

Who Leads the Flock? Religion and the Radical Right among Brazilian Migrants*

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Abstract

Brazilians in the United States voted overwhelmingly for right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro in 2022. What effect did religion, an important part of many migrants' day-to-day lives, have on their voting behavior? Based on exit polling of Brazilian expatriate voters, focus groups, and observation of local Brazilian churches, this paper explores how conservative Christianity drives support for right-wing populism among Brazilian migrants to the Boston area, who stand out for their *bolsonarista* tendencies. Christians, and especially evangelicals, are significantly more likely than other Brazilian migrants to vote for Bolsonaro, and the priests and pastors of Brazilian migrant churches are particularly willing to discuss parties and candidates. Yet neither clergy endorsements nor explicit conversation about politics at church explains this religious effect. I argue that indirect influence within congregations, which reinforces a conservative worldview in ways that are not overtly political, helps explain why observant evangelicals tend to favor Bolsonaro.

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1 Introduction

In 2022, 65 percent of Brazilians in the United States who voted from abroad in their country's presidential runoff election supported far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro. Their conservative tendencies were much stronger than those of their compatriots back home, where Bolsonaro narrowly lost with 49 percent of the runoff vote, or of Brazilian expatriates outside of the U.S., where he received 44 percent (Table 1).

What explains the marked support for right-wing populism among Brazilians in the United States? I argue that conservative Christianity, particularly evangelicalism, plays a key role.¹ Religious organizations are key institutions in many urban migrant communities, meeting not only spiritual but also material and social needs (Levitt, 2007, 2008; Manglos-Weber, 2018; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001). They are particularly important for Brazilians, a newer migrant community speaking a different language than others from Latin America. And while Brazil is still a majority-Catholic country, Brazilian migrants have long been disproportionately evangelical (Marcelli et al., 2009; Margolis, 1994; Martes, 2000; Sales, 2003). Back home, Brazilian evangelicals have been growing in numbers and political influence for decades (Boas, 2023; Smith, 2019), and the evangelical vote was crucial for Bolsonaro's 2018 victory (Layton et al., 2021).

Among Brazilian expatriate communities in the United States, I focus on those in Boston, who stand out for their *bolsonarista* tendencies. Seventy-six percent of Boston-area Brazilians supported Bolsonaro in the 2022 runoff. This figure was surpassed only by Miami (81 percent), a traditionally conservative community for Latin American expatriates. By contrast, extreme right-wing voting is a novel trend for Brazilians in Boston. In the two elections prior to 2018, when Bolsonaro was not on the ballot, Boston-area Brazilians were the least supportive of the right-wing candidate of any Brazilian expatriate community in the United States (Table 1). While Brazilians in the U.S. lean conservative in general, those in Boston seem particularly enthused about far-right populism. Thus, their voting behavior in 2022 cannot simply be explained as a continuation of historical patterns, as it might in Miami.

Table 1: Brazilian Versus Expatriate Presidential Runoff Voting Results

	2022 Election		Right Vote Share			
	Registered	Valid Votes	2022	2018	2014	2010
Global						
Brazil	155,756,933	118,254,184	49.1	55.1	48.3	43.9
Non-US Expats	514,092	229,973	43.8	66.8	73.5	53.0
US Expats	182,986	68,196	65.4	81.7	85.8	72.5
US Cities						
Miami	40,189	16,245	81.2	91.0	91.8	82.8
Boston	37,159	14,468	75.8	86.6	81.5	61.8
New York	27,937	11,399	53.2	76.4	83.6	70.9
Washington	14,073	5,046	49.4	69.4	84.8	73.6
Houston	13,804	4,206	65.3	81.2	89.2	80.9
Atlanta	12,591	4,553	74.1	88.1	89.5	76.7
San Francisco	11,698	4,015	39.1	61.9	83.6	73.7
Los Angeles	11,205	3,969	50.7	71.9	86.9	77.8
Chicago	10,302	2,837	44.1	69.7	85.8	79.9
Hartford	4,028	1,458	64.0	85.5	81.7	65.7

Source: Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. ‘Registered’ and ‘Valid Votes’ give raw numbers; other columns give percentages.

This paper adopts a multi-method research strategy to address the role of conservative Christianity in Boston-area Brazilians’ support for Bolsonaro. It draws on an original $N = 715$ exit poll of expatriate Brazilians voting in the October 2022 presidential elections; three qualitative focus groups with Bolsonaro supporters; and analysis of the worship services of ten Brazilian churches in Boston during the campaign season. I show that being Christian, and especially evangelical, is a particularly strong predictor of supporting Bolsonaro. Yet I argue that religion’s impact on Boston-area Brazilians’ political attitudes is primarily indirect, and that explicit political speech by clergy or fellow congregants does not change many minds. For evangelicals, regular religious worship helps shore up support for Bolsonaro by reinforcing a multifaceted conservative worldview held by many congregants. Meanwhile, for Catholics, religion matters for political attitudes primarily as a group identity, independent of the regularity of practice. The paper thus confirms findings from the religion and politics literature about the limits of clergy persuasion and the important role of congregations as a mechanism of political influence, especially indirect (Bean, 2014; Djupe

and Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert, 1993; Smith, 2008; Wald, Owen and Hill, 1988). It shows that these conclusions apply even in a context where politicking from the pulpit is much more common than in English-speaking American congregations.

In addition to its insights for the literature on religion and political persuasion, this paper contributes to our understanding of migration and how religion shapes migrants' political attitudes. Existing studies of migration, religion, and politics have tended to focus on participation, such as whether Catholicism makes Latino immigrants more likely to vote or protest (Eggert and Giugni, 2011; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Leal, Patterson and Tafoya, 2016). This mirrors the broader literature's focus on whether immigrants are becoming politically engaged in their new homes (Guarnizo, Portes and Haller, 2003; Hochschild and Mollenkopf, 2009; McCann and Jones-Correa, 2016, 2020). Religion's implication for how migrants incline politically, as opposed to whether they participate, has been less explored (but see Wong, 2018).

