

Radical Presidents, Polarized Voters? The sources of mass polarization in Latin America

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Abstract

Introduction

Recent research on political behavior in Western Europe and in the United States has argued that broad cultural and economic changes have led to the emergence of new cleavages and to increasingly polarized mass electorates. Unprecedented levels of economic security favored the adoption of post-materialist values by the younger generations, while the rise of new left politics brought issues related the recognition of minorities and alternative lifestyles onto the political agenda (Bornschiefer, 2010; Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Welzel et al., 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). These cultural changes have displaced the traditional values of some voters, particularly those who are older, male, or less educated, thus generating resentment and the polarization of attitudes (Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Ignazi, 1992; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Although Latin America did not experience the post-materialist turn that triggered a cultural backlash in Western Europe, there is evidence that many countries in the region have experienced broad value changes in the last decades, due to rising levels of education and seculariza-

tion. At the same time, there have been advances in the recognition of LGBTQI and gender rights, and issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and sex education have become increasingly contentious in the region (Corrales, 2020; Smith, 2019; Smith and Boas, 2020). Secularizing trends and progressive value change have been partly counteracted by the rapid growth of evangelical churches (Boas, 2020; Smith, 2019; Villazón, 2014). Last but not least, far-right leaders and parties have emerged in various Latin American countries and they have purposefully sought to politicize cultural grievances, associating the political left with atheism and the undermining of traditional moral values (Kestler, 2022; Queirolo, 2020; Sendra, 2023; Zanotti and Roberts, 2021).

This paper investigates the impact of these broad cultural and political changes on levels of mass ideological polarization in Latin America. While most scholars tend to agree that non-economic issues have become increasingly salient and divisive in the region, we still need to know how and to what extent these trends have resulted in more polarized electorates.

Cultural backlash explanations assume that polarization likely increases when the adoption of more progressive value orientations by a significant portion of society alienates more conservative citizens. According to Norris and Inglehart 2019 cultural change in Western societies has led to a conflict between the older and the younger generations, as the latter have been much keener to adopt liberal values. We argue that in the Latin American context, the conservative reaction against progressive change has resulted, to a great extent, from secularization and increasing divergence in the attitudes of churchgoers and secular citizens. Also, because secularization is associated with a decline in the influence of religion in the lives of individuals, thus leading to the abandonment of traditional values supported by religious organizations (Gaskins et al., 2013; Manza et al., 2003) it is likely to be seen as a threat by the older and, usually, more conservative generations, irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Based on these claims, we propose two hypotheses. First, as secularization increases and society becomes more evenly divided among religious and non-religious individuals, citizens that attend church regularly will react by adopting more ideologically extreme positions rela-

tive to the average or typical voter. Second, we expect secularization and increasingly divided societies along the secular-religious cleavage to push the older generations farther to the right relative to the average ideological position of the electorate. A distinct set of explanations claims that polarization is mainly driven by elite cues. Mass publics become more clearly divided along new electoral cleavages as political elites take polarized positions on salient "cultural war" issues (Smith and Boas, 2020). Polarization can also increase once ideologically extreme parties become viable competitors and/or enter the government, as suggested by recent research on the far-right in Western Europe (Bischof and Wagner, 2019). In the Latin American context, this latter scenario would entail the emergence of competitive radical presidential candidates with ultraconservative positions on divisive cultural issues. Given the centrality and public visibility of the presidential office, we would expect polarizing effects to be magnified when radical parties win the presidential race. Based on this literature, we propose the following hypothesis: far-right leaders, once in the presidential office, will legitimize extreme positions, while at the same time triggering a strong negative reaction from voters on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, thus leading to higher levels of polarization. To the extent that far-right presidents in Latin America have sided with religious conservatives, purposefully mobilizing cultural conflicts that oppose secular and religious voters, we expected their impact on levels of polarization to be magnified as societies become more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavage. This leads to our fourth and last hypothesis : far-right presidents will increase polarization to a much greater extent in societies that are more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavage and which are experiencing secularization.

