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FAITH AND THE BALLOT: THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF EVANGELICALISM IN BRAZIL

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Author

Altafini, Leonardo

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FAITH AND THE BALLOT: THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF EVANGELICALISM IN
BRAZIL

By

Leonardo Sene Guandalini Altafini

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APPROVED

Dr. Miguel Carreras

Department of Political Science

Dr. Begoña Echeverria, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether evangelical voters in Brazil have become increasingly politically cohesive over time and what factors may explain this transformation. Using survey data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer from 2006 to 2023, I examine patterns of voter choice, ideological self-placement, and religiosity among evangelicals relative to other groups across six presidential elections in Brazil. The findings show that while evangelical voting patterns between 2002 and 2014 were not markedly different from other groups, the elections of 2018 and 2022 reveal a more cohesive and right-leaning evangelical voting bloc alignment. Evangelical identification becomes a strong and statistically significant predictor of both support for conservative candidates on the ballot and right-wing ideological self-placement. Additional analysis on church attendance shows that the shift cannot be explained by increased religiosity, as evangelicals have consistently attended religious services at a higher frequency than other religious groups, but not increasingly so over time. Drawing on existing literature, the paper argues that this transformation is better explained by changes in how evangelicalism is organized and communicated politically. Coordinated church networks, moralized political messaging, and the increasing role of digital platforms such as WhatsApp have increased the frequency of exposure to politically salient content and facilitated the dispersion of targeted political narratives especially pertinent to evangelical communities and aligned with the political right. Taken together, the findings suggest that evangelical political cohesion in Brazil is the product of the interaction between institutional organization, strategic messaging, and modern communication technologies.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

Nilza Alves de Carvalho was my grandmother's live-in maid for almost 40 years. I have known her my entire life, and for the 12 years I lived in Brazil, she was like a second mother to me. Ever since I can remember she has been a follower of Edir Macedo's Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, or the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG). I remember that in her spare time she would often listen to radio sermons or watch them on YouTube when that became more common. She was a stout supporter of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, she loved everything about him: his policies, his speeches, his beard, his lack of a pinky finger on his left hand, any criticism towards him was not welcome around her. I moved out of the country in 2016 and returned to visit for the first time at the end of 2018, right when Bolsonaro was elected president. To my surprise, Nilza had become a bonafide Bolsonaro supporter. She loved his conservative standpoints, repudiated every one of Lula's policy initiatives such as Bolsa Família, and called Lula a liar, a thief, and a charlatan. She revered Bolsonaro, and celebrated the fact that Lula was in prison. Even now that Lula is back in the presidency and Bolsonaro is in prison, she has not wavered her support for the Bolsonaro family.

That shift was intriguing to me, as Nilza fit the demographics of somebody that would vote for leftist candidates, especially those in the Partido dos Trabalhadores. (PT, or Workers Party) She had not completed high school and was part of the lower class, traits that have been reliable predictors of somebody that would vote for the PT. (Molina 2022) Through Bolsonaro's first and second candidacies, it seems that more and more evangelical and Pentecostal Christians became vocal about politics, especially around topics related to family traditionalism, homosexuality, and abortion. Seeing this newfound cohesion and political realignment from some individuals led me to a few different questions: To what extent have evangelicals

consolidated into a cohesive voting bloc for conservative politicians? What accounts for said transformation?

In order to answer these questions, this paper explores whether evangelical voters in Brazil have become increasingly politically cohesive over the last two decades, particularly around conservative candidates and right-leaning ideological identification. Existing literature suggests that religion can influence political behavior through a variety of social, institutional, and political dynamics, especially during periods of greater polarization. Based on a set of theoretical expectations, I test the following hypotheses:

H1: Evangelical voters in Brazil have become increasingly cohesive in their support for conservative candidates over time, particularly after 2014, relative to other religious groups.

H2: Evangelicals in Brazil have become increasingly likely to identify with the political right over time both relative to other religious groups and within the evangelical group.

To evaluate hypothesis 1, I examine patterns of vote choice across religious groups—evangelicals, Catholics, other minority religious groups, and religiously unaffiliated voters—across six presidential elections between 2002 and 2022. The primary outcome of interest is the degree of within-group cohesion, defined as the proportion of each religious group supporting a candidate in a given election. Higher values may indicate greater internal agreement and more bloc-like voting behavior. I expect to observe a higher proportion of evangelicals supporting conservative candidates, particularly Jair Bolsonaro in 2018 and 2022, relative to other religious groups. I draw on data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys conducted from 2006 to 2023 to assess changes in voting cohesion across elections. Support for H1 would be indicated by a marked increase in evangelical alignment with right-leaning candidates after 2014, particularly relative to earlier elections and to other religious groups.