Research on Latin American migration to the United States has also largely ignored Brazilians. Existing survey projects, including those focused on religion, look only at Spanish speakers (Guarnizo, Portes and Haller, 2003; McCann and Jones-Correa, 2016, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2014; Wong, 2018). Yet Brazilians are numerically significant; they are the tenth largest national group of unauthorized migrants (Capps et al., 2020) and the second or third largest immigrant community in Boston (Marcelli et al., 2009). Their enthusiasm for right-wing populists means that they are also theoretically significant. Spanish-speaking Latino immigrants lean Democratic and have highly negative attitudes toward Trump (McCann and Jones-Correa, 2020; McCann and Nishikawa Chavez, 2016). Evangelical Latinos are more lukewarm on Trump than their white evangelical counterparts (Wong, 2018). Brazilians may buck both trends.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

Why might members of a migrant community support far-right political figures in home-country elections? The phenomenon is hardly unique to Brazilians. Other immigrant groups, including

Mexicans and French, have tended to vote conservatively in home-country elections regardless of how they incline politically in their countries of residence (Kernalegenn, Pellen and Smith, 2023; Lawson, 2003).

One common explanation for migrant conservatism concerns social status. Lawson (2003) attributes Mexican migrants' right-wing voting tendencies in expatriate elections to their higher-than-average education levels. Similarly, Bolivian migrants to the United States are whiter and more educated than those who migrate to neighboring South American countries—a likely explanation for their more conservative voting record (Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015). In the case of Brazil, migrants come disproportionately from the wealthier, more developed states in South and Southeast, and they are whiter, more middle-class, and much more highly educated than the average Brazilian back home (Levitt, 2007; Lima and Siqueira, 2007; Margolis, 1994; Marrow, 2003; Martes, 2000; Rubinstein-Avila, 2005; Sales, 2003). Hence, social status-determining variables such as race, education, and income may influence whether Brazilian migrants support right-wing candidates in Brazil.

While social status-determining variables may matter for migrant conservatism in general, religion and religiosity ought to be particularly important for migrants' support of far-right populists. Christian conservatives, and evangelicals in particular, were disproportionately likely to support Bolsonaro in 2018 (Layton et al., 2021) as well as Trump in 2016 and 2020 (Campbell, Kirk and Layman, 2021; Margolis, 2020). Beyond these two cases, conservative opposition to progressive cultural trends, which is often religiously inspired, has facilitated the rise of right-wing populism in democracies around the world (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). And as “culture war” issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights have become more prominent in national political agendas, religion has become more predictive of left–right voting behavior in Latin America, where materialist conflict use to drive decisions at the polls (Smith and Boas, Forthcoming).

In the existing literature on migrant political behavior, religion has been less commonly invoked than social class. Leal, Patterson and Tafoya (2016) note that religion is not commonly associated with voting behavior among U.S. Latinos because of the diversity of their religious communities

and experiences. Yet among Brazilians—more homogeneous, and more isolated as migrants due to a less commonly spoken native language—it could potentially play a larger role.

Several distinct aspects of religion potentially matter for Brazilian migrants' political attitudes and voting behavior. First, religion constitutes a social or group identity (Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Courtemanche, 2015; McCauley and Posner, 2019) that can potentially influence preferences over parties and candidates. Religious categories define both in-groups and out-groups, both of which have implications for voting behavior. All else equal, voters are more likely to favor a candidate with whom they share a politically salient group identity such as religion, thanks to the psychic benefit that it provides and the intrinsic sense of attachment to members of one's "team" (McDermott, 2009; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Religion was heavily politicized in Brazil's 2022 electoral campaign (Smith, 2022), which ought to increase its salience and weight in voters' decisions. While both major candidates were nominally Catholic, Jair Bolsonaro has long cultivated an ambiguous religious identity that straddles the line between Catholicism and evangelicalism (Oualalou, 2019). The major religious conflict in this election was not between denominations, but rather along Christian versus secular lines. Hence, we would expect those who identify as either Catholic or evangelical to support Bolsonaro in Brazil's 2022 election, while atheists, agnostics, and others without a religious affiliation should favor his opponent, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party.

Religion as a group identity potentially matters even for the nonobservant, but other aspects of religious influence on voting behavior depend upon religious practice. Regular attendance at worship services brings the faithful into contact with authority figures—Catholic priests or evangelical pastors—who can potentially influence their political attitudes. Opinion leaders inserted into local social networks are an important influence on political attitudes and voting behavior in democracies around the world (Baker, Ames and Rennó, 2020). Clergy not only have a regular opportunity to communicate their opinions to congregants; they also are endowed with authority by virtue of their religious leadership. Catholic priests combine the authority of the institutional Church with regular contact and an ability to communicate effectively with parishioners, which

ought to make their speech more influential than official but more distant pastoral letters and papal encyclicals (Smith, 2008). For their part, most evangelical churches endow pastors with even greater authority to interpret scripture and make recommendations to the faithful, without the constraints of hierarchy or denominational traditions (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Wald, Owen and Hill, 1990; Welch et al., 1993). In surveys, clergy perceive this potential influence over congregants' political opinions, even if they choose not to use it (Djupe and Gilbert, 2009, 31–33).

Despite their potential influence, religious leaders in the United States rarely try to shape congregants' voting behavior directly. In surveys of clergy, endorsing candidates from the pulpit is consistently the most frowned upon and least common form of political activity, with fewer than 10 percent admitting to doing so (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003; Djupe and Gilbert, 2002, 2003; Guth, 1997; Smidt, 2016). In this respect, clergy have long been constrained by the Johnson Amendment, the provision in the U.S. tax code that prohibits tax-exempt non-profit organizations from opposing or supporting candidates for office. Activities that skirt this prohibition—praying for candidates, or endorsing them in a personal capacity outside of church confines—are more common (Djupe and Gilbert, 2003; Guth, 1997; Smidt, 2016), though such indirect cues should also be less influential among congregants. In addition to legal constraints, overt politicking from the pulpit may violate important norms within congregations, making it a line that clergy are reluctant to cross even if they feel they could get away with it (Bean, 2014). Clergy political speech is much more commonly focused on policy issues than on parties or candidates (Djupe and Gilbert, 2002, 2003; Welch et al., 1993).

