

Contemporary Religious Political Parties in Latin America

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ABSTRACT: Religious political parties are one of the oldest forms of political organization in Latin America. Such parties have also taken on new forms in recent decades, as evangelical Christians with political ambitions organize their own electoral vehicles and as right-wing politicians of various stripes embrace the growing trend of Christian nationalism. This chapter surveys Latin American religious parties based on a systematic coding of all major political parties during the 2005–2025 period as well as case studies of Mexico’s National Action Party, Guatemala’s Vision with Values, and Peru’s Popular Renewal. We argue that there are three distinct types of religious party in contemporary Latin America: Catholic parties, which historically dominated the region but have declined in recent years; evangelical parties, which are mostly small and associated with particular churches or pastors; and nondenominational Christian nationalist parties, which argue that Christians should control the state and govern according to Christian principles. We identify a trend toward parties that appeal to a broad Christian identity but are increasingly intolerant of nonbelievers, progressive social stances, and state secularism.

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Religion is one of the oldest—perhaps *the* oldest—bases for organizing political parties in Latin America. In the decades following independence, the major political cleavage in nearly every country was between conservatives, who favored protectionism, a strong central government, and a close relationship between church and state, and liberals, who supported free trade, decentralization, and limits on the legal privileges granted to the Catholic Church (Coppedge 1998; Scully 1992). Conservative parties formed during this period served as defenders of Church interests against the secularizing goals of Radical parties. In the mid-twentieth century, a second wave of religious party formation saw the emergence of Christian Democratic parties that sought either to oppose a new labor-based populism, as in Mexico and Venezuela, or to articulate a “third way” between conservatism and socialism, as in Chile (Mainwaring and Scully 2003). By the time that democracy succumbed to military rule in much of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, religion was well established as an organizing basis for political parties, alongside social class, nationalism, and loyalty to charismatic leaders such as Juan Domingo Perón.

In the decades following redemocratization in the 1980s and 1990s, some scholars identified a decline in the degree to which religion structured party competition and voting behavior in Latin America (especially Chile), arguing that new cleavages, such as divisions over the legacy of authoritarian rule, had effectively displaced the “religious question” (Tironi and Agüero 1999; Torcal and Mainwaring 2003). Yet the rise of sexuality politics in the 2000s—focused on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and the treatment of gender and sexuality in public school curricula (Smith and Boas 2024)—has reinvigorated efforts to organize parties based on religion, prompting some scholars to speak of the revival of nineteenth century-style clerical versus anticlerical conflict (Corrales 2021). Moreover, the dramatic growth in evangelical Christianity since the 1980s (Boas 2023) has created new possibilities for forming political parties around religious identity. While “religious party” was once synonymous with “Catholic party” in Latin America, some of the newest and most successful religious parties in the region draw heavily on evangelicals for support and emphasize Christian nationalist ideas that transcend denomination.

The present chapter surveys contemporary religious parties in Latin America from approximately 2005–2025. We characterize the different types of religious parties in the region; their varying levels of electoral success, longevity, and cooperation or competition with other parties; and the basis on which they appeal for support. In the latter category, we focus in particular on whether such parties appeal to a broader Christian identity versus a narrower denominational one, and whether they advance Christian nationalist ideas or, alternatively, convey respect for religious diversity, state secularism, and Latin America’s growing number of nonbelievers. We first lay out criteria for identifying religious parties, a comprehensive list of parties in the region that meet those criteria, and an overview of their features. We then delve into case studies of three of these parties: Mexico’s National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional; PAN), Guatemala’s Vision with Values (Visión con Valores; VIVA), and Peru’s Popular Renewal (Renovación Popular; RP). In general, we identify a trend toward parties that cast a broad net in their appeal to Christians and social conservatives of different stripes but are increasingly intolerant of nonbelievers, progressive social stances, and state secularism.

Identifying and Classifying Religious Parties in Latin America

Characterizing contemporary religious parties in Latin America requires that we start with clear criteria for identifying them. Definitions of religious parties in the comparative politics literature are relatively rare, and many of the scholars who seek to define the term do not attempt to apply it on any broad scale (Brocker and Künkler 2013; Mantilla 2018; Ozzano and Cavatorta 2013; Ozzano 2013; Ronseblum 2003). In this chapter, we use an operationalization similar to that of Raymond (2018), who classifies a party as religious if it has a religious name, is a member of an international confederation of religious parties, has been classified as a religious party by experts, or has a website identifying “the representation of religious issues and/or identities as fundamental to the organization and goals of the party.”