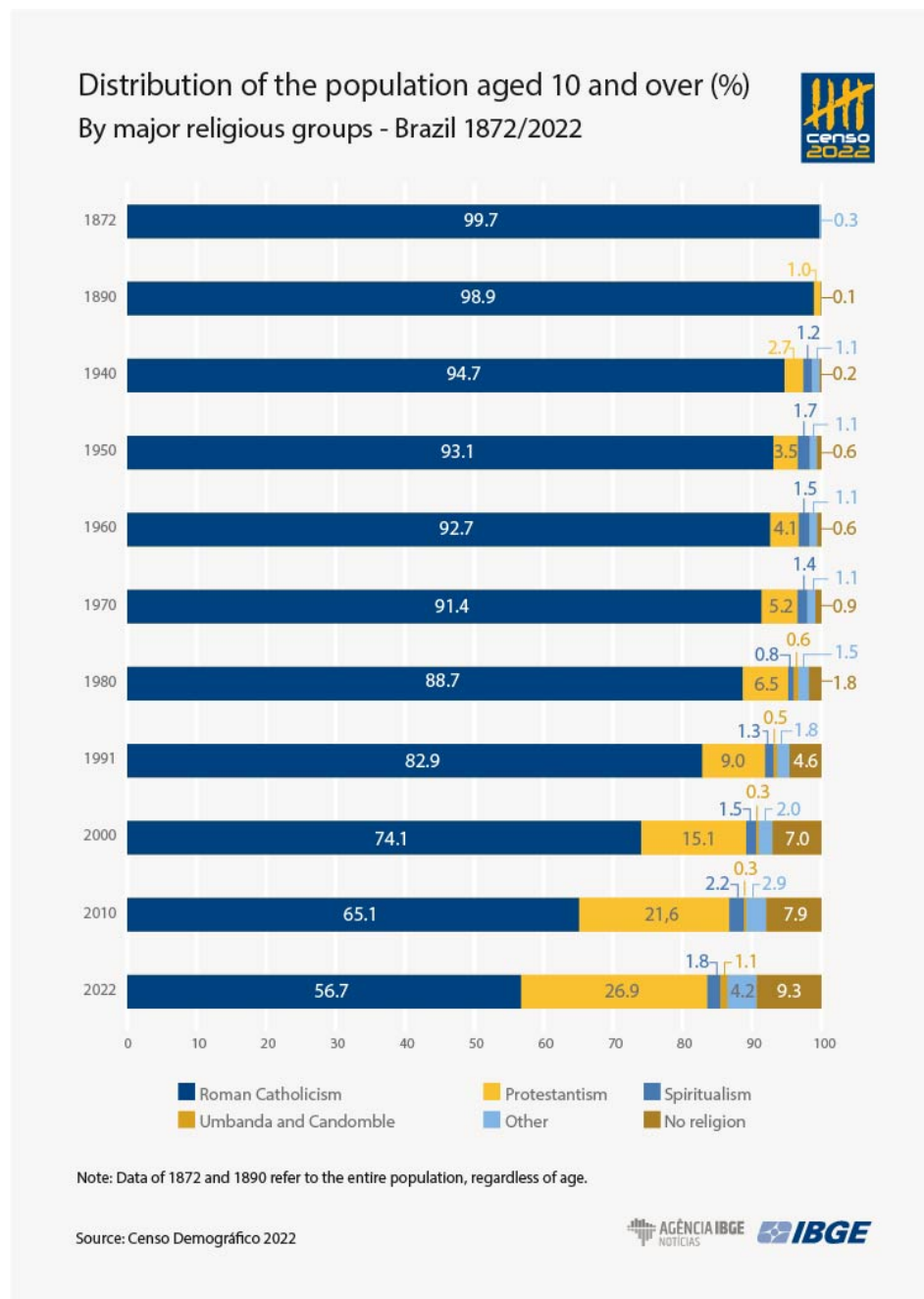
For hypothesis 2, I will also draw on data from the respective years' AmericaBarometer surveys to indicate whether evangelical respondents have been identifying as conservative in significantly higher proportions after the 2014 elections. Support for H2 would be shown through an increase in the proportion of evangelicals who consider themselves to be conservative, accompanied by a statistically significant higher likelihood of an evangelical identifying as a conservative than other religious groups.

PART II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The Growth of Evangelicalism:

Evangelical Christian denominations have grown in following and influence all throughout Latin America over the last half-century. Specifically in Brazil, there has been a drastic reduction in the proportion of the Catholic population and a respective increase in the proportion of protestants, evangelicals, pentecostals, and religiously unaffiliated population since the 1960s.

Figure 1.1: Distribution of the Population Aged 10 and Over by Religion, Brazil (1872–2022). (Loschi 2025)



Though the majority of people in all age groups still identify as Catholic according to the 2022 Brazilian census, the largest proportion of evangelicals are found in the youth (ages 10-14) whereas the lowest proportion is found amongst people who are older than 80 (Loschi 2025).

This shift has also changed the landscape of Brazilian electoral life accordingly, as the share of politicians who identify themselves as evangelical has risen within the Federal Chamber of Deputies, the Senate, and within state legislatures. (Smith 2019)

This evangelical growth in recent decades is explored by Diego Viana, a columnist at *Revista FABESP*, explaining the findings of Brazilian political researcher Victor Araujo. Viana reports, “Araújo sees the religious transition as ‘one of the most important demographic phenomena in modern Brazil.’ The process gained pace mainly from the 1960s, with the urbanization and industrialization of the country. ‘When people migrated to the new city limits, there were not yet Catholic parishes in place. The evangelicals were first to arrive in these locations because they could open their places of worship without having to apply to the Vatican, as the Catholics were obligated to do...’” (Viana 2023) The rapid economic growth of Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s created favorable conditions for evangelical expansion, particularly among Pentecostal denominations with more flexible organizational structures. With an increased influx of people moving and being born in densely populated areas, evangelicals were able to influence much of the population, and especially the youth. As identified by Loschi (2025) in her analysis of the Brazilian census of 2022, over 30 percent of evangelicals fall within the youngest reported age group (10–14). As this cohort reaches voting age, it may further shape the political influence of evangelical communities.

As we approach the presidential elections of 2026 in Brazil, Flávio Bolsonaro, gathering momentum from a now convicted and ineligible Jair Bolsonaro, faces off against Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva running for his 4th term as the incumbent. (Maffi and Ribeiro 2026) Brazilian national television is flooded with advertisements, live coverage of rallies for both of the top-runners, and political debates all over YouTube, Instagram, and X. A plurality of online

messages that rally behind the Bolsonaro family, carry religious undertones. The evangelical faithful in these platforms seem to be the most vocal supporters of Jair and Flávio Bolsonaro. Prominent clergy members like Bishop Edir Macedo, founder and leader of the UCKG, and Silas Malafaia, leader of the Assembleia de Deus Vitoria em Cristo (Assembly of God Victory Through Christ, AG) have pledged strong support for the Bolsonaro family and Flávio for recent elections. (Amado and Cappelli 2022) Both leaders coordinate massive congregations of people in the pentecostal faith community to vote in ways that align with their faith. This is not the first time in Brazilian electoral history where religious leaders endorse a certain candidate.

The growing political involvement of evangelical clergy is not incidental, but rooted in both institutional and ideological incentives. As Smith (2019) argues, clergy operate within a highly competitive religious marketplace, where attracting “souls” and financial contributions is essential for institutional survival. In this context, political engagement becomes a strategic tool for mobilizing followers, strengthening in-group identity, and maintaining influence. Evangelical leaders often act as intermediaries between politicians and voters, coordinating support within congregations and reinforcing political messaging. These endorsements are further driven by alignment on salient moral issues—such as abortion, sexuality, family values, and the role of religion in public life—which are emphasized more strongly in evangelical settings. Based on fieldwork in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, Smith finds that such issues are raised more frequently in evangelical services than in other Christian congregations. Clerical mobilization is also shaped by perceptions of political threat. The leftward shift of Brazilian politics in the 2010s, particularly under the Workers’ Party (PT), appears to have heightened concern among evangelical communities, encouraging greater political engagement. Additionally, evangelical leaders who had previously supported Dilma Rousseff and the PT may have reconsidered their

alliances following the impeachment, further contributing to a realignment toward conservative candidates.