Yet Brazilian clergy in the U.S. may be much more likely than their native-born counterparts to freely endorse candidates, especially those in home-country elections. Some may be unaware of the prohibition on political activity by nonprofit organizations or believe it does not apply to foreign elections.² Others may think it applies but assume that the chance of legal action against a migrant church for endorsing a foreign candidate during a non-English language service is vanishingly small. Moreover, the clergy and congregants of Brazilian churches in the U.S. are immigrants from a context in which clergy endorsements of political candidates are much more common. In

Brazil, legal prohibitions target campaigning in church, but they focus on physical advertisements such as posters rather than speech, and sanctions and enforcement are minimal (Smith, 2019, 21, 86). The greater frequency of discussing partisan politics in religious contexts in Brazil, especially in evangelical churches, ought to contribute to a distinct norm or “group style” (Bean, 2014) among expatriate congregations, potentially influencing clergy apart from the question of legal constraints.

Clergy are not the only, or even the most important, source of political influence within churches; congregations potentially play a major role (Bean, 2014; Djupe and Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert, 1993; Smith, 2019; Wald, Owen and Hill, 1988). Pastors and priests may not want to risk their church’s tax exempt status by talking about candidates during a sermon, but fellow congregants can freely do so during coffee hour, a church picnic, or a Bible study group. Casual conversation about politics in informal spaces may be more likely to reach members who would be on guard against clergy efforts to persuade. The more a church community is a part of its members’ lives, the more powerful congregational influence should be (Wald, Owen and Hill, 1990). In migrant communities, churches tend to play a central role in the lives of their members because they are one of the few institutions capable of providing support and social networks, especially when linguistic barriers exist (Levitt, 2007, 2008; Manglos-Weber, 2018; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001).

Congregational influence can take the form of direct persuasive efforts by lay opinion leaders in the congregation, but it can also happen in indirect ways. In the United States, evangelicals participate in a culture in which partisanship has been subtly incorporated into religious identity, contributing to unspoken understandings of which party and candidate “people like them” are expected to support (Bean, 2014, 62). A politically-tinged Manichean worldview contributes to this process of identity formation, with evangelicals conceiving of themselves in a battle of good versus evil, and blaming “the liberals”—theological, political, or both—for America’s decline (Bean, 2014). In polarized Brazil, and among the Brazilian community in the United States, a similar process of evangelical identity formation may be taking place. Negative partisanship—antipathy toward Democrats in the United States or the Workers’ Party in Brazil—is a key component of evangelical support for the far right in both countries (Araújo, 2022; Margolis, 2020). If congregations influ-

ence political attitudes indirectly, observant Christians in the Brazilian migrant community may incline toward support for Bolsonaro even without explicit attempts by opinion leaders—whether clergy or laity—to persuade them.

In sum, religion can influence migrants' voting behavior in at least four ways: group identity, clergy persuasion, congregational persuasion, and participating in a religious community where a partisan identity is reinforced in more indirect ways. These distinct mechanisms have different observable implications. In all instances, identifying as Christian, especially evangelical, should be associated with support for Bolsonaro. If group identity is the main mechanism, this relationship should not depend on one's level of religious observance. For the other three mechanisms, more frequent church attendance should increase the magnitude of the Catholic or evangelical effect, as voters are potentially exposed to more clergy persuasion and congregational influence. If clergy speech matters, candidate endorsements by one's pastor or priest should be associated with support for Bolsonaro. If direct congregational influence makes a difference, talking about current affairs at church should correlate with support. If indirect congregational influence is the key mechanism, religious group identity should matter for voting behavior, and religiosity should moderate its effects, but neither endorsements nor talking about current affairs at church should be significant predictors.

A distinct explanation for Brazilian migrants' support for right-wing populists concerns their sources of political information. What was once a major challenge for migrant communities—staying informed about and connected to their home country—has been made significantly easier and cheaper due to the ready availability of the Internet and especially social media. Simultaneously, right-wing populists in Brazil, the United States, and elsewhere have benefited extensively from social media, including its capacity for spreading misinformation (Tucker et al., 2017). Bolsonaro relied almost exclusively on social media campaigning in his first election in 2018, due to his limited access to television advertising and his hospitalization during much of the campaign (Hunter and Power, 2019). Hence, migrants who favor social media as a source of information about current events might be more likely to support Bolsonaro.

A final possibility, that Brazilians in Boston were wooed by face-to-face campaigning abroad, is unlikely. While some parties and candidates campaign explicitly among the diaspora (Burgess, 2018; Burgess and Tyburski, 2020; Kernalegenn, Pellen and Smith, 2023; Paarlberg, 2017, 2019), Brazilian parties rarely do so (Frizzo, 2016). Overseas campaigning is more common when diasporas are large relative to the home-country population, legislators are elected to represent citizens abroad, and exiles played a major role in party development; none of these conditions applies in Brazil. In June 2022, Bolsonaro participated in a motorcycle parade and visited an evangelical church in Orlando as an add-on to a diplomatic trip (Balago, 2022); his only other visit to the United States during the campaign was an appearance at the United Nations. I observed no presence of Brazilian political parties and presidential campaigns at the 2022 Brazilian Independence Day Festival in Boston in early September, the sort of event where parties campaigning abroad routinely appear.

3 Methods and Data Sources

To address these hypotheses, this paper draws on three original data sources: an $N = 715$ exit poll of Brazilians who voted from abroad in the 2022 election at Boston-area polling places; three focus groups with Christian Bolsonaro supporters, recruited from among the survey respondents; and analysis of the livestreamed worship services of ten Brazilian churches in Boston, both Catholic and evangelical, from August–November 2022. This section describes each data source.

3.1 Exit Polls

To gather data from a representative sample of Boston-area Brazilians who voted in the October 2022 presidential election, our research team conducted exit polls at both in-person voting locations set up by the Brazilian consulate in Boston: Salemwood School in Malden and St. Tarcicius Parish in Framingham.³ Enumerators waited outside each venue and randomly approached voters who were leaving, asking them to complete a five-minute survey via a Portuguese-language self-

administered paper questionnaire. The enumerators were undergraduates or recent graduates who were fluent in Portuguese; most were Brazilian-Americans who had grown up in the U.S. Members of the team were present at each polling place during the majority of voting hours for both the first round election on October 2 and the runoff on October 30. Questionnaires were identical across the two rounds, with the exception that the runoff questionnaire asked about vote in both rounds of the election. We surveyed 310 voters in the first round and 405 in the second, a sample size that compares favorably to other exit polls of expatriate voters (Bocagni, 2011; Escobar, Arana and McCann, 2014; Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015) as well as household surveys of immigrant communities in the U.S. (Guarnizo, Portes and Haller, 2003; Marcelli et al., 2009). We pre-tested the exit poll questionnaire at the 2022 Brazilian Independence Day Festival in Boston, an annual gathering of the Brazilian community in early September.

