


# Religious Engagement, Civic Skills, and Political Participation in Latin America

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*To what extent has the growth of Evangelicalism in Latin America contributed to political participation across the region? A number of scholars of religion and politics in the United States have suggested that Evangelicalism promotes the development of civic skills necessary for political engagement, while the Catholic Church, due to its hierarchical structure, provides fewer opportunities for skill acquisition. In this paper, we apply this debate to Latin America to test whether civic skills developed in Catholic and Protestant church activities lead to differential participation rates in 18 countries. We utilize the 2014 Pew Religion in Latin America survey to test these effects, and find that Protestant churches do indeed promote skill-developing activities at higher rates, but that Catholics, when involved, are more likely to translate this religious participation into political action. We conclude that political scientists must better understand the organizational role of religion in promoting political engagement worldwide.*

**Keywords:** *civic skills, Latin America, Catholicism, Protestantism, political participation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) influential study on political participation, *Voice and Equality*, scholars of religion and politics in the United States have increasingly studied the effect of civic skill development on political participation. In particular, a major focus has been which religious affiliations best facilitate adherents' acquisition of the skills necessary to participate in the political system and how those skills are translated from a religious setting to a political setting (e.g., Campbell 2016; Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001). Furthermore, political scientists have attempted to explain differential rates of participation for social groups based on their civic skill tendencies; for example, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) posit that Latinos tend to participate in politics at lower rates than other ethnic groups due to their Catholic background and, by extension, low rates of skill acquisition. This has largely become the driving debate for scholars of Latino religions and political participation (Campbell 2016).

Outside of the American politics literature, however, the focus on civic skills is often overlooked in favor of studies examining direct religious mobilization (but see McClendon and Riedl 2015) or cases in one country or localized region (e.g., Hale 2015, 2018; Rink 2018; Smith

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2016; Trejo 2009). While much of this literature likewise focuses on religious affiliation, it predominantly assesses how different churches coordinate religious responses to public policy or other government activity through explicitly political means. But civic skills can also be developed in nonpolitical settings, such as the workplace or voluntary organizations. Within the religious sphere, most civic skills are developed through participation in the ancillary activities of churches, which may not have political goals (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Given that Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's original theory rests on the structural makeup and additional activities of Catholic and Protestant churches, many of which are international institutions or rely on similar organizational structures across regions, we should expect civic skills to play an equally important role in the political mobilization of social groups outside of the U.S. context. As such, studies that do not take into account the social contexts in which civic skills are developed and applied to political action do not fully capture the impact of religion on political behavior worldwide.

This paper advances the study of civic skills outside of the United States by utilizing the case of Latin America. This region is particularly ripe for study on religious differences in civic skill development given its unique history and changing religiopolitical landscape. The countries have historically been dominated by the Catholic Church, but religious pluralism in the region has become increasingly salient as Evangelical churches increase their number of adherents (e.g., Chesnut 2003; Parker 2016). Moreover, religion has often been infused into Latin American politics, meaning that capturing its full effect through analyses of civic skill development is important for understanding patterns of political engagement. Finally, as the "sending countries" for the hypothesized differences between Latinos and others in the United States, Latin America represents a direct extension of much of the basis for the civic skills literature in American politics.

In the following sections, we utilize the 2014 Pew Religion in Latin America survey to examine which individuals are most likely to participate in religious activities that lead to civic skill development, whether they do indeed lead to higher rates of political participation, and whether the effect of those skills on politics differs by religious tradition. We hypothesize and find that respondents who participate in church activities outside of merely attending religious services are significantly more likely to engage in political action. We also find important differences between Catholics and Protestants in terms of their civic skill development, and conclude that, should religious bodies hold an interest in politically mobilizing their members, Catholic churches could increase the number of opportunities they provide for their adherents to develop civic skills while Protestant churches could increase attention toward translating the skills developed into political engagement.