Though evangelism is associated with conservative, right-wing politics today, evangelicals haven't always voted in such a unified, right-leaning manner. In fact, through 2002 to 2014, many prominent pastors and religious leaders supported the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) (Workers Party) through Lula's first and second terms, as well as Dilma's two terms. The evangelicals, however, were not exclusively committed to supporting the PT, as the vote was split in these respective elections between the front-running PT candidates and a few others such as Marina Silva, who drew a large share of the evangelical vote. Silas Malafaia supported Lula during his first two terms. The support then shifted as Dilma Rousseff was up for election, presumably because of her rhetoric supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage and abortion rights. Edir Macedo, a stout Bolsonaro family supporter today, supported the left-wing PT from 2002-2014, even standing as an outlier within the UCKG supporting the legalization of abortion and using the bible as justification. (Smith 2019)

Following the impeachment and removal of Dilma Rousseff from the presidency in the middle of 2016 and the commencement of Operation Carwash—the largest corruption investigation in the history of Brazil—the PT lost the presidency after 14 years of control. After Michel Temer's 3-year tenure and Lula's imprisonment before he could become a candidate, the 2018 elections would bring two front runners, Jair Bolsonaro, considered by many a right-wing extremist, and Fernando Haddad another candidate from the now weakened PT. The interesting pattern from this election, as explored later in this paper, was the overwhelming strength with which evangelicals supported Bolsonaro even when a familiar candidate, Marina Silva, was also running for president.

Religious Transformation in Brazil:

For analytical clarity, this paper adopts the definition used by Taylor C. Boas in “The Electoral Representation of Evangelicals in Latin America,” which defines evangelicals as “Protestant Christians of any sort, regardless of denomination.” (Boas 2020) This broad categorization encompasses traditional Protestants as well as Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal congregations. While theological differences exist across these groups, they share sufficient institutional and behavioral similarities—particularly in patterns of church attendance, clerical authority, and political engagement—to justify treating them as a single analytical category when examining electoral cohesion. This definition therefore includes Pentecostal denominations—making up the majority of evangelicals in Brazil—whose worship practices emphasize the active presence of the Holy Spirit, often expressed through charismatic forms such as speaking in tongues and emotionally demonstrative services. Pentecostal congregations by design tend to exhibit high levels of participation and strong clerical influence. (Boas 2020) These characteristics are embedded into the foundation of Pentecostal movements who became pioneers of fervent political participation among evangelicals.

Brazil was an almost entirely Catholic country until the second half of the 20th century. Upon the ratification of the constitution of 1891 marking the end of Brazilian monarchy, Brazilian lawmakers secularized the state, officially ending the link between the Catholic Church and the Brazilian government, and further establishing freedom of religion, allowing for the formation of new evangelical congregations. Upon the re-establishment of democracy in 1985 after the fall of the military dictatorship, Catholics and evangelicals were able to partake in a system that fostered free and fair competition for new congregants. (Smith 2019)

Historically, both the Catholic Church and Pentecostal movements in Latin America have often been described as politically restrained. After the Vatican was declared an independent state, the Catholic Church emphasized institutional neutrality in partisan political conflicts, intervening primarily on issues framed as matters of moral doctrine, human rights, or peace. Early Pentecostalism similarly tended toward political quietism. As Boas (2020) explains, while many strands of mainline Protestantism historically treated civic engagement as a social expression of the Gospel, early Pentecostal theology, engaging in a premillennial doctrine, emphasized the imminent return of Christ and the temporary nature of this world's institutions. If Christ's return was inevitable and the world a transitional stage before divine restoration, sustained political engagement appeared secondary, if not futile.

Boas (2020) describes that beginning in the 1970s, however, the emergence of neo-Pentecostal denominations in Brazil—most prominently the UCKG—marked a significant shift in orientation. These movements increasingly adopted a more assertive public posture, linking spiritual life with material prosperity and national transformation. Political participation was no longer treated as irrelevant to faith, but invaluable to advancing moral order in society. Rather than withdrawing from politics, neo-Pentecostal leaders framed civic engagement as a legitimate arena through which believers could defend religious values and shape the nation's future, thereby redefining the relationship between Pentecostal theology and electoral behavior. Evangelicals, especially Pentecostals who make up the majority of the evangelical population in Brazil, welcomed politics into their daily lives and adopted strategies to influence their congregations to vote for certain candidates. The evangelical influence started to become noticeable in the beginning of the 21st century.

Evangelical Electoral Alignment:

In October of 2002, Brazilians around the country went to their local polling stations to choose the president. The front runners were: Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who had come in second for the previous 4 general elections and was hoping to serve his first term; Jose Serra, the then Minister of Health under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso; and Anthony Garotinho, the first prominent evangelical presidential candidate, who had just stepped down from his role as the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro to run for president. When the first-round results came in, Lula had come in first with approximately 46% of the vote, Serra with 23% in second place, and Garotinho gathered nearly 18% of voters in third place. (Tribunal Superior Eleitoral 2002) Garotinho had gathered the majority of the votes cast by evangelicals in that general election. Since no candidate reached the 50% mark, the elections were to be decided in a second, run-off round, where Lula would face Serra. Garotinho endorsed Lula due to similarities between their political parties—one running for the Socialist Party and the other for the Workers Party—and the vast majority of evangelical voters cast their votes for Lula in the second round. (Bohn 2007)

Anthony Garotinho, as explained by Bohn (2007), was the first candidate to make the evangelical faith a main talking point of his presidential candidacy. Her article explores the question of whether evangelical voters should have been considered an identity group, or an interest group by testing the 2002 elections against the 2006 elections. She remarks that in 2006, that amongst the 4 main candidates, none of them had an explicit evangelical religious affiliation. Unlike 2002, there was no statistically significant candidate for which evangelical voters sought to vote during that election, meaning they were not more likely to vote for Lula or any other candidate than any other demographic group despite that being true for Lula in the previous

election. Bohn clarified that that behavior classified them as an identity group, where they may not be very participative if they do not believe a candidate reflects their religious beliefs.