On metrics that allow for a comparison, including gender and age, the sample is fairly representative of Boston-area Brazilians who voted in the 2022 election, as highlighted in the Appendix. In terms of religious variables, 32 percent of respondents reported that they were Catholic, while 44 percent identified as Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal, or other non-Catholic Christians.⁴ By comparison, in Marcelli et al.'s (2009) household survey of Boston-area Brazilians, fielded in 2007, 48 percent of respondents were Catholic and 37 percent were Protestant. The difference could reflect continued growth of the Protestant/evangelical population—also a phenomenon in Brazil—as well as the fact that evangelicals may have been particularly motivated to vote in this election. Nearly half of all respondents reported that they attend church once a week or more.

3.2 Focus Groups

To gain qualitative insight into the political opinions of Bolsonaro supporters and the role that religion plays in their attitude formation, I conducted focus groups, a common approach in other studies of religion and politics in Brazil (Smith, 2019) and among immigrants to the United States (Wong, 2018). When completing the questionnaire, all respondents had the option to leave their contact information and potentially receive an invitation to participate in a focus group in exchange

for a \$50 gift card; 45 percent did so.⁵ After each round of the survey, including the pre-test at the September festival, a Brazilian-American research assistant invited nearly all respondents who were religiously observant Bolsonaro-supporting Christians (either Catholic or evangelical) to participate in a focus group. The first group took place September 25, just prior to the first round of the election; the second occurred on October 15, in between the two rounds; and the third was on November 19, three weeks after the runoff. Groups were held in meeting rooms in local public libraries on a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon and ran for 1.5–2.5 hours; 6 participants attended each one. While those who show up to focus groups are an inherently self-selected sample, the focus group participants were not markedly different from those who were invited but did not attend, as highlighted in the Appendix.

As recommended by Cyr (2019), focus groups were moderated by a member of the research team who was demographically similar to participants—a first-generation immigrant to the greater Boston area who had grown up in an evangelical household. I attended all focus groups, introduced myself at the start, and asked a few follow-up questions during the conversations, but the Brazilian-American moderator was running them. Focus group topics included people’s sources of information about Brazil and the election, their opinions about Brazilian and American politics, and their religious lives, including how often politics is discussed in church; specific questions are reproduced in the Appendix. All quotes taken from the focus groups use pseudonyms.

3.3 Brazilian Church Services

In order to obtain a direct measure of how much political information is conveyed during Brazilian church services in Boston, I analyze the livestreamed weekly worship services of six evangelical and four Catholic churches in the Boston area between August 13–14 and November 5–6. Many churches began livestreaming their services during the COVID pandemic (if they did not do so already) and have continued this practice even as in-person worship resumed. For each church, I downloaded videos of weekly services from their Facebook or YouTube pages, ran them through Trint’s automated video transcription service, and read through the transcripts, looking for any

mentions of politics and extracting relevant quotes (cross-checked with the original video). I also conduct text-as-data analysis of the transcribed worship services.

In selecting churches to analyze, I sought to identify the largest and most popular Brazilian churches in Boston. For evangelical churches, I did Google and Facebook searches on “igreja boston” and “igreja brasileira boston,” following multiple pages of hits until I was not finding anything new. Nearly all of these churches had weekly livestreamed worship services. I then ranked them according to their number of Facebook followers, and I chose the top six for analysis. The resulting sample gives decent variation in terms of denomination and includes most of the major Brazilian churches in Boston identified by independent listings (Bostonmais.com, 2021; Cook and Ketcham, 2020). For Catholic Churches, I looked for the websites and Facebook pages of every parish listed by the Brazilian Apostolate of the Archdiocese of Boston (<http://apostoladobrasileiro.com>), choosing to analyze the 4 (out of 16) that offered regular livestreamed Portuguese-language services. A list of churches analyzed is in the Appendix.

Compared to visiting churches in person, analyzing videos and transcripts of worship services has both advantages and disadvantages. The present approach allows me to follow more churches, on a more regular basis, than would be possible through in-person visits, even if every member of the research team were visiting a Brazilian church every Sunday morning. There are no concerns about Hawthorne effects (research subjects modifying their behavior in response to being observed); a scholar analyzing a public video is an electronic “fly on the wall.” One avoids the awkwardness and potential inaccuracies of scribbling notes during a worship service, as well as the ethical concerns that might arise from recording or publicizing a message that may only have been intended for a limited, in-person audience on a given Sunday morning. On the other hand, analyzing livestreamed services is clearly not participant observation; one sees and hears what is taking place on stage or behind the altar but not how participants are reacting in the pews or what conversations might be taking place before and after worship services.