We test these hypotheses while controlling for alternative explanations using individual-level data on voter polarization and country-level data on elite polarization in 16 Latin American countries. We rely on several waves of the Americas' Barometer and on the PELA surveys with Latin American legislators to obtain measures of our main dependent and independent variables and run a series of multi-level regressions.

Theory

Voter polarization is considered a major issue for modern democracy. Studies in the United States and other countries have demonstrated that mass polarization may undermine support for democracy (Graham and Svobik, 2020; Kingzette et al., 2021), compromise social interactions (Webster et al., 2022), increase support for the expansion of Executive powers (Touchton et al., 2023) and lead to democratic backsliding (Orhan, 2022).

Given its detrimental effects on democratic institutions, the causes of polarization have gained special attention from political science in recent years. According to the cultural backlash hypothesis, polarization can result from broad processes of cultural change, as the acceptance of new values varies among distinct segments of society. This in turn leads to increasing divergence in political attitudes and behavior between groups divided along newly emerging political cleavages. In Western Europe and North America, the rise of post-materialism and new left politics displaced the traditional values often held most strongly by the older generation. Over time, cultural change created a conflict between defenders of traditionalist and authoritarian values, on the one hand, and advocates of more liberal or libertarian views on the other (Bornschieer, 2010; Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

According to Norris and Inglehart 2019, cultural backlash unfolds as societies reach a ‘tipping point’ at which former (conservative) majorities become or are about to become a minority. As citizens holding more traditional values feel increasingly threatened by the gradual loss of their once dominant position, this triggers a conservative reaction and fosters support for extremist, non-mainstream parties. In both Europe and North America, voters displaced by cultural change have been mostly attracted to populist radical right parties. These parties have played a key role in the articulation of a programmatic response to post-materialism and new left politics, by challenging societal changes brought about by the libertarian left, while at the same time promoting new issues, such as immigration (Bornschieer, 2010; Ignazi, 1992).

One likely implication of the cultural backlash hypothesis is that mass electorates become more polarized as distinct groups of society diverge in the acceptance of new values brought

about by cultural change. In particular, one might expect the citizens displaced by value change to adopt more ideologically extreme positions, the greater the perceived threat to their world views and ways of life.

While in Western Europe cultural backlash developed in mostly secular societies, this is certainly not the case of Latin America. By the late 1990s, Latin American countries figured at the bottom of Inglehart and Baker's (2000) classification of world political cultures in the traditional/secular dimension. Moreover, the region remained solidly Catholic: in many countries, Catholics represented over 80% of the population. This scenario has changed in the last decades, however. The religious landscape has become increasingly pluralist, as a consequence of the growth of evangelicals and irreligious individuals (Somma et al., 2017). While secularization has progressed at different paces across countries – for instance, in Uruguay secular individuals represented almost 70% of the population by the early 2020s as compared to 23% in Brazil -, we note a similar trend all over the region in what concerns the growth of the secular population.

In our view, these changes in the religious affiliations of mass publics are the main drivers of polarization in Latin America. In particular, we believe that secularization has had a disruptive impact on citizens' political attitudes, to the extent that, until very recently, religion shaped to a very substantial extent citizens' values. By secularization we mean various processes of change, including: a decline in the importance of religion in the lives of individuals; a decline in the social and political influence of religious organizations; a decline in engagement in political life by religious organizations (Manza et al., 2003, p. 300-301). These three processes may or may not occur together, but in any case, secularization involves the replacement of religious interpretative frameworks by outlooks that are closer to science and secular moral.

Over time, secularization processes result in a decline of social conservatism, as secular individuals are more likely to accept liberal values. These value changes, in turn, may foster cultural backlash and polarization, as the attitudes of religious individuals become more conservative relative to the population average. In other words, the attitudes of those who remain

religious in the face of secularization are increasingly likely to conflict with the attitudes of the rest of society (Gaskins et al., 2013). In many Latin American countries, this gap between the attitudes of the religious and the irreligious tends to be wide, as secularization has been accompanied by an increase in the evangelical population. Since evangelicals are, on average, more conservative and attend religious services more often than Catholics (McAdams and Lance, 2013; Corrales, 2020), secularization and the expansion of evangelicalism together tend to result in societies increasingly polarized along the secular-religious cleavage.