The 2010 general elections told a similar story to 2002. The front runners were Dilma Rousseff from PT, José Serra from PSDB, and Marina Silva, an Evangelical candidate from the Partido Verde, (PV, Green Party) affiliated to the AG. During the first round, Marina Silva gathered over 20% of the votes, with evangelicals being statistically significantly more likely to vote for her than any other candidate. During the run-offs between Rousseff and Serra, however, there was a statistically significant effect against voting for Dilma because of a controversy over her opinion on abortion in the eve of the first round. Serra gathered the majority of Marina's votes, but a non-negligible portion of evangelicals voters voted null. (Peixoto and Rennó 2011) Once again, evangelicals were showing up to vote, though there was no clear left-right alignment within the political compass.

In 2014, following the death of Eduardo Campos, Marina Silva became the presidential candidate for the PSB and quickly emerged as a competitive third option alongside incumbent Dilma Rousseff and Aécio Neves. Silva again received over 20% of the vote, but her campaign faced challenges in consolidating support from the general public. ("Em 8 Eleições Para Presidente," 2021) Notably, after initially expressing support for same-sex marriage, Silva reversed her position following backlash from evangelical voters. (Kurczy 2014)

The aforementioned presidential elections demonstrated sporadic moments where appealing to evangelicals helped candidates gather support from that group. What I aim to establish in my statistical analysis is whether or not that surge in evangelical support was statistically significant, or notably different from other populations, and whether evangelicals in

the latest elections of 2018 and 2022 have started to act more as an interest group rather than an identity group as Bohn (2007) identified them in her study.

PART III: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Methods & Results H1:

The Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), a research institution built by Vanderbilt University conducts bi-yearly surveys in a plurality of Latin American countries including Brazil called the AmericasBarometer. Using STATA, I downloaded the survey responses datasets from 2006 to 2022. With the exception of the 2006 and 2022 questionnaires, surveys are usually conducted 1-3 years after the election has passed, introducing the possibility for both recall and social desirability bias, as people may have forgotten for whom they voted for in either round of the presidential elections, or if a candidate has since become unpopular, conceal or change their true answer. Surveys have a range of 1100 to 2400 respondents each year.

Each survey was very similar, and each contained two questions that were of most interest for hypothesis 1: “What is your religion?” and “Which candidate did you vote for in the first round of the previous presidential elections?”. There were many options for the response possibilities to the religious question. For ease and clarity of analysis, I generated a new group under the name “evangelical” and set it to the dummy variable ‘1’. I then had STATA combine pentecostal and non-pentecostal evangelicals under the “evangelical” group where responses were recorded as 1. Every other religious group including atheists and agnostic people (no religion), were recorded as dummy variable zero. I tabulated “evangelical” and “vote choice” to learn the frequency and proportion at which evangelicals would vote for each candidate in the respective election years. I then ran a simple linear regression on the most prominent candidates

from each election to ascertain whether or not identifying as evangelical was a significant predictor of vote choice in each year.

After analyzing each election, I chose the top 2 candidates from each year and labeled them left-leaning and right-leaning—PT candidates on the left and non-PT on the right. I calculated the difference in each year of the proportion of evangelicals who voted for a certain right-leaning candidate from the proportion of non-evangelicals who did the same (Evangelical vote % for candidate - Non-Evangelical vote % for the same candidate). I repeated this process for those who voted for left-leaning candidates.

Figure 1.2: Evangelical–Non-Evangelical Vote Gap in Brazilian Presidential Elections (2002–2022)