In particular, we consider the following criteria for identifying religious parties, which are readily applicable across Latin America:

1. A religious name—in practice, one containing the word “Christian”
2. Affiliation to the international or regional confederations of Christian Democratic parties, the Christian Democrat Organization of America (Organización Demócrata Cristiana de América – ODCA) and the Centrist Democrat International (formerly Christian Democrat International)
3. Classification by Wikipedia as having a religious ideology, such as Christian Democracy, Christian Humanism, Social Christianity, or Christian Right
4. Religious values included in a statement of principles on the party’s website

We were able to code these criteria for a wide swathe of parties from 18 Spanish- and Portuguese speaking countries across the region, ensuring that our search for religious parties was not biased toward those that are most prominent in news coverage or the scholarly literature. For the second and third criteria, we used Wikipedia’s Spanish- or Portuguese-language page for each party, which exist for nearly all contemporary and historical parties in the region. For the fourth criterion, we sought to visit each party’s website, or an archived version via archive.org for those that were no longer active.

To generate a starting list of relevant political parties in Latin America, we focused on those that citizens identify with. We used a question about party identification included on AmericasBarometer surveys from 2008 to the present: “At this time, do you sympathize with any political party?” If yes, “With which political party do you sympathize?” We retained all parties that were named by more than 2 percent of those who sympathize with a party in at least two waves of the survey from 2008–2018 or in the most recent wave (2023) or were named by at least 10 percent of identifiers in a single earlier wave. This approach screens out minor parties that have limited support across elections as well as most flash-in-the-pan *fenómenos* that only gained supporters in a single election. We then coded every party according to the criteria listed above. Finally, we took a closer look at each party that would be classified as religious by one or more of these criteria, eliminating those that we considered false positives.

Table 1 lists the 16 religious parties in 8 Latin American countries that we identified via this approach, along with their year of founding, their mean ideological position on a scale from Left (1) to Right (10), and their median share of lower house legislative seats in all elections in which they competed from 2005–2025. For ideological positions, we draw on surveys of legislators from the Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) project, who were asked to place multiple parties from their country on the 1–10 scale; some small parties were not included. We also list the category in which we classified each party: Catholic, Evangelical, or Christian Nationalist.

Table 1: Major Contemporary Religious Parties in Latin America

Country	Party	Seat Share	Left (1) – Right (10)	Founded	Category
Chile	Christian Democratic Party (PDC)	15.8	4.9	1957	Catholic
Chile	Independent Democratic Union (UDI)	24.2	9.3	1983	Catholic
Chile	Republican Party (PR)	9.0^	9.7	2019	Christian Nationalist
Colombia	Independent Movement of Absolute Renewal (MIRA)	0.6		2000	Evangelical
Colombia	Conservative Party (PC)	16.3	7.9	1849	Catholic
Costa Rica	National Restoration Party (PRN) / New Republic Party (PNR)	1.8	7.2	2005 / 2018	Evangelical
Costa Rica	Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC)	14.0	7.0	1983	Catholic
Ecuador	Christian Social Party (PSC)	10.2	9.2	1951	Catholic
Guatemala	National Convergence Front (FCN)	2.5	7.5	2008*	Evangelical
Guatemala	VALOR	2.8		2016	Evangelical
Guatemala	Vision with Values (VIVA)	4.1		2007	Evangelical
Mexico	National Action Party (PAN)	22.2	9.1	1939	Catholic
Peru	Christian People’s Party (PPC)	0.0	8.7	1966	Catholic
Peru	Popular Renewal (RP)	10.0	8.9	2020	Christian Nationalist
Peru	National Restoration (RN)	0.8		2005†	Evangelical
Dominican Republic	Social Christian Reformist Party (PRSC)	6.0	8.3	1984	Catholic

Note: we treat Costa Rica’s PRN and PNR as a single party given the exodus of legislators from the former to the latter in 2018. Sources: Wikipedia for founding dates and seat shares; Parliamentary Elites in Latin America (PELA) surveys, 2005–2024, for Left-Right positions. ^December 2025 election excluded; *dissolved 2024; †dissolved 2020.

Table 1 is not an exhaustive list of contemporary religious parties in Latin America, since it omits those with which few citizens identify. For example, Brazil’s small evangelical parties—including the Republicans, the party of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God—do not appear on the list because they failed to capture a sufficient share of party identifiers across two waves of the AmericasBarometer survey. Table 1 also excludes historically prominent Christian

Democratic parties, such as Venezuela's COPEI, that still exist but have lost virtually all of their support in recent decades. However, it does include those parties that have captured a minimum share of citizens' loyalties over the past several decades, which we argue is an important criterion.

