American countries (such as Uruguay and Mexico) have made access to legal abortion easier, others (such as El Salvador, Chile) have retained or enhanced policies highly restrictive of reproductive freedom (Jelen and Bradley, 2014; Tuman, Roth-Johnson and Jelen, 2013).³

The general question posed by this study is whether, and to what extent, these Latin American trends are related at the level of mass opinion. More specifically, how does religious affiliation and behavior affect Latin American attitudes toward abortion and same-sex orientation?

To oversimplify for the sake of clarity, it is possible to discern two general models of religious socialization. One such approach might be termed the “sacred canopy” model (Berger, 1967) in which shared religious values limit the range of socially and politically acceptable opinions, and impose corresponding limitations on the range of politically plausible public policies. This idea, of course, is not a new one, and can be traced at least as far back as Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1945). Conversely, a hegemonic religion can result in what has been termed a “lazy monopoly” (Stark and Finke, 2000), in which consensual religious affiliations are limited in their effects on other aspects of public life.

Second, a large and growing literature has emphasized the effects of religious pluralism on religious belief, adherence, and practice. The “market model” of religion suggests that competition among religious organizations and

traditions leads to great efforts to recruit and retain laity, with a corresponding increase in religiosity.⁴ Further, some research has suggested that religious pluralism increases the effectiveness of religious socialization (primarily among Roman Catholics) in such diverse settings as American states (Cook, et. al, 1993); nations of Western Europe (Jelen and Wilcox, 1998; Jelen, O’Donnell, and Wilcox, 1998), and German *Länder* (Jelen and Wilcox, 1998). Further, analyses of religious politics in Latin America (Trejo, 2012, Trejo and Neto, 2015) have suggested that religious competition from evangelical Protestants has affected the behavior of Catholic leaders in Mexico and Brazil.

Thus, this study provide as test of the relative plausibility of the canopy and market models of religious socialization. If the canopy model is substantially correct, it might be anticipated that the effects of religious affiliation and behavior on attitudes toward issues involving questions of personal morality would be strongest among adherents of the majority Catholic tradition in Latin America, and that these effects would be strongest in nations with the largest Catholic majorities. Conversely, the market model yields a prediction that the effects of religious variables on social issue attitudes would be strongest among religious minorities, and in settings characterized by relatively high levels of religious diversity.

DATA AND METHOD

Data for this study are drawn from the World Values Surveys for Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Uruguay for 1999-2007 (Waves 4 and 5). We pool the surveys from Waves 4 and 5 for each country. The dependent variables are separate measures of attitudes toward abortion and homosexuality, in which respondents are asked to locate themselves on 10 point scales on which the endpoints are whether abortion or homosexuality are “never justified” (1) or “always justified” (10). Since the dependent variables have 10 possible values, with no obvious cutting points, the estimation method is ordinary least squares regression (OLS).⁵

⁴The literature on market models of religion is voluminous. For early statements of the approach (based on economic models of religious competition) see Iannaccone, 1991; and Stark and Finke, (2000). For an overview of this literature, see Jelen, (2002).

⁵However, the results are robust to alternative estimation procedures, including ordered logistic

³In other cases, abortion remains restricted, although courts or legislatures have added legal exceptions to criminal prosecution for abortion. Although Chilean law currently prohibits all abortion, in January 2015, President Michelle Bachelet introduced legislation that would allow for abortions in the cases of rape, risk to the birth mother, or evidence that the fetus would not survive. The Chamber of Deputies approved the changes. Despite repeated efforts by President Michelle Bachelet, the Chilean Senate has rejected the modifications (BBC 2016). In Argentina, a 2012 Supreme Court decision interpreted Article 86 of the Penal Code to add rape or incest to the conditions permitting abortion, regardless of the mental or developmental condition of the woman (previously, Article 86 had been interpreted as applying only to rape of developmentally disabled women; the other exception is for the health of the birth mother) (see Venture 2012). Similar exceptions (rape, health of the birth mother) are permitted in Brazil.

The main independent variables are dummy variables for affiliation as Roman Catholic or Protestant.⁶ A dummy variable measuring frequency of attendance at religious services is coded 1 if the respondent reports attending church once a week or oftener, and 0 if the respondent attends church less frequently. Control variables include respondent age, gender, education, and urbanization.

Separate analyses are performed for each country, and a combined multivariate models is estimated for all four countries, in which dummy variables for each country (excluding the baseline of Argentina) are included.

FINDINGS

Some preliminary results of the analyses of the WVS are presented in Table 1, which simply presents mean values for the main variables of interest. As expected, all four countries have large Catholic majorities, with three quarters of respondents in Argentina, Mexico, and Uruguay reporting a Catholic affiliation, while about 69% of Brazilian respondents are Roman Catholic. Except for Brazil, in which about a fifth of respondents are Protestant, fewer than ten per cent of respondents are Protestant.