4 Analysis

4.1 Predicting Support for Bolsonaro

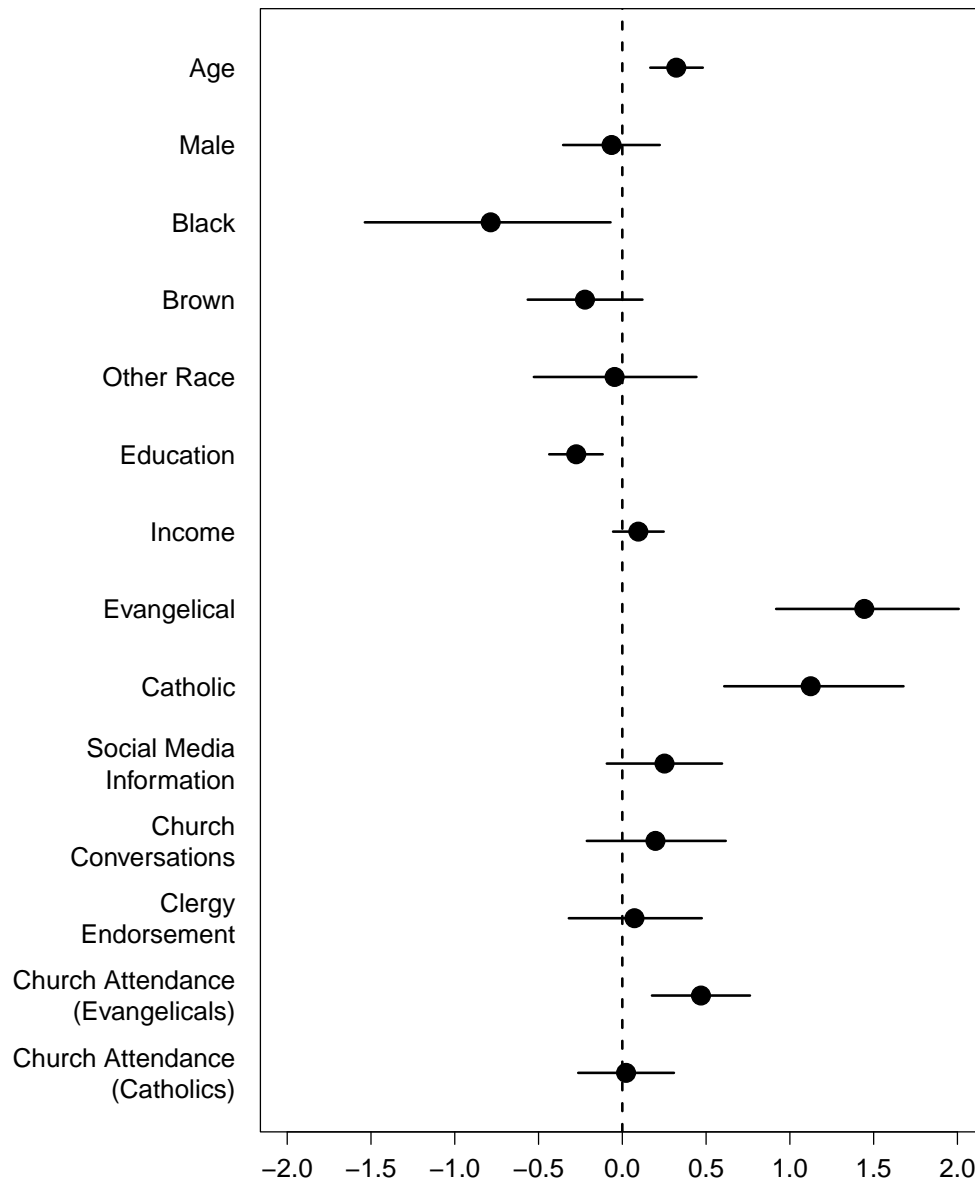
Consistent with the actual electoral results, exit poll respondents were strongly supportive of Jair Bolsonaro, with 63 and 70 percent reporting a vote for him in the first round and the runoff, respectively. What explains Boston-area Brazilians' support for right-wing populism?

To test the hypotheses outlined in section 2, I estimate a probit regression in which the dependent variable is the respondent saying that they voted for Bolsonaro in the first round of the election. To operationalize social status, I use respondents' self-declared race (indicator variables for Black, brown, and other race, with white as the reference category), education, and income. Religious group membership is measured in terms of identifying as Catholic or as evangelical, Protestant, Pentecostal, or non-Catholic Christian, with no or another religion as the reference category. Both religious indicator variables are interacted with frequency of church attendance. To test the hypothesis about clergy influence, I use an indicator for reporting that the respondent's pastor or priest spoke in favor of or against a candidate in Brazil's 2022 presidential election. To measure the potential for direct congregational influence, I include an indicator for mentioning church (among several non-exclusive options) as a place where the respondent talks about "what's going on in the world." To test the hypothesis about political information sources, I include an indicator for relying on social media as a major source of information about Brazilian current events. Finally, I include controls for age (in years) and an indicator for male respondents (versus female/other gender). Age, education, income, and church attendance are standardized, so estimates represent the effect of a one standard deviation change, and the estimates for the evangelical and Catholic indicators represent the effect for those with average levels of church attendance.

The results of this analysis, summarized in Figure 1 and in an Appendix table, confirm that religion is a major factor in explaining Brazilian migrants' support for right-wing populism. At an average level of church attendance, evangelicals and Catholics are significantly more likely than those with no religion, or a non-Christian religion, to vote for Bolsonaro. The estimated effect of

these religious indicators dwarfs that of any other variable in the model.

Figure 1: Predicting Brazilian Migrants' Support for Bolsonaro



Note: Icons show point estimates and lines give 95% confidence intervals from a probit regression of vote for Bolsonaro in the first round in 2022 (versus other/none/blank/null). Age, education, income, and church attendance are standardized, so estimates represent the effect of a 1 standard deviation change. White is the reference category for race and none/other is the reference category for religion. Church attendance is interacted with religion; in place of the main effect and interaction terms, I report the marginal effects for evangelicals and for Catholics. N = 479.

For evangelicals, the results suggest that indirect persuasion within congregations matters most

for support of Bolsonaro. Leaving other covariates at their observed values and varying church attendance across its inter-quartile range, an evangelical who attends church once or twice a month has a 77 percent chance of supporting Bolsonaro, whereas one who attends more than once a week has a 90 percent chance. However, neither clergy endorsements nor talking about current affairs at church are significant predictors of supporting Bolsonaro. This suggests that church attendance matters for evangelicals because of indirect influence rather than explicit efforts, by either clergy or fellow congregants, to persuade.

For Catholics, church attendance does not significantly boost support for Bolsonaro. Rather, simply identifying as Catholic, even nonpracticing, is what makes a difference. Hence, it seems like group identity matters most, rather than political influence within places of worship. This finding contrasts with Brazilians' voting behavior in the 2018 election (Layton et al., 2021), where being Catholic was not a significant predictor of support for Bolsonaro. In contrast to Brazil, Catholicism is a minority religious tendency in the United States, as it is among the Brazilian community in Boston. Those with no religion are also a much larger share of the population—around 30 percent in the United States, versus 12 percent in Brazil (Balloussier, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022)—and large urban areas like Boston are a particularly secular environment. While identifying as Catholic is simply the default in Brazil, retaining one's Catholic identity after immigrating appears to be a more politically meaningful choice.