We expect progressive value change associated with secularism to be perceived as a threat to the life-styles and beliefs of religious voters, leading to cultural backlash and greater alignment between individuals' ideological preferences and religious beliefs. We also expect secularization to be seen as a threat by the older and usually more conservative cohorts, which were socialized in mostly religious societies at the beginning of their adult lives.

We propose two hypotheses regarding the impact of secularization on ideological change across different social groups. First, as secularization increases and society becomes more evenly divided among religious and non-religious individuals, citizens that attend church regularly will react by adopting more ideologically extreme positions relative to the average or typical voter. Second, we expect secularization and increasingly divided societies along the secular-religious cleavage to push the older generations farther to the right relative to the average ideological position of the electorate.

A second set of explanations of mass polarization has emphasized the role of political elites in fostering partisan animosity (Bäck et al., 2023; Druckman et al., 2013; Bischof and Wagner, 2019). According to the theory of party cues, voters frequently rely on the opinions of party leaders to form their own on a series of issues (Samuels and Zucco, 2018). Furthermore, experimental research suggests that uncivil and derogatory discourse, a common trend in current political campaigns in many democracies, undermines political trust in government (Mutz and Reeves, 2005). If voters are influenced by the opinions and attitudes of political elites, the electoral process can affect their attitudes. Indeed, there is evidence that elections catalyze polar-

ization (Hernández et al., 2021).

Experimental and observational evidence on elite influence on mass political behavior has amounted in the last decades (Achen and Bartels, 2017; Broockman and Butler, 2017; Lenz, 2013). Voters not only use elite cues as a reference for their vote choice but also form opinions based on what the elites signal to them. Thus, the radicalization of parties and candidates may impact voters' attitudes on a series of issues.

According to Smith and Boas (2023), the emergence of new electoral cleavages rooted in cultural grievances in Latin America has depended on political elites taking polarized positions on newly salient "cultural war" issues. They argue that sexuality politics, involving dissent over issues relative to sex education, gender equality, LGBTQI and reproductive rights has become increasingly relevant for party competition and voter choice. Once party elites place these issues on the agenda and adopt clear-cut positions, the mass public responds and vote choice becomes tied to attitudes on sexuality politics.

Elite cues may also exert a polarizing effect on voters when ideologically extreme, non-mainstream parties, become viable competitors and/or enter government. In both Western Europe and Latin America this scenario has been associated with the emergence of far-right parties. Different from the mainstream right, the far-right combines ideological rigidity with an antiestablishment agenda that challenges the core values and institutions of the liberal democratic order. As Mudde 2007 notes, while conservatives are patriotic, right-wing radicals embrace an extreme and xenophobic variant of nationalism; while conservatives are traditionalist, right-wing radicals are reactionary. Moreover, the antiestablishment and illiberal traits of the far-right implies that these parties present themselves as enemies of the political system as it is, which often leads to a virulent attack to the established parties and liberal democratic institutions (Carter, 2018; Mudde, 1996, 2019).

Bischof and Wagner 2019 empirically demonstrate that the entrance of a radical right-wing party in the Dutch parliament led voters to polarize. The authors argue that, on the one hand, the entrance of the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) party in the Dutch parliament in 2002 led extreme

right-wing voters to believe that their worldviews were legitimized and thus these voters radicalized. On the other hand, left-wing voters reacted to the entrance of the LPF in parliament and were also radicalized, resulting in an ideological backlash. Despite the important contributions of the literature to the study of the effects of elite polarization on voter polarization, few studies have yet explored how radical right-wing candidates presidents and presidential candidates lead voters to polarize in Latin America. One notable exception is the experimental study by Russo, Pimentel, and Avelino 2022. The authors manipulate the mentioning of Jair Bolsonaro's and Lula's ideological positions and find that, when voters are informed of the ideology of the two presidential candidates, they tend to be more likely to polarize and self-identify ideologically.