Types of Religious Party: Catholic, Evangelical, and Christian Nationalist

We classify Latin America's contemporary religious parties into three distinct types: Catholic, evangelical, and Christian nationalist. Catholic parties are the oldest type of religious political party in Latin America, with an average founding year of 1952. They are also the most ideologically diverse, from Chile's centrist PDC, with a score of 4.9 on the 1–10 Left-Right scale, to several right-wing parties with scores above 9. On average, they are located on the center-right, with a score of 8. Most of these parties are members of the international and regional confederations of Christian Democratic parties, the Christian Democrat Organization of America and the Centrist Democrat International, and explicitly identify with Christian Democracy as a political movement. Catholic parties were typically founded by lay activists—e.g., Manuel Gómez Morín, a former university president who founded Mexico's PAN, or Jaime Guzmán, a former conservative student activist who started Chile's UDI—and while they have often sought to represent Catholic Church interests and political positions, they have always operated independently of the Church.

Some of these Catholic parties historically anchored their party systems as the dominant party of the right or center. In Colombia, for example, the Conservative Party, which dates back to the liberal-conservative cleavage of the 19th century, formed half of a two-party system that lasted until the 2000s (Albarracín, Gamboa, and Mainwaring 2018). In Chile, the centrist PDC was the dominant party in the 1960s and also held the presidency twice in the 1990s.

All of these Catholic parties have lost support in recent years as established party systems have been challenged by new arrivals. Many achieved their worst-ever performance (under conditions of democracy) in the most recent legislative election, including Chile's PDC and UDI (5 and 15 percent of seats in 2021), Ecuador's PSC (3 percent of seats in 2025), Mexico's PAN (14 percent of seats in 2024), Peru's PPC (0 seats in 2016, 2020, and 2021), and the Dominican Republic's PRSC (2 percent of seats in 2024). Nonetheless, thanks to their relative strength in earlier years, they are collectively the dominant type of religious political party over the 2005–2025 period, holding an average 13.6 percent of seats.

Evangelical parties are a much newer phenomenon in Latin America, with the earliest examples dating from the 1980s (Ortega Gómez 2018); the average year of founding of those listed in Table 1 is 2008. While Latin America's growing ranks of evangelicals have achieved significant political representation in some countries (Boas 2023), many evangelical politicians have gained office with the support of established secular parties. By comparison, the performance of evangelical parties has been much less impressive. They have the weakest electoral performance of the three types we examine—an average of only 2.1 percent of seats across all elections they competed in from 2005–2025. Ideologically, the evangelical parties for which we

have data are located on the center-right, but to the left of Catholic parties, with an average score of 7.3 on the 1–10 scale. Their slightly more centrist position likely reflects their legislators' comparatively moderate stances on issues of economic redistribution, in keeping with the more humble socioeconomic status of most Latin American evangelicals (Boas 2021).

In contrast to Latin America's Catholic parties, many of its evangelical parties were established by politically ambitious pastors or churches, often remaining under their close control. Colombia's MIRA was founded as the political arm of the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International (Beltrán and Quiroga 2016); Guatemala's VIVA was established to support Pastor Harold Caballeros's presidential bids in 2007 and 2011 (O'Neill 2010); and Peru's National Restoration, while founded by an interdenominational group of evangelicals, was always closely associated with Pastor Humberto Lay, its 2006 presidential candidate (Gutiérrez Sánchez 2008).

Evangelical parties' performance in legislative elections is often dependent on whether they have a strong evangelical candidate at the top of the ticket, underscoring their personalistic rather than programmatic appeal. Costa Rica's PRN won 25 percent of seats in Congress in 2018, when its presidential candidate, Fabricio Alvarado, advanced to the runoff. However, it won no seats in the next election, after Alvarado founded and ran with a new party, PNR, which gained 12 percent of seats.