In contrast to religious variables, information sources and social status-related variables have smaller and inconsistent associations with support for Bolsonaro. Black respondents are less likely to vote for him, though these effects are imprecisely estimated due to their small share of the sample. Higher incomes have no significant effect. Education matters somewhat, but in the opposite direction as predicted by social status explanations for migrant conservatism; those with less education are more likely to favor Bolsonaro, as has also been shown for Brazilians in Brazil (Layton et al., 2021). Finally, relying on social media as an information source has no significant association with support for Bolsonaro, perhaps reflecting its ubiquity and users' tendency to consume information that reinforces existing views. This finding echoes research on Brazil's 2018 election

showing that social media use did not consistently benefit Bolsonaro (Rennó, 2020).

4.2 Further Evidence on Politics in Church

Analysis of the exit poll survey data suggests that religious variables matter a great deal for Brazilian migrants' support for Bolsonaro. However, direct political persuasion, in the form of clergy speech about parties and candidates or congregational discussion of current events, has no effect. Indirect influence within congregations seems to be the major reason why evangelicals favor Bolsonaro, and group identity, rather than any persuasive aspects of the worship experience or congregational life, accounts for why Catholics support him. In this section, I draw on evidence from the focus groups and church service analysis, combined with descriptive statistics from the survey, to delve deeper into how religion and religiosity may influence migrants' political attitudes.

4.2.1 Clergy Political Speech

Based on responses to the survey, Brazilians in Boston are much more frequently exposed to explicitly political messages in church than their American counterparts in the United States more broadly (Table 2). I asked if the respondent's priest or pastor had spoken in favor of or against a candidate in Brazil's 2022 election. Among respondents who attend church at least 1–2 times a month, 27 percent of evangelicals and 15 percent of Catholics answered yes. These figures are not as high as in Brazil's highly polarized 2018 election, when Bolsonaro first ran for president, but they are higher than in the more ordinary Brazilian elections of 2014 and 2010. They are also far above figures from the United States in the polarized elections of 2000 and 2016, where no more than about a tenth of Protestants report clergy endorsements. Some of the Brazilian respondents attend English-language American congregations, so the rate of explicitly political speech in Boston-area Brazilian churches is almost certainly higher than reported here.

On the other hand, even in those churches where pastors speak about politics, the vast majority of worship time is devoted to strictly religious topics. Figure 2 summarizes results from a word

Table 2: Clergy Speech on Candidates/Parties: Comparative Statistics

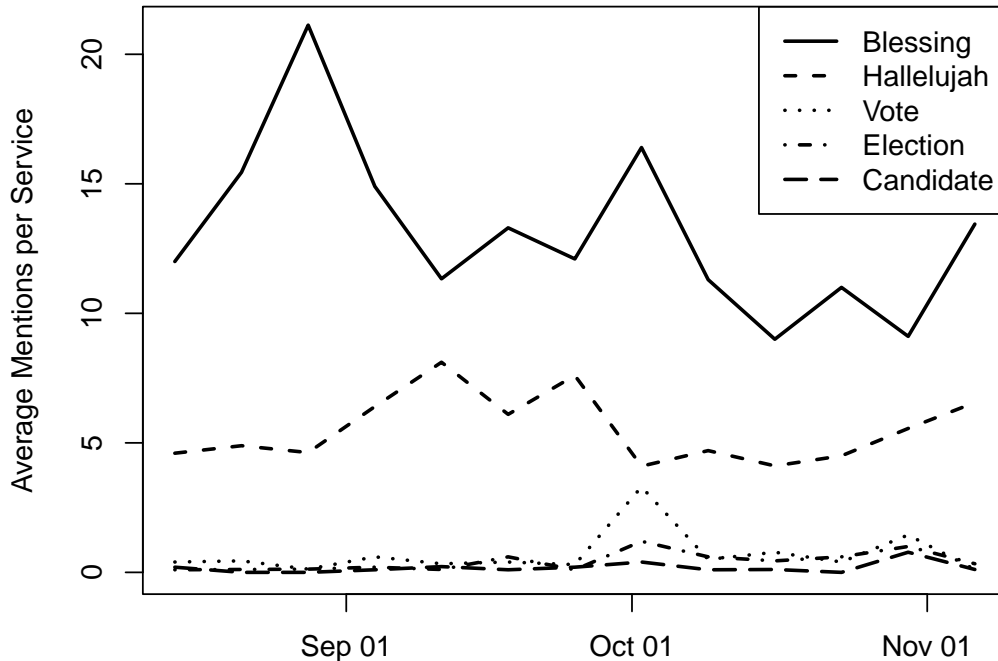
	Support	Oppose	Either	Discuss
Boston Brazilians 2022				
Protestant	24.2	4.2	26.9	
Catholic	14.0	3.1	14.7	
Brazil 2018				
Protestant	52.1			
Catholic	34.1			
Brazil 2014				
Protestant	19.7			20.4
Catholic	7.1			15.5
Brazil 2010				
Protestant	21.8			25.5
Catholic	9.4			10.8
United States 2016				
Protestant	5.5	8.5	10.7	
Catholic	2.1	3.4	4.1	
United States 2000				
Protestant	9.1			
Catholic	7.5			

NOTE: Figures are percent of churchgoing (at least once a month) respondents of each religion reporting that their clergy spoke about presidential candidates or their parties during the campaign. Data sources: Boston Brazilians Survey 2022; Democracy on the Ballot: Brazil 2018 Survey (using sampling weights due to the online sample); Brazilian Electoral Panel Study 2010 and 2014; Pew American Trends Panel Wave 18 (2016); American National Election Studies 2000 Time Series.

count analysis (discussed further in the Appendix) of transcribed livestreamed worship services from ten Brazilian churches. Common worship terms, such as “blessing” and “hallelujah,” appear much more frequently than political terms such as “vote,” “election,” and “candidate.” References to political terms peaked on the two election days, October 2 and October 30, but many of these mentions were entirely nonpartisan, such as a pastor mentioning at the start of the service that people would likely be trickling in late because of long lines at the polling place. A pastor or priest who speaks about parties or candidates is likely to do so via a prayer, announcement, or isolated comment during a sermon on election day, rather than a constant drumbeat of political content

throughout the campaign season.