We believe that the institutional features of presidentialism in Latin America also contribute to the polarizing effect of radical right-wing candidates and parties, especially when they succeed in controlling the national government. Since national elections in most Latin American countries revolve around the presidential dispute, presidential candidates receive significant attention from the media outlets and thus radical candidates' polarizing messages have more chances to be heard by voters during presidential campaigns. Moreover, the personalization of power that is intrinsic to presidentialism allows presidents to exert much more influence over national political affairs, above and beyond their parties, than any prime minister can (Samuels and Shugart, 2010).

Far-right presidential candidates often polarize the political landscape using ideological terms during their campaigns, thereby fostering the development of more clearly defined ideological and partisan identities. These effects are magnified when far-right parties win the presidential race, as securing the major political office legitimizes radical actors while simultaneously triggering a strong negative reaction from voters on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum. Note further that while not all voters may pay attention to elections and electoral campaigns, once an ideologically extreme leader assumes the presidential office he will have the opportunity to shape national policies that produce large-scale impacts, affecting the lives

of large sections of society.

Since the 2010 decade, Latin America has witnessed the arrival of far-right leaders to the presidential office. This is the case of countries like Brazil, with Jair Bolsonaro, Argentina, with Javier Milei, and El Salvador, with Nayib Bukele. All of them use a virulent and polarizing rhetoric, emphasizing their rejection to "globalism" and "gender ideology". These far-right leaders have sought to differentiate themselves from both the mainstream right and the political left by adopting ultraconservative positions on "cultural war" issues such as abortion and LGBTQI rights. Thus, they have contributed to politicize cultural grievances, gaining support from voters who felt threatened and displaced by progressive changes. Based on these claims, we propose the following hypothesis: (H3) far-right incumbent presidents will increase polarization, by legitimizing extreme positions adopted by their supporters, on the one hand, and by triggering a strong negative reaction from voters on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, on the other hand.

Because far-right leaders in Latin America have more often than not relied on the support of evangelical voters and clergy and other conservative Christian denominations (Rennó, 2020; Sendra, 2023; Zanotti and Roberts, 2021), we assume that their polarizing rhetoric is likely to exert a stronger influence on mass behavior in societies more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavages. That is, by siding with religious conservatives, the far-right has mobilized cultural conflicts that oppose secular and religious voters. Such strategies are more likely to bear fruit when religious conservatives experience a concrete threat to their values due to ongoing processes of secularization. This leads to our fourth and last hypothesis : far-right presidents will increase polarization to a much greater extent in societies that are more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavage and which are experiencing secularization.

Data and Methods

Our data come from two sources: the Americas' Barometer and an original dataset, the Dataset of Parties, Elections and Ideology in Latin America (DPEILA). The DPEILA utilizes a range of publicly accessible data sources, including expert surveys (V-Party, Global Party Dataset, PREPPS), elite surveys (Parliamentary Elites in Latin America, PELA and Brazilian Legislative Survey, BLS), and individual-level surveys (LAPOP, World Values Surveys, Latinobarómetro). It evaluates various aspects of political parties and party systems across 16 Latin American countries over an extensive time span. These evaluations encompass measures of ideological polarization, fragmentation, parties' issue stances, and political divisions at both elite and voter levels. The dataset also incorporates data on parties' electoral performance in presidential and lower chamber elections dating back to the 1950s, alongside indicators of parties' participation in presidential elections up to 2020 for those receiving at least 1% of the national vote. The DPEILA currently covers 16 countries as part of a broader research initiative on the political dynamics of the new right in Latin America, supported by the Latin American Studies Association and the Ford Foundation (Borges, 2022).

We use two-ways fixed effects models to test our hypotheses. The dependent variable in all models is measured using the Americas' Barometer question for ideological self-placement. We operationalize ideological polarization as the absolute distance between respondents' ideological self-placement and the mean ideology of respondents in country x and year t .