### **CIVIC SKILLS, RELIGIOUS DENOMINATIONS, AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

In their effort to explain why U.S. Latinos participate in politics at lower rates than Anglos or African Americans, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) turn to what is perhaps a surprising source: the Catholic Church. Aside from other political and sociodemographic disadvantages, they theorize that because Latinos are more likely to be Catholic than those from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, they have fewer opportunities to develop civic skills—those skills necessary to be effective in political action, such as public speaking, argumentation, or the organizational skills needed to assemble a protest, for example. They argue that because the Catholic Church is more hierarchical than Protestant churches (which operate through a decentralized, congregational setup), Latinos would have fewer opportunities to take part in the leadership and other church activities where these skills are developed. Rather, priests and other church leaders would fill the important roles that would otherwise allow for the acquisition of civic skills by lay religious adherents.

Since Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's original argument, scholars of American politics have debated the merits of this suggestion as it relates to Latinos and other social groups. Some have indeed found that Protestants and Catholics develop civic skills at different rates, leading to a religious disadvantage for Latinos (e.g., Campbell 2016; Espinosa 2005; Hritzuk and Park 2000). However, a number of other scholars have found that the participation rates of Latino Catholics and Protestants are not statistically distinguishable or that Catholics are even more likely to participate than their Protestant counterparts (e.g., DeSipio 2007; Djupe and Neiheisel 2012; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Stevens-Arroyo 2012). Importantly, as Jones-Correa and Leal (2001) point out, if differences in civic skill development are indeed due to the structural features of churches rather than the identity of the respondent, then we should see similar results for Anglo Catholics and Protestants or those from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. By extension, the Catholic Church is a global institution, and many Protestant churches are similarly decentralized around the globe. If these differences exist, we may thus expect to see them in contexts outside of the United States. In this analysis, we apply it to the Latin American context, which should correlate partially with analyses of Latinos in the United States.

As these writings point out, civic skills can be developed through regular church attendance, but they are predominantly acquired through participation in small group activities outside of normal worship services (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Whitehead and Strope 2015). The more participatory nature of these groups allows adherents to pick up skills that they can then translate into political engagement. For example, the organizational skills needed to run a Bible study could easily correlate to the skills necessary to organize a neighborhood community action group. Though still not a measure of civic skills themselves, participation in small group activities is often used as a proxy measure for civic skill development; indeed, nearly all analyses of civic skills rely on variables addressing participation in church activities as a means of assessing skill acquisition (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Aside from debates over religious tradition, the development of civic skills in churches is also premised on a variety of other demographic characteristics. For example, Schwadel (2002) finds that economic inequality persists in civic participation and skill development within the church, as those with lower incomes are less likely to take part in the ancillary activities of the church. Furthermore, others have found gender, education, and religiosity to influence whether one takes on important leadership roles within the church (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2006; Whitehead and Strope 2015). Yet, churches are not merely reinforcing political inequality; the development of civic skills is also often heralded as an equalizing force when it comes to political engagement and representation (Lichterman and Potts 2008; Smith 2017; Smidt et al. 2008; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In a case study of a municipal election in Brazil, Smith (2017) finds that churches provide a vital forum for political discussion and civic skill development, which helps bridge the education gap among low-income citizens. Because churches are relatively open, accessible, and common institutions, they provide opportunities to bring new individuals and groups into the political system. However, the effectiveness of civic skills in promoting these political gains has largely been tested through the case of the United States. To determine the role that civic skills might play in promoting political participation elsewhere, we now review the unique influence of religion in Latin American politics.

### RELIGION AND PARTICIPATION IN LATIN AMERICA

The recent changes in the religious landscape in Latin America provide an ideal setting to analyze the influence of religion on political behavior, particularly in the acquisition of civic skills and political participation. While the Catholic Church still has a predominant presence in most countries, citizens in Central American countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras,

and Nicaragua increasingly identify as Evangelical Protestants (around a third of its population, according to our data). In Mexico, a traditionally Catholic country, Evangelical adherents have increased in past decades, particularly in the South. In fact, Catholics are now minority groups in municipalities in Chiapas, the state with the most important Evangelical presence in Mexico (see Hale 2018; Trejo 2009). Moreover, Evangelical churches in countries like Brazil and Colombia are very politically active through Congress and civic organizations (Smith 2016, 2019). The increasing importance of Evangelical churches in Latin America suggests variation in the unique influence of religion in politics.