The third and newest category of religious party in Latin America is one that we label Christian nationalist. The two parties in this category, Chile's Republican Party and Peru's Popular Renewal, were founded in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Their recent appearance can be attributed both to a conservative reaction to the Pink Tide—Latin American leftist governments of the 2000s–2010s, many of which pushed forward unprecedented advances in the area of sexuality politics (Mayka and Smith 2021)—and also an effort to emulate the brand of politicians such as Donald Trump, who has effectively deployed Christian nationalist rhetoric since his 2016 presidential campaign (Flores Borda 2025). In an era of increasing secularism and religious de-affiliation, Christian nationalist parties defend the notion that conservative Christianity lies at the core of national identity, that the country should be governed by Christians, and that state policy should reflect Christian principles. Such messages are not unique to parties in this category—many evangelical parties also embrace them, and Catholic parties may flirt with a more inclusive version, such as referencing shared national traditions of Christian humanism—but an exclusionary Christian nationalist discourse is front and center for some of the newest religious parties in Latin America. Christian nationalist parties are located at the far right of the ideological spectrum, with an average score of 9.3 on the 1–10 scale.

While Catholic parties were typically founded by lay activists, and evangelical parties by politically ambitious pastors, Christian nationalist parties are explicitly nondenominational. The conservative Christian heritage that they identify as lying at the core of national identity is cast as a generic one, neither Catholic nor Protestant. One of the party principles listed on the website of Chile's PR states that "in the Republican Party we believe in God" but "we are expressly a non-sectarian party," and it references "our Western Christian tradition" rather than any particular version of Christianity. Moreover, while Catholic parties are almost exclusively led

by Catholics, and evangelical parties by evangelicals, Christian nationalist parties may draw their leadership from both traditions. PR was founded by conservative Catholic politician José Antonio Kast, but its current General Secretary, Ruth Hurtado, is evangelical.

Given their recent arrival, Christian nationalist parties have competed in fewer elections than the other two types, but their performance has been relatively strong. In 2021, Chile's PR won 9 percent of seats in the lower house, and Peru's RP won 10 percent. This is less than the average for Catholic parties across the entire 2005–2025 period, but more than the average for those same parties in their most recent elections (7.6 percent). Moreover—with the caveat that forecasting electoral results in Latin America is inherently fraught—their trend may be upward. Rafael López Aliaga of Peru's RP was elected mayor of Lima in 2022 after finishing third in the previous year's presidential contest, and he narrowly missed the presidential runoff in 2026. Chile's PR won 45 percent of seats in the 2023 Constitutional Council election, and José Antonio Kast was elected president in 2025. A growth trend for these parties would be consistent with the strength of Christian nationalist politicians in other countries, such as Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil.

Profiles of Contemporary Religious Parties

To delve deeper into the differences between Catholic, evangelical, and Christian nationalist parties in Latin America, this section presents brief case studies of each type: Mexico's PAN, Guatemala's VIVA, and Peru's RP. Each party is arguably the most successful of its type, judging by its electoral performance and longevity. Mexico's PAN has a slightly lower share of legislative seats than Chile's UDI, but it has anchored the right wing of Mexico's party system for nearly a century and has elected two presidents, a milestone UDI has yet to achieve. Guatemala's VIVA has the highest legislative seat share among evangelical parties in Table 1; while it has not elected a president like FCN (Jimmy Morales, an evangelical who served from 2016–2020), it has proven to have more staying power, increasing its performance over the past four elections rather than collapsing like FCN did once Morales left office. Finally, as of mid-2025, Peru's RP held a slightly larger share of congressional seats than Chile's PR, and it had elected a mayor of Lima, the second most powerful position in Peru.¹

National Action Party – PAN (Mexico)

PAN was founded in 1939 by “a group of Mexicans who opposed the political project of the government of Lázaro Cárdenas, particularly the imposition of socialist education” (Menchaca 2023, 9). Although initially formed as a non-confessional party based on a coalition including “Catholic activists, liberals, business leaders and disaffected revolutionaries,” the Catholic faction held significant power inside the party (Mantilla 2020). PAN's foundation was characterized by “a duality embodied by the double leadership of Manuel Gómez Morín and Efraín González Luna, one secular and the other religious, respectively” (Loeaza 1996, 430). However, once Gómez Morín left the party's leadership in 1949, the Catholic faction took over (Alarcón 2023, 10).

The PAN has historically depended on Catholicism, both organizationally and doctrinally. Its internal organization in Jalisco depended on cadres from the Catholic youth groups Acción Católica de la Juventud Mexicana (ACJM) and Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos (UNEC) (Alarcón 2010, 9). PAN adopted certain ACJM organizational practices to consolidate a *panista* identity, such as study groups, courses, contests, and spiritual exercises (Alarcón 2010, 11). Doctrinally, PAN presented itself as Christian Democratic party (albeit without formal ties to the Christian Democrat International or ODCA), grounded in the Catholic Church's social doctrine and promoting a "political humanism" influenced by Jacques Maritain's integral humanism (Menchaca 2023, 9). Like other Christian Democratic parties, PAN's doctrine rested on the *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) encyclicals, in which the Catholic Church "called for the search of a 'third way' between free-market liberalism and communism, advocated in favor of policies to help the poor, and established a commitment to democracy and private property" (Mizrahi 2003, 23). After the party's progressive youth left due to the elite's opposition to joining the ODCA in 1963, PAN embraced "solidarismo" (solidarism) based on the *Mater e Magistra* encyclical as a social principle (Menchaca 2023, 21). In terms of social issues, PAN has adopted the Catholic Church's stances of opposition to abortion, homosexuality and birth control, and support of strong family values (Mizrahi 2003, 24).