To test hypotheses 1 and 2, we utilize a measure of secularization taken from the Latinobarómetro surveys. We opt for this latter source instead of LAPOP due to its broader longitudinal coverage. We classified as secular respondents who said they did not have a religion and those who, despite being believers, indicated that they were "not devout at all" in response to Latinobarómetro's question on the observance of religious principles. Using this categorization, we estimated the proportion of secular voters for each country and wave of Latinobarómetro included in our dataset. Since secularization involves gradual processes that lead to change in mass attitudes over the medium and long term, we opt for estimating a moving average of

the last three waves of Latinobarómetro. This also helps to minimize variation across years due to sampling error. Note that the Latinobarómetro surveys cover almost all years between 2004 and 2023. The largest distance between consecutive waves is three years (2020 to 2023). Thus, our measure accounts for changes in secularization across a three-year period in the majority of cases, and four to five years in the most recent period (after 2015).

In addition to the measure of secularization, we include a simple measure of religious divisions in society, operationalized as the absolute difference in the proportion of secular and religious voters in country x and year t . Theoretically, when this difference is large, this implies that most voters are located on the same side of the religious-secular cleavage. Therefore, ideological positions associated with religious identities should not differ substantially across the population, leading to low levels of polarization. By the same token, as the absolute difference in the size of the secular and religious constituencies diminishes, polarization should increase.

We interact our measures of secularization and religious divisions with individual-level measures of church attendance and age. We create four categories for age, with young citizens (25 and younger) as the reference category. Church attendance is a dummy variable that attributes value 1 to voters who said they frequented church often or very often.

To create our measure of far-right incumbent presidents, we rely on the V-Party and PREPPS expert surveys, in addition to the PELA surveys with Latin American legislators to measure party ideology. We maximized the coverage of our ideological classification by estimating the average of all available ideology scores for each party and year. Since ideology scores are highly correlated across sources ($r > 0.9$) we believe this procedure does not affect the reliability of our measures. We classify as radical right those parties whose mean ideological scores are one standard deviation above the mean estimated for all parties that entered the presidential election throughout the period covered by our data. To the extent that far-right parties differ from the mainstream right due to their troubled relationship with the values and institutions of liberal democracy, we selected only the ideologically extreme right-wing parties that scored above the median point of the scale (0.5) of the illiberalism index of V-Party.

Our models include a series of individual and aggregate-level controls. Voters who are keener to engage in political activities are more likely to develop clear-cut ideological identities than non-engaged voters. To control for these effects, we include dummies for partisanship and interest in politics.

According to modernization theory, societies become less polarized as income increases and a large middle class emerges. Because middle class individuals typically have higher levels of schooling and enjoy greater economic security, they develop more complex and gradualist views about politics, adopting more moderate positions than the lower classes (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006; Lipset, 1959). We account for these factors by including in the models individual-level dummy variables for voters who had at least some secondary or tertiary education. Our expectation is that both variables should exert a negative impact on polarization.

We begin our analyses by describing polarization trends in Latin America in the last 20 years among partisan and non-partisan voters. Figure 1 shows the evolution of ideological extremism across time in 16 Latin American countries. The dashed line in the figure corresponds to the mean score of ideological extremism for the whole period. There is an apparent increasing trend in ideological polarization in recent years, especially among partisans, in countries like Brazil, Chile, Honduras, Perú, and Colombia.

Figure 2 shows the evolution of religious divisions, measured as the difference in proportions of religious and secular adults, across 15 countries in Latin America. Values closer to zero correspond to higher religious divisions. Religious polarization can drive political polarization because of the stark contrast in social values among religious and secular voters. Most Latin American countries are not polarized regarding religion, but there appears to be a trend in increasing religious polarization across Latin America. Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile have the highest religious polarization scores.