Prior comparative research in Latin America has mostly focused on the role of the Catholic Church as an institution (Gill 1994; Hagopian 2008, 2009; Hale 2015), the influence of religious parties in the political process (e.g., Christian democratic parties; Mainwaring and Scully 2003), or the effect of religion on individual political behavior, such as voting patterns (Smith 2019). As Boas and Smith (2015) discuss, Catholics and Protestants do not seem to have consistent voting patterns, and the differences tend to vary across countries and time. For example, given that the Catholic Church tends to be more progressive in some countries (Brazil, Central American countries) and more conservative in others (Mexico, Colombia), Catholic voters receive different cues from religious leaders. Moreover, while Christian democratic parties continue to play a major role in countries like Chile, in some other countries their electoral stand has diminished (Perú, Ecuador, Costa Rica) or became almost irrelevant (El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala). They have also collapsed along with the broader party system (Venezuela), or their Christian democratic ideology has diminished (Mexico).

In the case of Evangelical churches, the variation is even broader. In some countries, Evangelical churches have endorsed left-of-center candidates (Marina Silva in Brazil in 2010) or right-of-center candidates (RN and UDI in Chile, PAN in Mexico in 2006, the PRI in Chiapas, Encuentro Social in 2018, Centro Democrático in Colombia). However, their ideological agenda tends to be more consistent focusing on moral issues opposing divorce, gay marriage, and abortion across Latin America. As the growth of Evangelicalism in the region indicates, though, Protestant churches have become a cultural and political force, which must be taken seriously in studies of social movements and religion and politics (Rink 2018).

Increased religious pluralism across Latin America has political consequences, particularly for patterns of electoral participation among Catholics and Evangelical Protestants. Unlike expectations for Latinos in the United States (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995), however, Catholics across Latin American contexts tend to participate in politics at higher rates than Evangelicals (Boas and Smith 2013). The tendency for Catholics to participate remains despite significant increases in Evangelical populations and increased competition, both political and social, between Catholic and Evangelical Protestant adherents and leaders (Trejo 2009). Denominational differences are equally as important as church involvement, which though it has long been thought to exert an independent influence on civic and political participation, may only impact participation through these denominational contexts (Carlin and Love 2015).

Religious divisions are also gaining prominence as moral and cultural issues become more important as political issues. The issue of gay rights in particular has begun to shape cultural politics across Latin America as there are some indications of liberalization in many countries (Encarnación 2016). Chile and Argentina have passed same-sex union and marriage legislation, and patterns of liberalization are particularly evident among younger generations. There is even some evidence of liberalization on the issue among Catholics, who have previously been against expansion of gay rights (but see Hale 2018). Evangelicals do not appear to adopt more liberal positions on rights, and the issue creates ideological and social cleavages between Evangelicals and Catholics. The salience of moral issues has significant consequences for who participates in politics.

These patterns of participation and issue organization lead to divergences in vote choice for Catholics and Evangelicals, although the exact character of these differences vary across

contexts (Fonseca 2008). Evangelical voters, for example, have supported candidates from both left and right parties, even within the same country (Boas 2016; Smith 2013). Catholics too have supported candidates from across the political spectrum and Catholics and Evangelicals have supported the same candidate in Nicaragua (Gooren 2010). Despite some evidence of variation in ideological voting, other evidence suggests that religious individuals mobilize religious identities to support candidates of similar religious backgrounds (Boas and Smith 2015). When tested together, however, differences in voting patterns between Catholics and Evangelicals seem to center on identity voting, rather than ideological difference (Boas and Smith 2015). Ideological differences seem to matter most for differences between religious and nonreligious voters rather than explain differences between religious denominations.

While this literature has made significant advances in understanding the political activities of religious persons in Latin America, most studies on the role of religion in shaping political participation and orientations in the region focus on religious identification and beliefs, rather than religious activities beyond simple denominational adherence or rates of church attendance. This is an important oversight given the potential importance of involvement in religious organizational activities as demonstrated in the U.S. context (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Evidence in the U.S. context regularly demonstrates the importance of civic skill development through participation in church-based activities organized around small groups outside of normal worship times. Díaz Domínguez finds that political engagement in Latin America—based on measures of political information, news consumption, and party identification—is higher among respondents who attend any church group (2013). However, the development of civic skills also has a denominational component: Evangelical Protestants tend to participate more in church activities, which may lead to higher rate of political participation among certain populations (Campbell 2016; Espinosa 2005; Hritzuk and Park 2000). Given the importance of denominational differences in Latin American politics, and the potential variation in the development of civic skills, it is necessary to explicitly examine the role of civic skill development in facilitating political participation in Latin America, especially as it relates to these important denominational differences.