Though Catholicism was a guiding principle of the PAN since its founding, the party struggled internally for decades over the question of how doctrinaire versus pragmatic it should be. According to Mantilla, "(t)he influence of religion within the PAN ebbed and flowed" but "was never hegemonic . . . [as] (t)he pragmatic factions of the PAN worried that the growing salience of religion within the party would limit its electoral effectiveness" (Mantilla 2020). In 1976, the pragmatic and doctrinaire factions deadlocked over the question of candidate nomination, and the party failed to put forward a presidential candidate to oppose the ruling PRI. After the PRI government nationalized Mexico's banking system in 1982, disaffected businessmen, known as "neopanistas," flocked to the party, bringing significant financial resources and a more pragmatic orientation focused on winning elections rather than promoting Catholic doctrine (Loaeza 2003; Mizrahi 2003). Neopanistas tended to be "more aggressive and confrontational than many of the PAN's typical candidates . . . earning the party its initial set of gubernatorial posts" including Vicente Fox in Guanajuato (Wuhs 2012, 174). This shift opened the path for PAN to become a catch-all party as it sought to expand its popular base (Mainwaring and Scully 2003a, 369). Surveys began to show a gap between PAN elites and PAN voters, with the former being ideologically compact and the latter being ideologically dispersed (Mizrahi 2003, 28-29).

However, the ascendancy of neopanistas and the shift toward a catch-all party did not mean that PAN's Catholic influence vanished. During his 2000 presidential campaign, Vicente Fox employed "the iconography of the Virgin of Guadalupe," and articulated "a ten-point promise to promote religious freedom and uphold religious values, most notably a commitment to protecting life from conception" (Mantilla 2020). This promise was presented "in an ecumenical context that aimed to appeal to a broad range of religious conservatives rather than exclusively to the Catholic Church, and as a personal promise by Fox rather than a formal political platform" (Mantilla 2020). Once elected as Mexico's president in 2000, Vicente Fox did not pursue "a distinctively Catholic agenda" but had "memorable performances of faith" that were "individual

rather than partisan,” such as “kissing the Pope’s ring on a visit to Rome” and an “emotional visit to the Vatican following John Paul II’s death” (Mantilla 2016, 243). Meanwhile, the “narrow presidential victory of long-time PAN leader Felipe Calderón in 2006 resulted in a government more willing to consistently defend Catholic positions,” with PAN playing a leading role in judicially challenging progressive laws passed by the government of Mexico City on abortion and same-sex marriage (Mantilla 2020). Calderón also publicly argued for the central role of the Jesuits in Mexico’s independence, connecting “the causes of independence with the presence and later expulsion of the Jesuits” (Perochena 2025, 12) and presenting them as “precursors of independence” (Perochena 2025, 13).

While we argue that PAN continues to be a Catholic party due to the Catholic influence on the party’s leadership, organization, and doctrine since its founding in 1939, it appears that PAN might be liberalizing, as the party has more recently advocated against “femicidios” (femicide, a term not usually accepted by religious conservatives in Latin America) and in favor of gender equality.^{2 3} The party’s 2024 presidential candidate Xóchitl Gálvez showed her support for the LGBTQ+ community by stating that “love is love” and positioned herself against conversion therapies in two different senate speeches.⁴ While she had expressed a prochoice stance before her presidential campaign, she moved to the more moderate position of solely opposing abortion criminalization during the campaign (Ochoa 2024), perhaps realizing that PAN’s support base still holds conservative social beliefs.

Vision with Values - VIVA (Guatemala)

VIVA is a Guatemalan political party founded in 2007, which we classify as an evangelical party. Its origins are usually traced to the 1983 foundation of neo-Pentecostal church El Shaddai by Harold Caballeros, a lawyer and evangelical pastor whose ministry was focused on “spiritual warfare” as described in his book *Victorious Warfare: Discovering your Rightful Place in God’s Kingdom* (Caballeros 2001).