Table 1 shows the results from our models. Our variables of interest are the proportion of secular voters, the election of a far-right president and attendance to religious services. As our first hypothesis predicted, voters who attend church more often should adopt more extreme

ideological stances as secularization increases and society becomes more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavage. Model results are consistent with these expectations: as the proportions of religious and secular adults equalize, polarization rises, although estimated effects are small. Note that the negative sign of the interaction term implies that decreases in the difference in the proportion of secular and religious voters lead to greater polarization among churchgoers. More precisely, a decrease of 0.20 points in the secular-religious difference increases polarization by 0.70 ($0.68 - 0.10 \cdot -0.20$). A similar result is found when it comes to age. Older adults in religiously divided societies tend to be more polarized, supporting the cultural backlash hypothesis. These effects are strongest for the older cohort: using results reported for model 3, we find that a decrease of 0.20 points in the secular-religious difference increases polarization by 0.50 points.

We also find support for our fourth hypothesis. The coefficient of the interaction between a far-right incumbent and religious polarization is negative and statistically significant. This means that far-right incumbents increase mass ideological polarization as societies become more clearly divided along the secular-religious cleavage. The marginal effect of incumbent radical right presidents conditional on religious divisions is rather strong: a decrease of 0.20 in the difference in the proportions of religious and secular voters increases polarization by 0.8 points.

Finally, and contrary to our expectations, the election of a far-right president has no unconditional effect on polarization, as model 1 shows.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the sources of mass polarization in Latin America. Our analyses demonstrate that cultural backlash originating from religious change is a major force behind ideological polarization. As societies become more secular, older and more religious voters are likely to become more conservative relatively to the rest of society, at the same time the younger