Using a survey of two countries, Brazil and Chile, Patterson (2005) finds that civic skill development is indeed an important factor in denominational differences in political participation (also see Smith 2017). Patterson also finds that Protestants are more likely than Catholics to develop civic skills through church activities, which in combination with political engagement has a positive impact on political participation. But this study, like others, relies on measures of church attendance and does not distinguish between attendance and actual civic activity. Our examination instead measures these activities directly, which illuminates the exact character of the relationship between denominations, civic development, and participation.

Despite the relative lack of cross-regional studies examining denominational influences on the role of civic skill development in Latin America, some scholars do find qualitative evidence for the ability of certain denominations in particular contexts to influence civic skill development that has political consequences. Hallum (2003) finds that Pentecostalism has played an important role for women; development of civic skills and connections among women insulates them against poverty and gender discrimination (see also McClelland and Riedl 2015). Similar patterns exist among indigenous populations where religion has played an important role in mobilizing indigenous political movements (Cleary and Steigenga 2004). In studies of the influence of Evangelicalism across many Latin American countries, the authors in Freston (2008) find that, in general, Evangelicals aid in the development of democratic norms and ideals, particularly when involved in efforts to build civic society and civic institutions. Although they focus on Evangelicals, their contextual analysis offers good evidence that civic development is politically important in Latin America in particular contexts. We take this as preliminary evidence for our hypothesis that civic skill development leads to differential rates of participation.

One possible explanation for the variation in the development of civic skills, political participation, and civic engagement is the important role clergy play in connecting religious identities to political identities and candidate and policy preferences. Clergy are particularly sensitive to external religious and political threats, which motivate clergy to encourage political participation among congregants (Chesnut 2003; Smith 2016). Clergy from different denominations react to different types of threats, which may shape their political advocacies (Smith 2016). Religious activities outside of the weekly religious services may act as another means of communication between clergy and congregants. If individuals participate in prayer groups, church meetings, or other forms of church activities, it may serve as a mechanism for greater connection between the congregant and the clergy, especially if this exposure allows for increased dialogue and discussion not available during a normal worship service.

Of course, civic skill development may also be a precursor to involvement in church-based activities, instead of the result of these activities. Those who are more civically engaged generally may also be more likely to join church groups, which may lead us to overestimate the relationship between church activities and skill development. Qualitative evidence, such as that presented in Freston (2008), suggests that church activities enhance skill development but that we cannot fully untangle this relationship. However, the endogenous relationship between skill development and church activities may be partially overcome by focusing on denominational differences. While those with high civic skills may be more likely to participate in church-based activities, these patterns should not vary across religious traditions. A highly involved Catholic should be just as likely to participate in church groups as a highly involved Protestant, especially in contexts in which both traditions are civically active. Thus, in keeping with previous literature, we use this as an opportunity for theoretical development while recognizing the possibility of other underlying relationships.

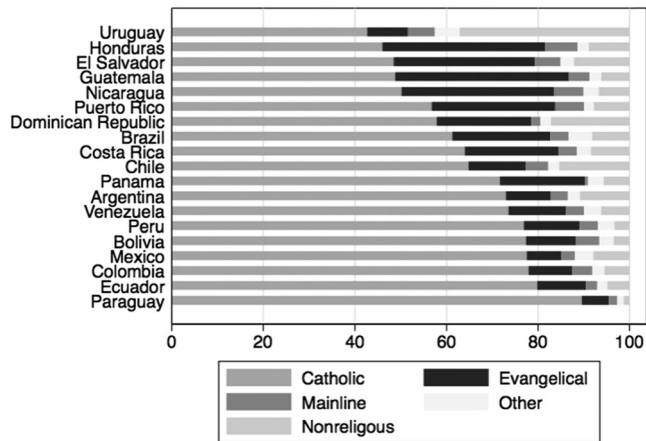
To uncover the role of civic skills in shaping political participation, we suggest an approach that combines cross-regional analysis, detailed measures of religious activities, and denominational analysis. In short, we ask how church-based activities vary across denominational contexts and how those contexts shape the influence of civic skill development on political participation. Following the arguments of Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) and others, we expect to confirm findings in U.S. politics that participation in the ancillary activities of churches (regardless of denomination) leads to political participation, and that Protestant churches are more likely to promote these opportunities. We further examine whether Catholics and Protestants are equally likely to translate skill development into political action. If the religion and politics literature in the U.S. context holds true, as we hypothesize it will, then we expect participation in church activities to lead to greater political participation and that Protestants will be more likely than Catholics to use their civic skills for political action. This is the first effort, to our knowledge, to test religious civic skill development in 18 countries across Latin America and the first to link denominational variation in church activities with observed differences in denominational political participation. Though a first analysis of its type, this allows us to observe whether and how the growth of evangelicalism might affect political participation across the region.