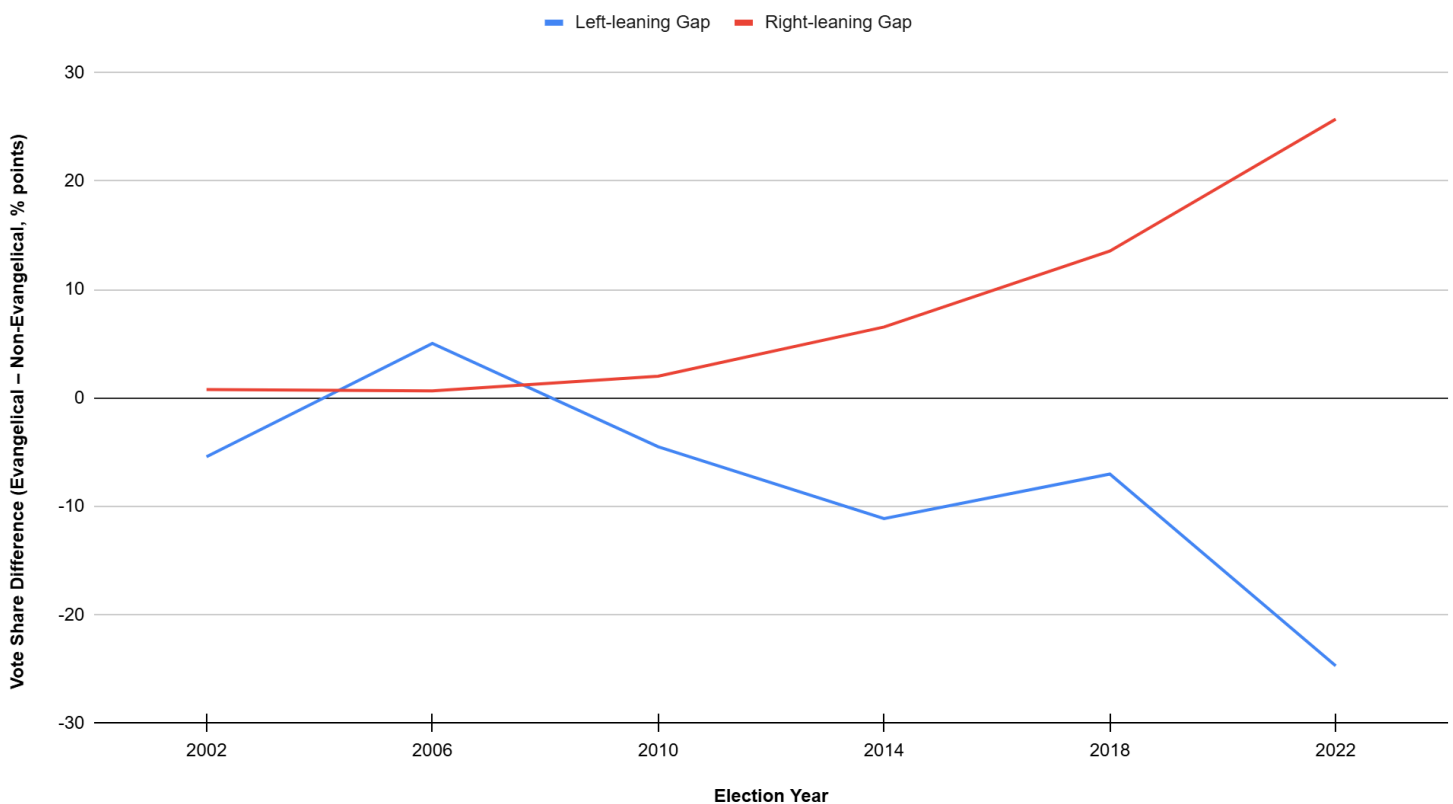


Figure 1.2 shows that identifying as evangelical from 2002 to 2010 was not a meaningful predictor in vote-choice. The proportion of evangelicals and non-evangelicals that voted for

either right or left-leaning candidates was only marginally different if at all. In 2014 evangelical voters became less likely than other voters to select the left-leaning candidates and more likely to vote for the right-leaning candidate. This trend furthered in the 2018 and 2022 elections with the presence of Bolsonaro on the ballots. The divergence shown in figure 1.2 represents a simultaneous move of evangelicals away from left-leaning candidates towards right-leaning ones indicating increased polarization between evangelicals and other religious groups.

Figure 1.2 is based on Table 1.1 below where I tabulate the percentage of evangelical and non-evangelical voters who voted for each of the top 2 candidates for said election year in the first round. I further assessed whether evangelical identity predicts voter choice. I estimate a series of models for the two candidates each year of the following form:

$$Vote_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Evangelical_i + u_i$$

$Vote_i$ is a binary indicator of whether respondent i voted for a given candidate, and

$Evangelical_i$ corresponds to a dummy variable equal to 1 if the respondent identifies as

evangelical and 0 if they do not. The coefficient β_1 captures the difference in probability of

voting for a given candidate between evangelicals and non-evangelicals.

Table 1.1: Vote Share Differences and Regression Estimates (2002–2022)

Year	Candidate	Evangelical %	Non-Evangelical %	Gap (E%-NE%)	Coefficient	P-value
2002	Lula (Left)	72.46	77.88	-5.42	-0.0995**	0.005
2002	Serra (Right)	18.84	18.06	0.78	0.0078	0.837
2006	Lula (Left)	74.04	69.01	5.03	0.0219	0.628
2006	Alckmin (Right)	21.15	20.5	0.65	0.0001	0.997
2010	Rousseff (Left)	62.88	67.38	-4.5	-0.0561*	0.063
2010	Serra (Right)	23.48	21.47	2.01	0.0071	0.751
2014	Rousseff (Left)	50	61.13	-11.13	-0.1119**	0.005
2014	Neves (Right)	40.91	34.37	6.54	0.0654*	0.041
2018	Haddad (Left)	11.23	18.25	-7.02	-0.0702***	0.001
2018	Bolsonaro (Right)	46.22	32.68	13.54	0.1354***	0
2022	Lula (Left)	33.55	58.25	-24.7	-0.1767***	0
2022	Bolsonaro (Right)	56.81	31.11	25.7	0.1717***	0

The results indicate that evangelical identification becomes a more polar and consistent statistically significant predictor of vote choice in the elections of 2018. While earlier results show weak or marginally significant results, such as the reduced likelihood of evangelical vote for Dilma Rousseff in 2014, the coefficients in 2018 and 2022 are mostly larger in magnitude and have P-values very near or at zero, indicating strong significance.

Lastly, in order to look at the changes in within-group cohesion, I plotted the vote shares of evangelicals for the top two candidates in the first round of each aforementioned election.

Figure 1.3: Evangelical Vote Distribution Between Left- and Right-Leaning Candidates, 2002–2022