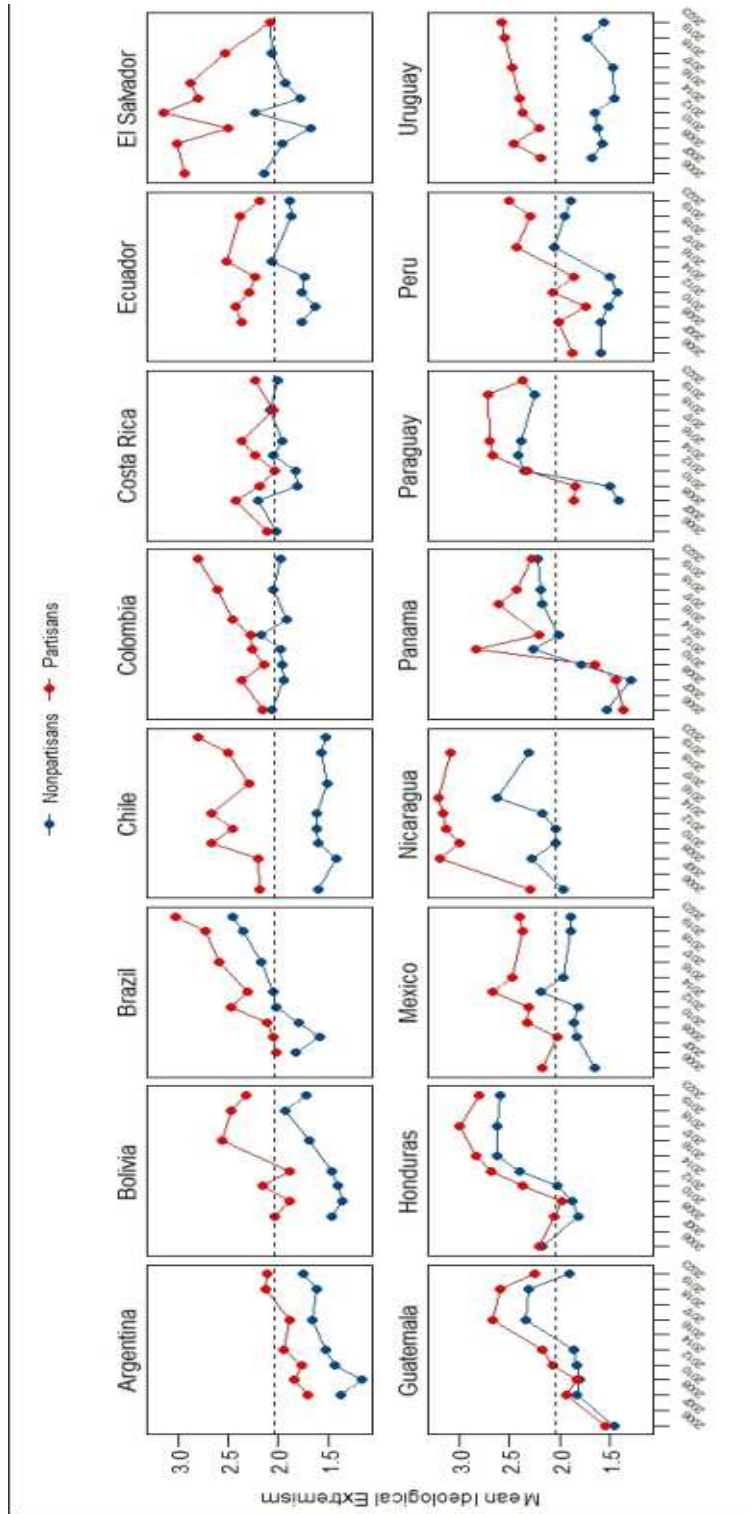


Figure 1: Ideological Extremism in Latin America (2006 - 2023)