## DATA AND METHODS

To test the relationship between civic skill, religious denomination, and political participation, we employ data from the Pew Research Center's 2013–14 Religion in Latin America Survey (Pew Research Center 2014a). This survey examined a wide variety of religious attitudes and behaviors of respondents in 18 Latin American countries and Puerto Rico (which was excluded from the analyses due to data availability). Over 30,000 face-to-face interviews were collected by university and research organization affiliates from October 2013 to February 2014, and the survey was conducted in Spanish, Portuguese, and Guarani. Together, the weighted data are comprised



Figure 1  
Religious affiliation in Latin America by percentage



of 19 nationally representative surveys with several questions targeted to the population of each given country. The countries sampled account for more than 95 percent of the Latin American population. The data collection occurred after the widely reported growth of Protestantism in the region (indeed, the survey report is titled “Widespread Change in a Historically Catholic Region”), which allows us to capture recent changes in the religiopolitical environment. For example, Figure 1 shows the proportion of Catholics, Evangelicals, and Mainline Protestants, as well as the percent of people who are not affiliated to any church (nonreligious) according to the survey. The Catholic Church maintains its predominance in countries like Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, México, Paraguay, and Perú. In turn, in countries like El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, a third of the population now identify as Evangelical Protestants.

Because it was designed to specifically examine the religious landscape of Latin America, this survey is unique, in that, it also allows us to go beyond mere Catholic-Protestant affiliation to examine the lived social contexts through which respondents practice their religion. Importantly, the data offer a glimpse into how respondents participate in the ancillary activities of the church where civic skills are theorized to be developed, which is often used as a point of analysis in studies of U.S. religion and politics. The survey also includes questions regarding respondents’ views on the role of religion in politics. Although it does not include traditional measures of electoral participation, such as turnout, it allows us to test the effect of religion on other forms of participation, including working to solve community problems, engaging in protest activity, and contacting public officials.

In the first analysis, we examine the characteristics of respondents who have the opportunity to develop civic skills through religious activities. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) and many others explain (e.g., Djupe and Gilbert 2009), civic skills are developed when individuals take on leadership roles in the life of the church beyond just church attendance. Therefore, we include measures of whether the respondent is a member of the church council, is a leader of any small group or other ministries, or is a teacher in Sunday school or religious education classes.<sup>1</sup> As with studies in the United States, overall participation in these activities is relatively low: about 13.5 percent are a member of a council, 10.5 percent lead a church group or ministry program, and about 6 percent participate in religious education activities. Altogether, about 1/5

<sup>1</sup> Aside from the theoretical rationale for grouping these three activities together, a simple factor analysis suggests that they do indeed load onto a single factor (eigenvalue = 1.17, factor loadings all above .55).

of the church-attending population participate in one or more of these three activities, a not insignificant number considering that there may be other, unmeasured activities available in these churches. As an additional measure, we examine the effect of participating in a small prayer or scripture study group (not as a formal leader). This also allows for the potential development of civic skills, especially in less formal prayer group settings where multiple people are responsible for the group's activities. In this case, about 60 percent of the sampled population engaged in this type of religious activity. Our predominant line of inquiry is whether Catholics and Protestants participate in these groups at different rates.<sup>2</sup> As stated above, we hypothesize that, as in the literature on U.S. politics, Protestants are more likely to participate in these church groups and develop civic skills.