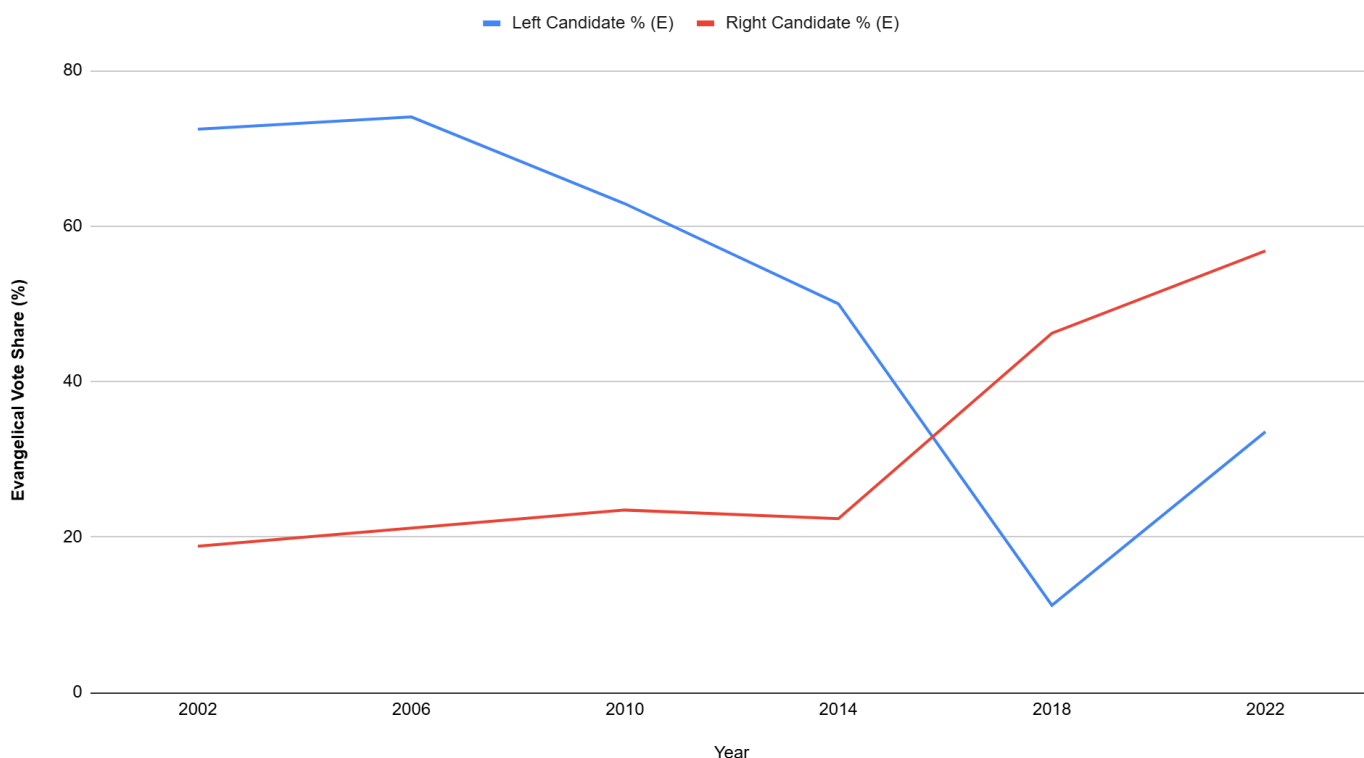


Figure 1.3 depicts a drop in evangelical in-group cohesion for left-leaning candidates from 2006 to 2018 while the cohesion supporting right-leaning candidates stays stagnant until the 2018 election with Bolsonaro as the leading candidate and 2022 as the incumbent. It is clear from this chart that within-group cohesion does increase as evangelicals support right-leaning candidates at higher rates over time.

While evangelical voters showed higher cohesion in 2002 voting for Lula, this cohesion is not unique to this group. Figure 1.2 and table 1.1 demonstrate other groups were voting similarly to the evangelicals. In contrast, in 2018-22, evangelicals show cohesive support for right-leaning candidates that is markedly distinct from other groups, indicating the emergence of a more clearly defined voting bloc.

Methods and Results H2:

Similarly to H1, H2 was also tested by gathering data from LAPOP's AmericasBarometer surveys from 2006 to 2022. I used the following survey questions for my analysis: "What is your religion?" and question "L1" in the survey, "On a scale of 1-10; 1 corresponding to the political left and 10 corresponding to the political right, where do you identify yourself?". I again created the dummy variables 0 and 1, representing non-evangelicals and evangelicals respectively. I then ran a simple linear regression to ascertain the effect of evangelical identity on respondents' political identity:

$$L1_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Evangelical_i + u_i$$

$L1_i$ represents a political identity scale from 1-10. $Evangelical_i$ works in the same way as it did in hypothesis 1, and β_1 is a coefficient that represents how much evangelical identification affects political identification.

Table 2.1 Evangelical Effect on Ideological Self-Placement (L1) (2006-2022)

Year	Evangelical Effect (β_1)	P-value
2006	-0.01	0.966
2010	0.32***	0.009
2014	0.04	0.78
2018	0.57***	0.001
2022	0.55***	0.002

Table 2.1 shows that the evangelical effect on ideological self-placement was positive and statistically significant especially in 2018 and 2022. This means that being evangelical is associated with ideological self-placement over half a point more conservative than non-evangelicals. This also shows that the effect of evangelical identity on ideological

identification became more positive in comparison to 2010, where religion was also a reliable predictor of more conservative identification.

Figure 2.1: Ideological Self-Placement by Religious Group in Brazil (2006–2022)