Figure 2: Religious and Political Terms in Boston-Area Brazilian Church Services



Note: based on automated text analysis of church service transcripts; see text for details.

Qualitative examples from the livestreamed Brazilian church services give a sense of what form clergy speech about candidates might take. In four of the six evangelical churches (and none of the Catholic churches), clergy offered pro-Bolsonaro or anti-Lula comments on election day or the Sunday before. At one church on election day, the pastor closed the service with “God Bless Bolsonaro, brothers, and yes, we’re going to pray for him... It’s crazy for anyone, any believer, to vote for someone else.” At another church, the pastor criticized Bolsonaro’s major opponent: “I’m not for Lula, no way. Lula has to get out of there by any means, I wouldn’t vote for him even if I were dead.” Others endorsed Bolsonaro in more of a tongue-in-cheek, wink-wink, nod-nod fashion. At one church on election day, before offering a closing prayer for the nation, the pastor asked for a Brazilian flag to be displayed on the video screen behind him. A Bolsonaro 2022 campaign poster promptly appeared, and the pastor remarked, to applause and laughter, “There we go! Oh, not that one, sorry!” The Brazilian flag replaced it, and the prayer began.

These examples of pro-Bolsonaro or anti-Lula comments offer insight into why clergy endorsements, though more common than in English-speaking American churches, may not actually affect Brazilian migrants' voting behavior. Even with the more serious, less tongue-in-cheek comments, one gets the sense that clergy knew they were preaching to the converted and did not need to expend much effort to win votes for Bolsonaro. Comments about candidates and parties were always brief, even on election day. The only extended discussion of the election, running about three and a half minutes, came from a pastor who did not endorse any of the candidates, but instead lamented the divisiveness of the campaign and called on Christians to move beyond their political differences.

Similarly, nearly all of the Bolsonaro supporters who participated in the focus groups reported that explicit discussion of politics in church was rare. According to José, a Catholic, the topic only came up indirectly: "in the church that I attend, they ask God to enlighten politicians. . . I've never heard [my priest] talk about parties, never." Maria, an evangelical, said "I think it is really great that my pastors, they don't show, there's no way to know who they voted for." Some participants had encountered political discussion before; Adriana, an evangelical, said she used to attend a Brazilian church in Boston where talking about politics was more common than in her current American church. But most participants reported that clergy never talk explicitly about politics during church, whether because there are too many different political opinions within a congregation, too little time during the service, or simply that the purpose of worship is not politics.

Focus group participants reported that it was more common for clergy to talk about social or political issues without directly making a connection to parties or candidates. Several participants, both Catholic and evangelical, mentioned that their clergy took a clear stance against abortion. According to Pedro, an evangelical, his pastor made it clear that biblical "principles should be taken into consideration, principally at the time of voting, in the choice of your candidate. That was clear, but he never mentioned a name, he never mentioned a party." João, an evangelical, said he would actually like to see pastors and priests spend a bit more time talking about the biblical position on issues such as abortion and drugs and asking the congregation to compare the candidates with that biblical position.

4.2.2 Congregational Influence

While analysis of livestreamed worship services can capture clergy's formal messages about politics, a lot of potential persuasion happens in more informal spaces of socialization, such as a church picnic on a Saturday afternoon or the ubiquitous coffee hour after worship. Several focus group participants mentioned that politics is more commonly discussed in these informal spaces, especially at election time. According to Adriana, an evangelical: "I think that it depends a lot on the moment. . . now, in electoral season, it's going to be a common subject. Outside of election season, maybe soccer is more the topic." Paulo, an evangelical, mentioned that during campaign season, a common discussion topic was how people who purport to believe in biblical principles can support leftist candidates who go against those principles. Different congregations have different norms, however. Ana, a Catholic, said that in her parish, politics "is not a common topic of discussion, because it is very polemical and everyone has an opinion."

Yet it was also apparent from the focus groups that there is ample potential for indirect influence within congregations, as people's interactions with one another reinforce multiple elements of a distinct conservative worldview. As Brazilian migrants and churchgoing Christians, the six participants in each of the three focus groups were people who, despite not knowing each other (with one exception) before setting foot in the discussion room, could plausibly have been members of one or a couple congregations.⁶ As such, their interactions during the focus groups constitute something of a microcosm of Brazilian migrant churches and the conversations that might emerge therein. While the focus group moderator asked specific questions, there was plenty of freeform discussion that followed, allowing for particular topics, and points of consensus, to emerge spontaneously.

Below, I list elements of this conservative worldview that emerged spontaneously in one or more focus groups, along with representative quotations. Comments on these topics often engendered nodding, murmurs of approval, and supportive interjections from other group members.

- Patriotism

- João (evangelical): "As long as the schools don't go back to teaching patriotism, no

one is getting ahead.”

– Antonia (evangelical): “Patriotism. We have to first create it at home, then in the schools.”

- Anticommunism and the military regime

– Juliana (evangelical): “I am against communism. Why?... We can’t say we’re going to equalize the world. Equality doesn’t exist. We are different.”

– José (Catholic): People criticize the military regime “because they had prisons, and all that stuff about killing 100,000 people. But it wasn’t like that at all. . . they were against communism.”

– João (evangelical): “Who saved Brazil? It was the military.”

- Leftist indoctrination in schools

– Maria (evangelical): “Here, in elementary school, my son, when Trump was in office, they were teaching *partisanship*,⁷ speaking disrespectfully.”

– Pedro (evangelical), on his education in Brazil: “It was sixteen years of brainwashing, from kindergarten through the university.”

– Carlos (Catholic): “The universities in Brazil, mainly the federal ones, they are created within an ideological system.”

Participants did not agree on *every* aspect of a conservative worldview. Some were much more favorable toward the welfare state, while others espoused free market attitudes. Most, understandably, supported more liberal immigration laws. But enough elements of this worldview emerged as seemingly consensus positions in the focus groups that, if conversations at church picnics and coffee hours tend to flow along similar lines, there is definite potential for influence and persuasion. Without ever mentioning candidates, elections, and parties, discussion of moral and political issues within congregations can encourage ideological conformity by clearly indicating the positions that

“people like them” are expected to hold. Right-wing voting behavior has the potential to emerge naturally within such a community simply because the majority of members cannot imagine doing anything else.