VIVA’s origins follow the common pattern in which an evangelical party is established by a politically ambitious pastor or church. VIVA was incorporated in 2007 with Caballeros as the party’s general secretary (Dary 2018, 337) to support his 2007 and 2011 presidential campaigns (O’Neill 2012, 301). While legally precluded from participating in the 2007 election, Caballeros ran for the first time in 2011 as the presidential candidate of a coalition formed by VIVA and the “Encuentro por Guatemala” party, obtaining 6.24% of the vote (Dary 2018, 336). While El Shaddai provided VIVA with “a large and disciplined voting base for the abovementioned candidacy” (Dary 2018, 336), Caballeros was clearly unable to win over most evangelicals, who made up between 35% and 40% of the population in 2011 (US Department of State 2011).

Despite VIVA’s lackluster performance in 2011, the party was clearly oriented toward the evangelical community, offering a religious narrative to motivate their political participation. This narrative incorporated some Christian nationalist elements, but without the ideological combativeness of later Christian nationalist parties like Peru’s RP and Chile’s PR. In an era before abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and other sexuality politics issues were prominent on the political

agenda in Guatemala (Smith and Boas 2024), VIVA and Caballeros were initially focused on the issues of crime, drugs, and corruption. O'Neill (2010) argues that the spiritual warfare messaging of neo-Pentecostal churches like El Shaddai sought to convince Guatemalans that they had "the moral responsibility to save Guatemala—to be good Christian citizens." In the words of Caballeros, "[Christianity] is the only option to unite our country in the future" and "we have an obligation to produce this transformation of Guatemala into a Christian nation" (O'Neill 2010, 4-5).

Subsequent VIVA presidential candidates have shifted the focus to issues of abortion and LGBTQ+ rights but initially maintained Caballeros's more positive, less combative stance. In 2015, VIVA's presidential candidate was Zury Ríos, a neo-Pentecostal congresswoman and the daughter of former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (Dary 2022, 279). During her campaign, Ríos expressed prolife and profamily stances (Dary 2018, 338), though her arguments were neither overtly religious nor combative and were mostly grounded in the concept of "life." She stated that VIVA "was not in favor of abortion but supports family planning" because "the Constitution states that life must be respected since conception" and that "the concept of marriage, as a source of life, is between a man and a woman" (Pocasangre 2015). In 2019, the party ran Isaac Farchi, a Jewish businessman who returned to Guatemala to run for president after 18 years living in Israel. Though not a Christian himself, Farchi actively campaigned among evangelicals, appearing before the Evangelical Federation to express his commitment to defend "family values" (Medinilla 2019) and meeting with pastors and evangelical churchgoers (Castillo 2019). He also promised to oppose abortion and same-sex marriage in general terms (Medinilla 2019).

VIVA's 2023 presidential candidate, Armando Castillo, who has also served as the party's general secretary since 2015, revived a more explicitly Christian discourse associated with VIVA's founding. In a 2015 interview, Castillo argued that VIVA "has not changed and keeps its essence," having been "conceived as a long-term project for Guatemalans who mostly profess the Christian faith" but still being "a broad-based party."⁵ In a 2021 interview, Castillo reminisced about how he "met the Lord when I was 15 years old" and emphasized his evangelical background by saying that "I am a son of God, born again." In that same interview, Castillo called on congresspeople to remember that "98% [of Guatemalans] are Christians" and "thus we should know that we are representing a mainly Christian people who are conservative-minded."⁶

Under Castillo's leadership, VIVA has also moved in the direction of a more exclusionary and combative Christian nationalism. While VIVA's website does not seem to contain anything particularly religious or combative, Castillo has made it clear that he intends to fight against "a strong wave of ideologies . . . that negatively impact . . . the most important aspects of a country like life and family."⁷ In 2020, Castillo and other VIVA congresspeople promoted a law, Initiative 5272, purportedly to fight against "the persecution of any religious cult."⁸ The law, which passed in 2022, prohibited teaching sexual diversity in schools, criminalized abortion, and forbade same-sex marriage (BBC News Mundo 2022). Castillo has described abortion as "the most abhorrent crime to be committed against someone who has not yet been born and has no way to defend themselves."⁹ He has attacked "globalism," a favorite *bête noir* among Christian

nationalists, and has even waded into international culture wars, expressing support for the U.S. evangelical baker involved in the *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* case because he was being “harassed for his faith in Christ.”^{10 11}

Popular Renewal (Peru)