Following our analysis of who participates in civic skill-developing activities, we then examine whether participation in these activities leads to increased rates of political participation (community work, protest, and contacting elected officials). Notably, one may participate in these activities even if they have relatively low political power or otherwise low rates of efficacy in national politics. If civic skills indeed allow individuals to translate their religious experiences into political action, we should see a positive and significant effect of participating in church activities above and beyond religious affiliation and church attendance. We hypothesize that religious participation will indeed be significant. As before, we are also interested in whether Catholics and Protestants participate in politics at differential rates and the sources of any differences in participation.

Finally, we include a political participation model interacting religious affiliation and church participation to determine specifically whether participation in *Catholic* church activities or *Protestant* church activities leads to higher rates of participation. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) theorize that the decentralized nature of Protestant churches and groups allow for greater skill development, and, by extension, more political participation. Given the Catholic Church's historical dominance in Latin America, we might furthermore expect that skill development, rather than direct mobilization, would be particularly important to the participatory activities of Protestants. Therefore, we expect that participation in church activities will lead to more gains in participation for Protestants than for Catholics.

To account for the categorical dependent variables and cross-national survey data, all of the above analyses are conducted through multilevel nonlinear models with country-level fixed effects. In addition to our variables of interest, we also control for a range of individual-level variables known to variously influence participation in both church activities and political life. These include the respondent's gender, age, marital status, racial background, income, and education.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we include country-level control variables in our various models to account for the ability of one to participate in politics, in this case, the country's Polity score (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2016), as well as measures of the political influence of religion, including the percentage of the country that identifies as Catholic,<sup>4</sup> government restrictions on religion,

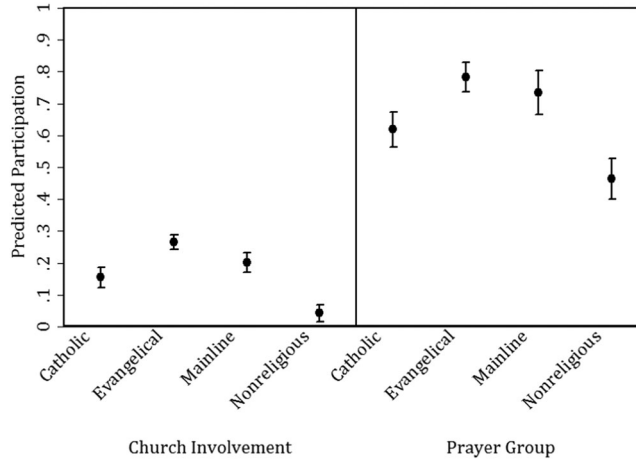
<sup>2</sup>Consistent with other Pew Research studies, we code all Protestant respondents as Evangelical if they identify as born again, Pentecostal, or charismatic. This has been the largest source of growth of Protestantism in Latin America, and most new Evangelicals are also Pentecostals. All other Protestants are classified as Mainline. Catholics were also permitted to classify themselves as Pentecostal and charismatic, and we find minor (though inconsistent) differences between these two Catholic groups. However, this is beyond the purview of the present paper, so we maintain the unity of Catholics as a group for parsimony and to retain a larger sample size.

<sup>3</sup>The race, income, and education variables are unique to each particular country. On the issue of race, we group respondents together as white, black, Indigenous, Mestizo (mixed), or from another racial group. For income and education, we group respondents in country-specific quartiles. This is consistent with the relative/sorting models of education (e.g., Nie et al., 1996; but see also Campbell, 2009) and allows for the greatest comparability across countries.

<sup>4</sup>This is calculated from the survey itself, and corresponds with other measures from the CIA World Factbook and Gallup surveys of Latin America.



Figure 2  
Predicted religious involvement by affiliation



social hostility toward religions (Pew Research Center 2014b),<sup>5</sup> and number of legislators from Christian democratic parties. Given the range of control variables, we can be relatively confident in the results of our models. We now turn to an analysis of these results.