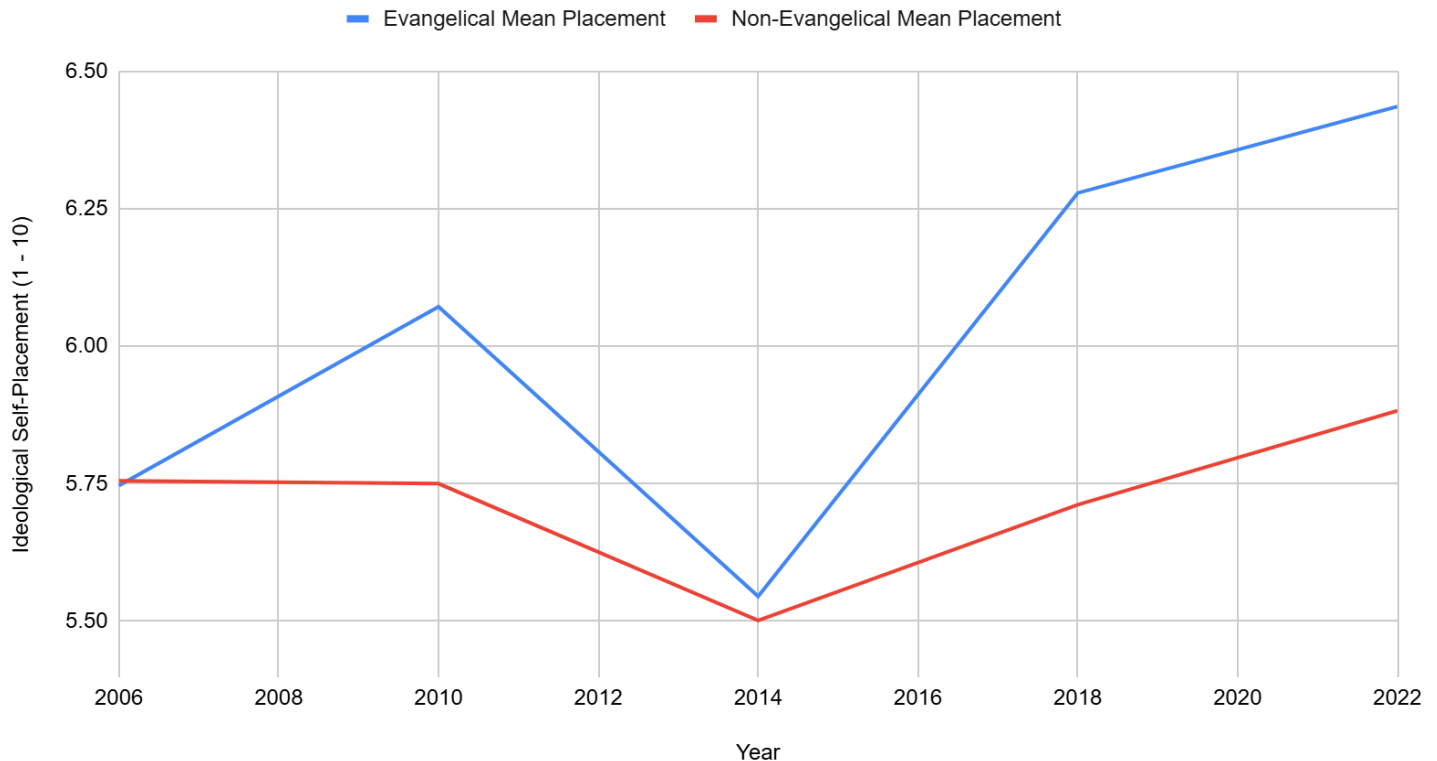


Figure 2.1 demonstrates the mean ideological self-placement of evangelicals and non-evangelicals over time. In 2006, evangelicals placed themselves ideologically on an average of 5.75, politically centrist, no different from the rest of the population. In 2018 and 2022, that average was nearly 6.5, almost a whole point more conservative than they were previously, growing more conservative at a higher rate than other groups. Evangelicals as a group seem to have become more conservative over the last two decades.

Does Religiosity Explain a Rightward Shift?:

Next I wanted to explore a mechanism behind why this shift may have happened over time. While exploring the AmericasBarometer survey, I found a question that asked respondents

how often they attended their respective religious services, “How often do you attend a religious service?” To test whether evangelicals are more religious than other groups, I test the effect of evangelical identity on attendance frequency by running:

$$Attendance_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Evangelical_i + u_i$$

Church attendance is measured differently across survey waves. In 2006 and 2010, respondents were placed on a 1-5 scale ranging from “rarely/never” to “more than once a week.” In 2014 and 2018, attendance was measured on a 1-4 scale from “never” to “once a week,” omitting the highest-frequency category. The 2022 survey did not include a comparable attendance question. I define religiosity in this paper as the frequency in which a person attends their respective religious services. Higher attendance means higher religiosity.

Table 3.1: Evangelical Effect on Church Attendance (1–5 Scale), 2006–2010

Year	Evangelical Coefficient (β_1)	P-value (β_1)	Constant Coefficient (β_0)	Evangelical Mean Attendance (1-5 Scale)
2006	1.5926***	0	2.4952	4.0878
2010	1.2681***	0	2.9301	4.1982

Table 3.2: Evangelical Effect on Church Attendance (1–4 Scale), 2014–2018

Year	Evangelical Coefficient (β_1)	P-value (β_1)	Constant Coefficient (β_0)	Evangelical Mean Attendance (1-4 Scale)
2014	0.8956***	0	2.4761	3.3717
2018	0.8708***	0	2.2463	3.1171

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show that evangelical identity is a statistically significant predictor of higher attendance. While non-evangelical attend religious services from a few times a year to once a month, evangelicals attend from once or twice a month to once a week. Though

evangelicals attend church significantly more often than other groups, the rate at which they do so is stagnant over time. Evangelicals have not become increasingly religious, they are just constantly more religious than other groups. Attendance and religiosity on their own have not increased, and are unlikely to explain rising conservatism among the group.

Finally, I wanted to test whether attendance had an effect on ideological self-placement and whether attendance affected evangelicals differently from other groups. For this I returned to the L1 scale and tested it against evangelical identity, attendance, and the interaction between the two terms:

$$L1_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Evangelical_i + \beta_2 Attendance_i + \beta_3 (Evangelical_i \times Attendance_i) + u_i$$

The tables for the following results were separated again to reflect the difference in scaling for the attendance coefficient.

Table 3.3: Interaction Model, Effect of Attendance and Evangelical Identity on Ideological Self-Placement (L1) (2006–2010) (1–5 Attendance Scale)

Year	Attendance (β_2)	P-value	Evangelical (β_1)	P-value	Interaction (Att × Evan)	P-value
2006	0.0849	0.198	-0.7854	0.303	0.1505	0.422
2010	-0.0823	0.108	-0.4434	0.338	0.2034*	0.068

Table 3.4: Interaction Model, Effect of Attendance and Evangelical Identity on Ideological Self-Placement (L1) (2014–2018) (1–5 Attendance Scale)

Year	Attendance (β_2)	P-value	Evangelical (β_1)	P-value	Interaction (Att × Evan)	P-value
2014	0.0317	0.637	-0.7068	0.135	0.2161	0.126
2018	0.1623**	0.028	0.2566	0.548	0.061	0.655

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 show that attendance is sometimes associated with more conservative ideological identification, but this relationship is not consistent across years. More importantly, the interaction between attendance and evangelical identity is not statistically significant, indicating that attendance does not affect evangelicals differently than other groups. Taken together, these results suggest that religiosity does not explain the observed political shift, pointing towards alternative explanations related to how religion is organized and communicated politically.

Taken together, these findings suggest a clear transformation in the political behavior of evangelicals in Brazil over the last two decades. While earlier elections between 2002 and 2014 show patterns consistent with Bohn's (2007) characterization of evangelicals as an identity group, the results from 2018 and 2022 indicate the emergence of a more cohesive voting bloc, or an interest group—formal organizations that act with the intention of pursuing policy goals. Evangelical identification becomes a reliable indicator of both voter choice and right-leaning ideological self-placement, supporting both hypotheses. Additionally, the analysis of attendance shows that the shift in the evangelical population to the political right cannot be explained solely by increasing religiosity. Evangelicals have consistently been more religious than other groups, but this level of religiosity has stayed the same over time and does not differently influence ideological positioning. This suggests that the observed realignment may not be attributable to changes in personal religious intensity, but rather broader changes in how evangelicalism is organized and how it engages with politics.

PART IV: INSTITUTIONAL AND MESSAGING MECHANISMS

What Can Explain the Shift?:

While the statistical analysis reveals a clear shift in evangelical political behavior, it does not by itself identify the driving mechanisms. What factors can account for the growing cohesion of evangelical voters? This section explores a number of plausible explanations, drawing on existing literature.

At the individual level, variation in congregants' responses to religious messaging provides an additional explanation for evangelical cohesion. Smith (2019) shows in chapter 6 of her book that clerical influence is strongest on culturally salient moral issues like same-sex marriage, gender roles, and the legal status of Christianity. This selective influence suggests that political alignment emerges most clearly around "culture war" topics, where religious messaging is both more frequent and persuasive. Smith finds that susceptibility to clerical influence varies across individuals: greater participation in congregational activities, and stronger doctrinal conservatism are associated with closer alignment between individual attitudes and the opinions of the clergy, meaning they are more easily influenced. These findings provide a mechanism through which evangelical voters become more ideologically cohesive, as highly embedded congregants are more likely to internalize and act upon the political messages they receive within religious settings.