It is perhaps of interest to note that, contrary to trends in Europe and the United States, relatively few Latin Americans report religious non-affiliation. The percentage of respondents, who are affiliated with Catholicism, or with a Protestant denomination, ranges from 79.1% in Argentina to 91.5% in Brazil. Thus, in the four countries considered here, large majorities are self-identified adherents of a Christian tradition. However, church attendance does vary among these nations. About a quarter of respondents in Argentina and Uruguay report weekly church attendance, while the figure approaches half in Brazil and Mexico.

regression. We retain OLS here for ease of interpretation.

⁶ Unfortunately, the WVS data do not permit finer distinctions among Protestants. However, other evidence (Trejo, 2012; Gomez, 2014; Trejo and Neto, 2015) suggests that a large proportion of Latin American Protestants would qualify as evangelicals.

Table1.

Mean Values of Variables, by Country				
	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico	Uruguay
Catholic	.761	.689	.731	.751
Protestant ⁷	.030	.226	.070	.069
Church Attendance	.223	.489	.495	.267
Justifiable Abortion	2.98	2.42	3.05	4.49
Justifiable Homosexuality	4.97	4.28	4.31	5.66

Source: Computed by authors from World Values Surveys, 1999-2007.

The data in Table 1 also show that approval of both abortion and homosexuality in all countries is relatively low, with the mean approval below 5 (on a 10 point scale) for both issues in all countries, except for homosexuality in Uruguay, where the mean level of justifiability is .566. In all four countries, approval of abortion is lower than approval of homosexuality. Brazil is consistently the most disapproving country, and Uruguay the most approving. Mexican respondents are slightly more approving of abortion than Argentines, while the reverse is the case with respect to homosexuality.

Table 2 contains multivariate models of the sources of abortion attitudes for each country. As these data show, the coefficient for Roman Catholic affiliation is significant only for the most restrictive countries (Argentina and Brazil), but the coefficient for Protestant affiliation is significantly and negatively related to a belief in the justifiability of abortion in all countries except Uruguay. The effects of church attendance are strong, significant, and negative in Argentina and Uruguay, and are marginally significant in Brazil.⁸

⁷ Protestants include "Protestant," "Evangelical," Jehovah's Witnesses, 7th Day Adventists.

⁸ Prior research using Wave 5 of the World Value Survey (WVS, 2005) found that frequency church attendance was significant and negatively associated with approval of abortion in Mexico (Tuman, Roth-Johnson and Jelen, 2013). The insignificant coefficient for church attendance in Mexico reported in Table 2 may reflect the influence of observations across two waves (i.e., Waves 4 and 5, from 1999 and 2005, respectively) of the WVS in this study.

Alternatively, the model in this study contains measures of denominational affiliation, which may

Table2.

Multivariate Models of Attitudes Toward Abortion by Country (OLS)				
	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico	Uruguay
Catholic	-.568*	-.348*	-0.219	-0.338
Protestant	-2.844*	-.721**	-.704*	0.377
Church attendance	-1.398***	225@	0.089	-1.435**
Sex	0.134	-0.053	-0.109	0.428
Age	-.018**	-0.066	.010*	-0.006
Urbanization	.122**	0.071	.089***	-0.07
Education	.156**	.164***	.134**	.314***
Constant	3.262***	2.601**	2.859***	3.822***
Adjusted R ²	0.089	0.043	0.038	0.064
N	919	1466	2256	443

Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients.

@significant at .10

*significant at .05

**significant at .01

***significant at .001

Source: Computed by authors from World Values Surveys, 1999-2007.

When attention is turned to the correlates of attitudes toward homosexuality, a distinctive picture emerges. Table 3 shows that the coefficient for Catholic affiliation are significant and in the expected (negative) direction in Brazil and Uruguay, but are slightly weaker than the effects of Protestantism in Uruguay, and substantially weaker in Brazil and Mexico. Among religious variables, only the effects of church attendance attain statistical significance in Argentina.

Table3.

Multivariate Models of Attitudes Toward Homosexuality by Country (OLS)				
	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico	Uruguay
Catholic	-.132	-.500*	.074	-1.053**
Protestant	.066	-1.389***	-1.166**	-1.639**
Church attendance	-1.367**	-.370*	-.368***	-.768*
Sex	.791***	.734***	.428**	.087
Age	-.035***	-.008@	-.028***	-.033***
Urbanization	.134***	.075	.155***	.154**
Education	.404**	.236***	.156***	.264***
Constant	3.800***	3.900***	3.499***	6.701**
Adjusted R ²	.163	.079	.091	.157
N	848	1432	2179	443

affect the magnitude of the direct effects of religious observance.

Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients.

@significant at .10

*significant at .05

**significant at .01

***significant at .001

Source: Computed by authors from World Values Surveys, 1999-2007.

Perhaps interestingly, the effects of demographic variables are larger across all four countries with respect to attitudes toward homosexuality, relative to corresponding attitudes about abortion. Women are consistently more approving of homosexuality than men in all countries except Uruguay, and urban residents are more accepting of homosexuality in every country except Mexico. As was the case with abortion, higher levels of education are associated with more permissive attitudes toward homosexuality,⁹ and younger respondents are consistently and significantly more likely to regard homosexuality as justifiable than their elders (although the effect of age is marginally significant in Brazil).

These patterns are made even clearer in Table 4, which contains the results of combined multivariate models for all four countries. Catholic affiliation is significantly related to opposition to abortion, but not homosexuality, although the effects of Catholicism on attitudes toward both issues are much weaker than those associated with Protestant affiliation (an interesting finding, given the imprecision with which Protestantism is measured). Church attendance is significantly related to conservative positions on both issues,¹⁰ and demographic variables have the expected relationships with positions on both issues, except for the effects of gender on attitudes toward abortion (Jelen, 2015).

⁹The results for education in Mexico are consistent with prior research. Tuman, Roth-Johnson and Jelen (2013) found that in comparison to individuals with higher education (the reference), respondents with less education exhibited negative and significant views of abortion.

¹⁰ The results presented in all multivariate models are substantially unaffected by the inclusion of interaction terms between religious affiliation and church attendance.

Table 4.

Multivariate Models of Attitudes Toward Abortion and Homosexuality, with Country Dummies.		
	<i>Abortion</i>	<i>Homosexuality</i>
Catholic	-.254*	-.098
Protestant	-.554***	-1.132***
Church attendance	-.403***	-.506***
Sex	-.015	.572***
Age	-.011**	-.025***
Urbanization	.065***	.121***
Education	.158***	.230***
Brazil	-.646***	-.826***
Mexico	-.148	-1.085***
Uruguay	1.265***	.635**
Constant	3.072***	4.288***
Adjusted R ²	.073	.124
N	5087	4895

Entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Argentina is comparison category.

@significant at .10

*significant at .05

**significant at .01

***significant at .001

Source: Computed by authors from World Values Surveys, 1999-2007.

It is also noteworthy that there remain significant country effects, even when the effects of individual level religious and demographic variables are taken into account. When compared to Argentina (closest to the media on both dependent variables), Brazilians are consistently more conservative than other Latin American respondents, and respondents for Uruguay consistently exhibit the most permissive respondents. Mexicans are distinctive (and substantially more conservative) on homosexuality, but not abortion. These findings suggest that there exist substantial sources of variation that may be unique to each country. Such sources might include the activities of interest groups and political parties, and the persistence of such country effects suggests the necessity of more qualitative, contextually based studies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study, while scarcely definitive, provide qualified support for the market model of religious socialization. Protestants, who constitute minorities in all four countries considered here, are consistently less

approving of abortion or homosexuality than their Catholic counterparts. This finding, which is consistent with previous research, suggests that religious socialization is most effective in religiously competitive contexts, and is perhaps most effective among religious minorities (Trejo 2012). Religion appears to be a more effective source of political learning when adherents of particular religious traditions are made aware of the distinctive nature of their attachments.

Further evidence supporting the market model is provided by the case of Brazil, in which the effects of Catholicism on social issue attitudes are consistently significant and in the more “traditionalist” direction. As noted in Table 1, Brazil is the most religiously pluralistic of the four countries considered here, and, as such, might be expected to respond to the competition provided by (usually evangelical) Protestant alternatives.

Future research in this area might usefully focus on institutional actors, such as political parties or interest groups, and examine the effects of non-electoral institutions (such as courts) on public opinion and public policy in these areas. It would also be instructive to examine the effects of religious competition at the subnational level, which would seem an especially promising strategy in federal systems such as Mexico and Brazil. Moreover, the Brazilian results suggest that the response of national Catholic churches to religious competition might well be a fruitful avenue of investigation.

Of course, any investigation into religious politics in Latin America must take into account the possible influence of Pope Francis I. As Francis’ papacy unfolds, it is possible that his message of inclusion might be particularly powerful in his home region of Latin America, and may have distinct effects on the attitudes of Latin American (and, perhaps, particularly, Argentine) Catholics.

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