## RESULTS

Our first model looks at the characteristics of respondents who participate in the ancillary activities of churches—serving on the church council, as a leader of a small group ministry, or in the religious education efforts of the church. We examine whether respondents have engaged in any of these activities as well as the overall number they engage in. Importantly, these leadership opportunities are theorized to help participants develop the civic skills necessary to participate in public life. While formal leadership opportunities are hypothesized to create the most significant opportunities to develop civic skills, less formal leadership opportunities through participation in small prayer groups can also facilitate the development of these skills, particularly when these prayer groups rely on the participation of all of their members. As such, we also include a model with a dichotomous dependent variable for whether the respondent participated in a prayer group at any point, as well as a separate one for the frequency with which they do so. These results are reported in Table 1.

Within the literature on civic skills, among the most common debates is whether Catholics and Protestants participate in these activities—and thus develop civic skills—at different rates (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). Here, we find that Catholics and Protestants do indeed participate in these church leadership roles and small group activities differently; Protestants (and especially Evangelical Protestants) are much more likely to both participate in church activity and take part in small prayer groups, and when they do, are more likely to be heavily involved. Because the results of logistic regression models are not substantively intuitive, Figure 2 shows the predicted probabilities of these models by religious affiliation. As we see, the gap is fairly

<sup>5</sup>Government restrictions on religion include a 20 item index, including establishment of a state religion, efforts to restrict certain religious beliefs or practices, and giving preferential treatment to one or more religious groups. The index of social hostility toward religion includes 13 items, such as religious armed conflict, sectarian violence, and harassment or intimidation of certain religious groups. Both serve to indicate whether religious individuals are free to practice their religion and translate it into political activity.

Table 1: Religious involvement by tradition and sociodemographic characteristics

	Any Church In- volvement	Level of Church In- volvement	Any Prayer Group In- volvement	Level of Prayer Group Involvement
<i>Level 1: Individual level</i>				
Evangelical	.78* (.11)	.74* (.12)	.94* (.11)	1.05* (.13)
Mainline	.36* (.12)	.36* (.12)	.63* (.15)	.82* (.13)
Nonreligious	-1.51* (.37)	-1.52* (.37)	-.75* (.12)	-.57* (.13)
Church attendance	.68* (.04)	.69* (.05)	.44* (.03)	.56* (.04)
Female	.08 (.06)	.06 (.05)	.23* (.05)	.23* (.04)
Married	.37* (.07)	.41* (.06)	.17* (.06)	.17* (.06)
Children	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.01 (.01)	-.00 (.01)
Age	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	.02* (.01)	.02* (.01)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00* (.01)	-.00* (.00)
Indigenous	.17 (.11)	.19* (.10)	.14 (.13)	.13 (.09)
Mestizo	-.04 (.08)	-.02 (.07)	-.09 (.09)	-.01 (.08)
Black	.23 (.16)	.26 (.16)	.26 (.20)	.29 (.16)
Education	.12* (.02)	.13* (.02)	.03 (.03)	.01 (.02)
Income	-.09* (.02)	-.09* (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Urban	.05 (.10)	.06 (.11)	-.12 (.08)	-.05 (.07)
Immigrant	.52* (.16)	.49* (.13)	-.11 (.11)	.26* (.12)
Constant	-4.82* (.33)		-1.29* (.25)	
<i>Level 2: Country level</i>				
Country	.13* (.04)	.14* (.05)	.26* (.10)	.23* (.06)
N	18,945	18,862	21,367	21,308

Note: Entries are multilevel (ordered) logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

substantial. Mainline Protestants are about 5 percent more likely than Catholics to be involved in a church leadership activity, while Evangelical Protestants are nearly 11 percent more likely to be involved in their church's leadership. The gap is even more pronounced when it comes to participation in prayer groups. While even Catholics participate in prayer groups at reasonably high rates (about 62 percent), Mainline Protestants (73 percent) and Evangelicals (78 percent) both exceed Catholic participation in these groups by at least 10 percent. This offers strong evidence for our hypothesis that Protestants are more likely to take part in the church activities that promote civic skill development.

Beyond religious affiliation, other predictors of church involvement generally follow the expected direction. Those who attend church more often are more likely to take on leadership roles, as are married individuals and those with comparatively high levels of education. This offers some evidence that leadership opportunities in church reinforce cultural inequality, with higher status individuals obtaining these positions (e.g., Schwadel 2002). However, when it comes to general participation in prayer groups, the effect for education washes out. Additionally, individuals who immigrated to their country of residence are more interestingly more likely to participate in both types of religious activities, while women are more likely to take part in prayer groups, reflecting the fact that women have long been recognized as being more religious than men (e.g., Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012).