5 Conclusion

In recent years, the United States and Brazil have both experienced extreme political polarization and the coming to power of right-wing populists who posed serious threats to democratic stability both in and out of office. In both countries, an emerging cleavage between Christian conservatives and secular progressives is contributing to this polarization, and conflict around “culture war” issues and identities has helped secure a loyal base of support for the radical right.

Regardless of whether they arrived in the United States three decades or three months ago, Brazilians in major immigrant communities like Boston have hardly escaped the climate of political polarization in their home country. Bolsonaro 2022 bumper stickers were visible on cars around Boston during the campaign, and campaign posters were on display in Brazilian restaurants. At one Boston-area polling place on Brazil’s election day, a pickup truck flew Brazilian and “Don’t Tread on Me” flags side by side. Partisans of left-wing candidate Lula, while fewer in number, showed their colors as well. I observed voters leaving the polling place dressed head to toe in red, the color of the Workers’ Party, or draped in a flag of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, one of its major supporters. The weekend after Lula’s runoff victory, Bolsonaro supporters occupied Harvard Square in Cambridge for a rally protesting the election result. And these physical manifestations of political polarization among Brazilians abroad surely pale in comparison to social media, where partisan and fake news content shared by family and friends flows readily across borders via WhatsApp groups.

Brazil’s 2022 campaign was particularly polarized along religious lines, with the leading candidates visiting churches, seeking endorsements from televangelists, and trading accusations of making pacts with or being possessed by the devil. Local priests and pastors often waded into the

fray, supporting a candidate or criticizing his opponent from the pulpit. In this respect, Brazilian communities in the United States were more similar to their homeland than their adopted country. While most clergy in the United States rarely make political endorsements that could jeopardize their churches' tax-exempt status, Brazilian clergy in Boston do so much more freely, as shown by the survey analyzed in this paper.

Religion mattered in particular for Brazilian migrants' voting behavior in the 2022 election. In this paper, I show that being a Christian, whether evangelical or Catholic, is a strong predictor of supporting Bolsonaro over his opponent Lula. For evangelicals, these results confirm prior findings about home-country voting behavior in the 2018 election (Layton et al., 2021). For Catholics, this finding is new; it suggests that Catholic identity abroad may be more politically meaningful than in Brazil, where it is still the default.

Yet I argue in this paper that direct persuasion within churches—in the form of either clergy endorsement from the pulpit or explicit conversation about the election within congregations—does not explain evangelical and Catholic support for Bolsonaro among Boston-area Brazilians. Neither clergy endorsements nor mentioning church as a place where one talks about current affairs are predictive of the vote. Analysis of livestreamed services from ten Brazilian churches in Boston suggest that endorsements, when they happen, are short, fleeting, and sometimes tongue-in-cheek, with the distinct feel that clergy are preaching to the converted. Participants in focus groups report that, in some churches, both clerical and lay discussion of politics violates important norms.

Rather, what seems to matter most for Brazilian migrants' right-wing voting behavior is indirect influence within congregations, where day-to-day interactions serve to reinforce a conservative worldview in ways that are not explicitly political or even religious per se, but that nonetheless contribute to a shared understanding about the types of candidates that Christians should support. In focus groups, several areas of consensus emerged naturally and independently—the importance of teaching patriotism to children, the role of Brazil's military regime in opposing communism, and charges of leftist indoctrination within schools. These issue stances are all closely associated with Bolsonaro, but participants did not link their positions to his presidency or candidacy for reelec-

tion. To the extent that participating in evangelical worship, and evangelical culture more broadly, reinforces this conservative worldview, it helps explain how church attendance can increase the magnitude of evangelical support for Bolsonaro, even if clergy endorsements and explicit discussion of current events in church has no direct effects.

This paper thus extends Bean's (2014) argument about evangelical political identity in the United States, showing that congregational subcultures can be a key mechanism of indirect political influence even in churches where overt discussion of candidates and elections is not necessarily taboo. It also underscores the limits of clergy political influence in a context where clergy are not shy about speaking up. In English-speaking congregations in the United States, direct clergy effects on voting behavior are the dog that didn't bark: there is little evidence that priests and pastors influence how their congregants vote (Smith, 2008), but also little evidence that they try to do so (Beyerlein and Chaves, 2003; Djupe and Gilbert, 2002, 2003; Guth, 1997; Smidt, 2016). Here, I show that even among a community where direct clergy endorsements are much more common, indirect influence within congregations matters more.

Notes

¹In this paper, I use the term “evangelical” in the same way that it is commonly used in Latin America—to denote all Protestants, including Mainline denominations such as Methodists and Presbyterians that would not normally be classified as evangelical in the English-language sense of the term. While this usage is nonstandard in the United States, it is common in English-language studies of Brazil and other Latin American countries (Boas, 2023; Smith, 2019). It is also common among Brazilian migrants who, like their compatriots back home, regularly think of Christians as either Catholic or evangelical. Moreover, many denominations that would be classified as Mainline in the United States look much more evangelical in terms of their theology and practice in Brazil, as well as among the Brazilian diaspora.

²The tax code is unclear on this point; the language refers generically to “any candidate for public office.”

³I informed the consulate of our research plans in advance.

⁴I listed these four categories under a single response option, given the expansive meaning of the term “evangélico” in Portuguese, which is commonly used as a synonym for Protestant, as well as the fact (underscored during pretesting) that a growing number of Brazilian evangelicals attend non-denominational churches and simply identify as “Christian.” While enumerator-administered surveys of Brazilians often distinguish between Pentecostals and other evangelicals, self-administered surveys commonly use a single omnibus category (e.g., Layton et al., 2021) given many respondents’ uncertainty about where they fit.

⁵To maintain survey respondents’ anonymity, enumerators tore off the slip of paper with the contact information after receiving a questionnaire where this section had been filled out.

⁶Even Catholics sometimes attend Brazilian evangelical churches, and vice versa; the focus group participants offered several such examples.

⁷Literally, “ensinando partido,” a clear reference to the Escola Sem Partido (School Without Party) movement in Brazil.

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