Popular Renewal is a Peruvian political party (re)founded in 2020, which we deem a Christian nationalist party. The beginnings of Popular Renewal are usually traced back to the rebranding of the now defunct party National Solidarity (*Solidaridad Nacional*). National Solidarity was officially registered as a political party in 1999 under the leadership of Luis Castañeda Lossio (Duárez 2024, 77), who was elected mayor of Lima in 2002, 2006, and 2014. Corruption accusations against Castañeda in connection with the Lava Jato scandal eventually led to a loss of popular support. In an effort to revive National Solidarity’s damaged brand, Rafael López Aliaga, a former Lima councilor from the party and member of the conservative Catholic organization Opus Dei, led its re-founding in 2020 as Popular Renewal, a party whose identity would be grounded in religious morals. In López Aliaga’s words, “this re-foundation is deeper than a name change” since “the solidarity concept is now elevated to a higher level . . . God, Christ” advancing “the preferential option for the poorest.” Duárez (2024, 78) interprets this rebranding as a way to keep “the preferential appeal to the popular sectors but now from a rhetoric centered in defending the family, life, moral values, and property.”

While the rebranding of National Solidarity as Popular Renewal was spearheaded by a conservative Catholic, political mobilization by evangelicals—namely, the Christian Action Party and the conservative social movement “Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas” (Don’t Mess With My Children - CMHNTM)—was an equally important part of its origins (Vildoso 2022, 71). CMHNTM was a conservative mass movement founded in 2016 by Christian Rosas, the son of Peruvian Congressman and evangelical pastor Julio Rosas, to oppose the implementation of gender equality in public education (Rousseau 2022). It drew its members from the three largest evangelical denominations—Christian and Missionary Alliance, Worldwide Missionary Movement, and Assemblies of God (*Diario Expreso*, 2019)—and also secured the support of Catholic figures such as Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani (*Diario El Comercio*, 2017). Thus, CMHNTM “spanned both the evangelical and Catholic spheres” (Semán 2019, 28), appealing to a broader Christian identity based on prolife and profamily advocacy. The ties between Popular Renewal and CMHNTM are clear, since at least three out of the thirteen Popular Renewal congresspeople elected in 2021—Alejandro Muñante, Esdras Medina, and Milagros Aguayo—were evangelical leaders of CMHNTM.

For its part, the Christian Action Party was the failed attempt by Julio and Christian Rosas to form their own party using the CMHNTM base. They began the process of registering the party in 2018 but abandoned it in 2019 after failing to collect enough signatures (Castro 2018).¹²¹³ A year later, Christian Rosas became the person in charge of Popular Renewal’s rebranding. Therefore, we argue that CMHNTM was already in the process of transforming from a broadly Christian social movement into a broadly Christian party but, unable to fulfill the legal

requirements, opted for assisting in the (re)founding of Popular Renewal as a Christian party with a largely evangelical base and a Catholic leader.

When Popular Renewal was launched, López Aliaga presented it as “a Christian party” (Hidalgo, 2020) with “a Christian doctrine” (Diario Expreso 2020). However, we contend that Popular Renewal should be deemed a Christian nationalist (CN) party, since its leaders have incorporated religious rhetoric like the US White Christian Nationalism (WCN) rhetoric deployed by Donald Trump during and after his 2016 presidential campaign. Flores Borda argues that “the forms and functions of religious discourse in Latin American politics have evolved since 2016,” as Latin American conservative politicians “mainly employed ‘pro-family’ rhetoric to oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage and ‘pro-life’ rhetoric against reproductive rights” before 2016 but began “incorporat(ing) nationalistic arguments stating the need to defend the ‘Christian identity’ of Latin American ‘Christian nations’ from national and international threats” after 2016 (Flores Borda 2025, 25-26).

López Aliaga and Muñante from Popular Renewal embraced three distinct elements of a Latin American CN political vision during the 2021 general election campaign (Flores Borda 2025, 26). First, they argued that Peru should be a Christian nation governed by Christian laws and Christian leaders who defend Christian values. López Aliaga claimed that he wanted “to place Christ at the summit of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers” (Castilla, Cabral, and Cucho 2021), while Muñante emphasized that “we need men and women with Christian principles influencing the politics of our country.”¹⁴ Second, they sought to demonize political adversaries for their supposed goal of destroying the Christian identity of Peru. López Aliaga depicted centrist and progressive public officials and politicians as “caviars” (a derogatory term for well-off leftists) who act as “parasites” who “study humanities . . . [and] get a job in government” to destroy the family, life, and churches “because they hate God.”¹⁵ Muñante characterized “the caviar left” as “wealthy people who receive money from global NGOs or large government consultancies and obey foreign interests rather than national ones” (Muñante 2022). Third, they expressed support for political violence to defend the “Christian nation.” In particular, López Aliaga called for “Death to Castillo!” before the 2021 presidential runoff between leftist Pedro Castillo and rightwing candidate Keiko Fujimori (Diario La República 2021).

