Book Proposal

Evangelicals and Electoral Politics in Latin America: A Kingdom of This World

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Abstract

Why are religious minorities well represented and politically influential in some democracies but largely absent from the halls of power in others? Focusing on evangelical Christians in Latin America, this book develops a theory of the descriptive representation of religious minorities. In contrast to existing arguments focused on voting behavior and political institutions, I maintain that the most important factors in explaining the descriptive representation of Latin American evangelicals are a) the degree to which their religious identity has been politicized by threats to their material interests and worldview, and b) whether cross-cutting cleavages complicate efforts to act collectively in the political sphere. Analyzing the cases of Brazil, Chile, and Peru, I argue that cross-national differences in the politicization of evangelical identity emerged as a result of two critical junctures: disestablishment of the Catholic Church or major episodes of secular reform in the early twentieth century, and the arrival of sexuality politics on the political agenda at the turn of the twenty-first. In Brazil, significant threats to evangelicals at both critical junctures prompted extensive electoral mobilization; in Chile, the absence of such threats meant that mobilization lagged. Yet where authoritarian–democratic cleavages are salient both within and outside of the evangelical community—as in Peru, with fujimorismo—threats prompt less electoral mobilization than would be expected. I develop the argument through a comparative-historical analysis of these countries over more than a century; secondary case studies of Colombia, Costa Rica, and Guatemala; and quantitative analysis of survey, electoral, and census data to examine the influence of voting behavior and political institutions.