The content of political messaging itself plays a critical role in shaping voter behavior. In their analysis of the rhetoric of evangelical political actor and federal deputy Nikolas Ferreira during a 2022 pro-Bolsonaro campaign rally, Barros and Tavares (2024) show that in his speeches and public appearances the election was framed in explicitly moral and religious terms, presented as a struggle between good and evil. Ferreira's influence extends beyond in-person

events: as one of the most followed federal deputies in Brazil, with millions of followers across platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, his messaging reaches a broad and highly engaged audience. This framing simplifies complex political decisions and encourages voters to interpret elections through a moral lens rather than policy-based considerations. Consistent with Smith's findings, such messaging is particularly effective on culturally salient moral issues. In Ferreira's discourse, conservative candidates like Jair Bolsonaro and his allies are portrayed as defenders of religious principles, while opposing candidates are framed as threats to those values and Christian identity. This dynamic increases political engagement and promotes cohesion by aligning voters around a shared moral narrative.

The organizational structure of evangelical churches can provide a more direct mechanism for cohesive political action. Oro (2005) shows that the UCKG identifies and promotes preferred candidates for elected positions, not just influencing political preferences. Although it is not the only evangelical church that participates directly in politics, it serves as the primary focus of his analysis. In contexts where clergy explicitly endorse candidates, evangelical voters face less uncertainty when selecting candidates. The UCKG's extensive media presence, including ownership of *Record*, one of Brazil's largest television networks, alongside its moralized framing that pits good against evil, further strengthens this strategy. Oro's work documents these dynamics within congregations, but Barros and Tavares (2024) suggest they are now being deployed nationally, extending beyond church networks into broader electoral politics.

Beyond institutional coordination and in-person messaging, digital communication platforms provide a wider playing field for amplifying political ideology. Evangelista and Bruno (2019) found WhatsApp played a central role in disseminating content during the 2018 election,

particularly through highly active and interconnected chat groups. Misinformation, though a small proportion of content, was disproportionately circulated and reached a large proportion of groups, often originating from a few highly connected sources. Hypersexualized and anti-Christian themes, for example, were particularly effective in provoking strong reactions from religious audiences. For evangelical voters, content like this may reinforce established moral narratives and consolidate support for candidates like Bolsonaro, helping explain a higher level of cohesion in today's more digital world.

Exposure to religious messaging from political and clerical elites has a measurable impact on voter behavior. Ferreira and Fuks (2021) showed that individuals who heard pro-Bolsonaro messages from their religious leaders were significantly more likely to vote for him, with evangelicals exposed to such messaging being approximately 2.4 times more likely to support Bolsonaro than those who were not. This effect is not limited to evangelicals, as similar patterns are observed among Catholics. Given the higher frequency of exposure within evangelical congregations, the effect is likely more pronounced within their communities. This finding helps connect the broader mechanisms discussed in previous sections, such as coordinated endorsements, moralized framing, and digital amplification, to actual voting outcomes. In particular, it reinforces the idea that the types of messaging observed in contexts such as Nikolas Ferreira's rallies are not merely symbolic or rhetorical, but have tangible electoral consequences, increasing the likelihood that individuals translate shared religious narratives into cohesive political behavior at the ballot box.

Evangelical organizational capacity is reflected in the electoral success of evangelical candidates. Netto and Speck (2017) found that evangelical candidates tend to raise less campaign funding than their non-evangelical counterparts, yet remain competitive in elections. These

candidates benefit from dense church-based networks and grassroots communities that facilitate the rapid diffusion of political messaging. Electoral coordination among evangelicals is sustained less by individual-level characteristics than by institutional networks that structure both information spread and voter behavior.

These mechanisms suggest that evangelical political cohesion is shaped by the interaction of messaging, institutional structure, and information diffusion. Higher levels of exposure to religious messaging, especially on culturally salient moral issues, make evangelicals more likely to adopt conservative political positions, particularly among those more embedded in church communities. This effect is reinforced by messaging that frames issues in moral and religious terms, as seen in the rhetoric of figures like Nikolas Ferreira and Jair Bolsonaro, contributing to polarization and increased participation. Digital platforms like WhatsApp amplify this effect, spreading emotionally charged content within tightly connected networks. Institutional structures within evangelical churches and grassroots communities help coordinate and sustain these patterns, ensuring messaging is widely disseminated and translated into electoral action. These factors help explain the increasing conservative alignment of evangelical voting behavior in recent Brazilian elections.

PART V: CONCLUSION

This paper examined whether evangelical voters in Brazil have become more politically cohesive over time. The results support both hypotheses. Evangelical voting behavior between 2002 and 2014 was not discernible from that of other groups, but the elections of 2018 and 2022 showed a clear change in the unity of evangelicals as an electoral group. Evangelical identification became a strong and statistically significant predictor of both vote choice and

ideological self-placement, indicating the emergence of a more cohesive and right-leaning political bloc.

The shift, however, cannot be explained by increasing religiosity. Evangelicals have consistently attended religious services at higher rates than other groups, but this level of religiosity has remained stable over time and does not differentially affect ideological positioning. This suggests that the transformation observed in recent elections is not the result of changes in personal belief or intensity of faith, but rather changes in how religion is organized and communicated politically.

The analysis of institutional and messaging mechanisms provides a plausible explanation for this transformation. Evangelicals are more frequently exposed to politically salient messaging, particularly on moral issues that are more likely to shape attitudes and behavior. Organizational structures within churches facilitate coordination, and digital platforms like WhatsApp have expanded the reach and intensity of political communication. As these platforms grew in the late 2010s, they enabled the faster spread of emotionally charged and ideologically consistent content within connected communities. Together, these factors likely increased the likelihood that conservative positions are both adopted by evangelicals and translated into voting behavior.

These findings suggest evangelical political cohesion in Brazil is the product of institutional networks, strategic messaging, and digital communication technologies. As evangelical populations continue to grow and maintain high levels of political engagement, their role in shaping electoral outcomes will likely remain significant and even grow in influence. Understanding the mechanisms behind this transformation is essential for explaining the Brazilian political landscape.

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