Conclusion: Whither Religious Parties in Latin America?

As stated at the outset of this chapter, religious parties are one of the oldest types of political party in Latin America, dating back to the early post-independence period in some countries. They are also one of the most resilient. Amidst fundamental shifts in Latin America’s religious landscape, including the disestablishment of the Catholic Church in most countries, the rise of evangelical Protestantism, and the growing share of nonbelievers, religious parties have remained a relevant feature of the political landscape in many countries.

Yet religious parties in Latin America have also changed significantly over time. The oldest type of religious party in the region is the Catholic party, with roots either in the liberal-conservative cleavage of the 19th century or the “third wayism” of twentieth century Christian Democracy.

While most such parties in Latin America were right of center, they also typically served as a pro-democratic, moderating force vis-à-vis military regimes and other anti-democratic actors on the far right (Mainwaring 2003b). As illustrated by the PAN, some have moderated programmatically in recent years, adopting a more liberal discourse on sexuality politics issues. And in general, Catholic parties have become less religious and more pragmatic over time as they have sought to appeal to an increasingly secular and diverse electorate (Mainwaring 2003a). In this regard, the evolution of the PAN is quite representative.

While some of Latin America's Catholic parties have had impressive staying power, this form of religious party is clearly on the decline. Nearly all of the Catholic parties we identified as major religious parties from 2005–2025 have lost vote share in recent elections, and some, such as Peru's PPC, have essentially already expired. While a few Catholic parties may persist as relevant players going forward—and Mexico's PAN seems to be the best bet, given the absence of a serious competitor on the right-hand side of the political spectrum—the future of religious parties in Latin America lies elsewhere.

Newer religious parties in Latin America have sought to speak explicitly to the region's growing religious diversity. The first new type to emerge was the evangelical party, starting in the 1980s. Many evangelical parties in Latin America have been closely tied to particular churches or pastors and served, at least initially, as vehicles for their electoral ambitions. Yet most evangelical party-building efforts have been fairly quixotic endeavors. Some that achieved breakthrough success in one election—such as Guatemala's FCN, with Jimmy Morales's presidential victory in 2015, or Costa Rica's RN, with its strong showing in 2018—essentially collapsed in the next. A few, such as Guatemala's VIVA, have established themselves as small but relevant players in their country's party systems across multiple elections.

In recent years, evangelical parties have been eclipsed by the newest type of religious party in Latin America: Christian nationalist parties. Such parties are not yet widespread across the region—we found examples only in Chile and Peru—though Christian nationalism does not always take consistent partisan form, as illustrated by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Christian nationalist parties are both inclusive and exclusive. Unlike Catholic and evangelical parties, each of which has roots in one side of a deep denominational divide, Christian nationalist parties appeal to a generic, nondenominational Christian identity, and they typically have both evangelicals and Catholics among their leaders and major candidates. Yet, while they seek to transcend the historical cleavage between Catholics and Protestants, they double down on the increasingly salient religious-secular cleavage. Their discourse tends to be particularly demonizing of opponents—even to the point of calling for violence, as in the example of Peru's López Aliaga—and they openly advocate for Christians to gain control of government and impose their moral order on an increasingly diverse and secular society.

With the newfound political success of Christian nationalism in Latin America, its signature polarizing appeals may be spreading more broadly, beyond Christian nationalist parties per se. The evolution in the discourse of Guatemala's VIVA—from a party seeking to cultivate “Christian citizens” to solve problems of drugs, corruption, and violence, to one that takes much more

combative positions on culture war issues such as abortion and LGBTQ+ rights—is one such example.

Religious parties, as old as Latin American democracy itself, are here to stay—but in an evolving form. Ongoing demographic trends—the decline of Catholicism and the growth of both evangelicals and nonbelievers (Somma, Bargsted, and Valenzuela, 2017)—are likely to heighten the region’s already salient cleavage between secularism and a broad, nondenominational Christian identity. The political success of Christian nationalism globally, and particularly in the United States, fuels its growth in Latin America as well. This will be fertile ground for religious parties in the years to come.

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