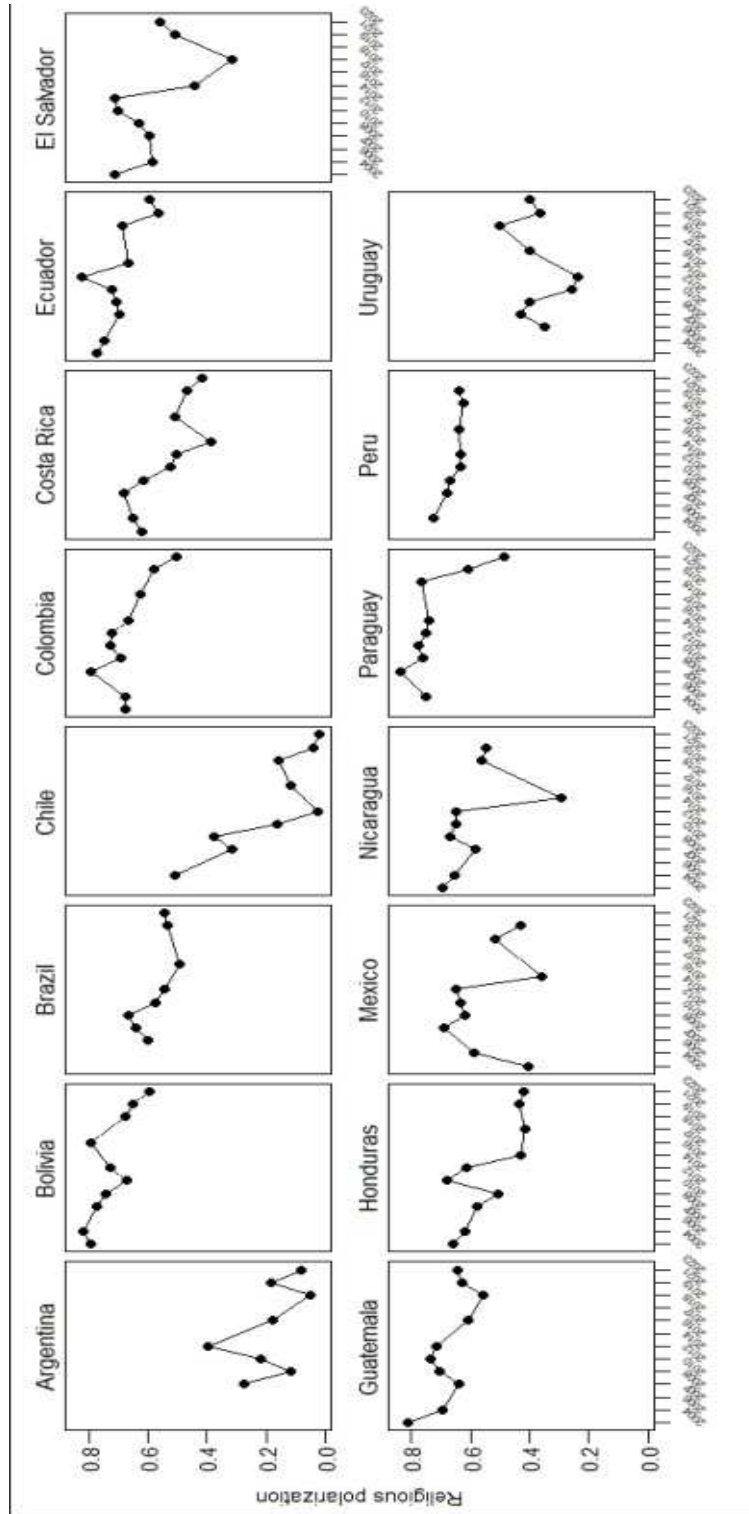


Figure 2: Religious polarization in Latin America (2006 - 2023)

Table 1

	<i>Model</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age 26 - 45	0.008 (0.011)	0.162*** (0.033)	0.164*** (0.038)
Age 46 - 65	0.090*** (0.012)	0.320*** (0.036)	0.314*** (0.041)
Age 66 and above	0.232*** (0.018)	0.435*** (0.047)	0.438*** (0.056)
Secondary education	-0.244*** (0.010)	-0.244*** (0.010)	-0.246*** (0.011)
College	-0.389*** (0.012)	-0.387*** (0.012)	-0.416*** (0.014)
Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular)	0.120** (0.055)	0.411*** (0.068)	0.418*** (0.092)
Female	0.031*** (0.008)	0.030*** (0.008)	0.033*** (0.010)
Partisanship	0.477*** (0.009)	0.474*** (0.009)	0.488*** (0.011)
Turnout	0.006 (0.010)		
Interest in politics	0.081*** (0.009)	0.080*** (0.009)	0.055*** (0.011)
Extreme right incumbent	-0.021 (0.028)	0.539*** (0.167)	0.614*** (0.193)
Religion attendance			0.068** (0.032)
Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular) x Extreme right incumbent		-0.904*** (0.265)	-1.017*** (0.316)
Age 26 - 45 x Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular)		-0.270*** (0.055)	-0.295*** (0.064)
Age 46 - 65 x Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular)		-0.412*** (0.061)	-0.393*** (0.070)
Age 66 and above x Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular)		-0.380*** (0.083)	-0.339*** (0.100)
Difference in proportions (Religious vs secular) x Religion attendance			-0.100* (0.054)
Observations	139,229	141,650	101,014
R ²	0.034	0.034	0.036
Adjusted R ²	0.034	0.034	0.036
F Statistic	450.082*** (df = 11; 139193)	357.784*** (df = 14; 141611)	237.083*** (df = 16; 100975)

Note:

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

and secular voters move further toward the progressive side of the liberal-conservative divide. As religious identities and ideological positions increasingly align, , mass ideological polarization rises accordingly. We also found evidence of the effect of far-right leaders on polarization, as societies become more evenly divided among religious and secular citizens.

The findings above contrast with recent research that has argued in favor of the absence of cultural backlash processes in Latin America (Maia et al., 2023). It is worth noting, however, that the strong effects estimated for the interaction between a far-right incumbent president and religious change suggest that the purposeful politicization of the secular-religious divide is a major driver of polarization and, thus, backlash alone may provide only a partial explanation of increasing polarization. To the extent that far-right leaders have sought to reinforce cultural backlash and underlying societal divisions, then it is possible that the current far-right wave in Latin America is being partly driven by a conservative reaction to the "pink tide" that swept Latin America during the 2000 decade. To be sure, our analyses focus on ideological self-placement, and thus future research should investigate whether our findings hold when it comes to voter behavior.

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