Table 2: Political participation by religious affiliation and involvement

	Community Work	Protest	Contact Official
<i>Level 1: Individual level</i>			
Evangelical	-.35* (.07)	-.35* (.09)	-.25* (.07)
Mainline	-.34* (.13)	-.38* (.16)	-.18 (.10)
Nonreligious	.02 (.09)	.12 (.16)	.07 (.19)
Church involvement	.25* (.07)	1.02* (.15)	.99* (.15)
Prayer group	.51* (.08)	.67* (.09)	.59* (.10)
Church attendance	.06 (.03)	.11* (.03)	.12* (.03)
Female	-.34* (.05)	-.17* (.06)	-.39* (.06)
Married	.18* (.05)	-.05 (.08)	-.05 (.07)
Children	-.02* (.01)	.00 (.02)	-.00 (.01)
Age	.03* (.01)	.00 (.01)	.02* (.01)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-.00* (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00* (.00)
Indigenous	.34* (.10)	.09 (.12)	.16 (.13)
Mestizo	.06 (.09)	-.01 (.06)	-.01 (.10)
Black	.13 (.07)	.26* (.12)	.26 (.15)
Education	.07* (.02)	-.04 (.04)	.03 (.04)
Income	.03 (.02)	-.05 (.04)	-.00 (.03)
Urban	-.44* (.09)	.07 (.12)	.01 (.10)
Immigrant	-.06 (.16)	.30 (.17)	.30 (.25)
Constant	-1.55 (.84)	-3.07* (.70)	-3.67* (.61)
<i>Level 2: Country level</i>			
% Catholic	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Polity	.04 (.05)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.03)
Government restrictions	.25 (.18)	.00 (.08)	.08 (.08)
Social hostility	-.18 (.11)	-.04 (.08)	.03 (.08)
Christian democrats in legislature	3.36 (5.28)	2.12 (1.52)	-1.84 (1.40)
Country	.19 (.31)	.08* (.04)	.09* (.05)
N	18,260	18,732	18,674

Note: Entries are multilevel logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

While the differences between Catholics and Protestants in terms of their religious participation are important for the internal life of churches, we are also interested in whether these participatory opportunities are translated into political gains. That is, do they actually take the skills they learn in church and apply them to political action as hypothesized? Table 2 reports the results of these models for three types of political participation: working with others to improve conditions in the community, organizing and participating in a protest (past year), or contacting elected officials (past year). In addition to looking for differences in religious affiliation, we also examine whether religious participation above and beyond attending services leads to greater levels of political participation.

As expected, we find that participation in church activities leads to strong and significant gains in participation rates. For example, those who are involved in the leadership of their church (Church Involvement) are 5 percentage points more likely to engage in community work, 12.5 percent more likely to protest, and 14 percent more likely to contact public officials than those who are not involved in their church's leadership roles. The results are similar for prayer group attendance. Those who are members of a prayer group are 11 percent more likely to report working in their community, 6 percent more likely to protest, and 6 percent more likely to contact

public officials than nonmembers. This offers convincing evidence in favor of the civic skills model of participation.

Additionally, we find significant participatory differences based on the respondent's religious affiliation. Across all three forms of participation, Catholics are significantly more likely to participate in politics when compared to Mainliners and Evangelicals. In our models, Catholics are about 7 percent more likely to work in their community, 4 percent more likely to protest, and 2 to 3 percent more likely to contact elected officials. As discussed above, this may stem from the long historical ties between the Catholic Church and several Latin American governments. However, when the church involvement and prayer group variables are removed from the models, the differences between Catholics and Protestants become statistically indistinguishable for protest activity and contacting officials, and drop to a 5 percentage point gap when it comes to community work. In combination with the results above, this suggests that a major way for Protestant churches to encourage their members to participate in political activity is through the promotion of civic skills in church leadership roles and small group activities. Furthermore, should Protestant churches wish to mobilize their members to an even greater extent, additional civic skill development may be one way to close the historic participation gap between Catholics and Protestants in the region.

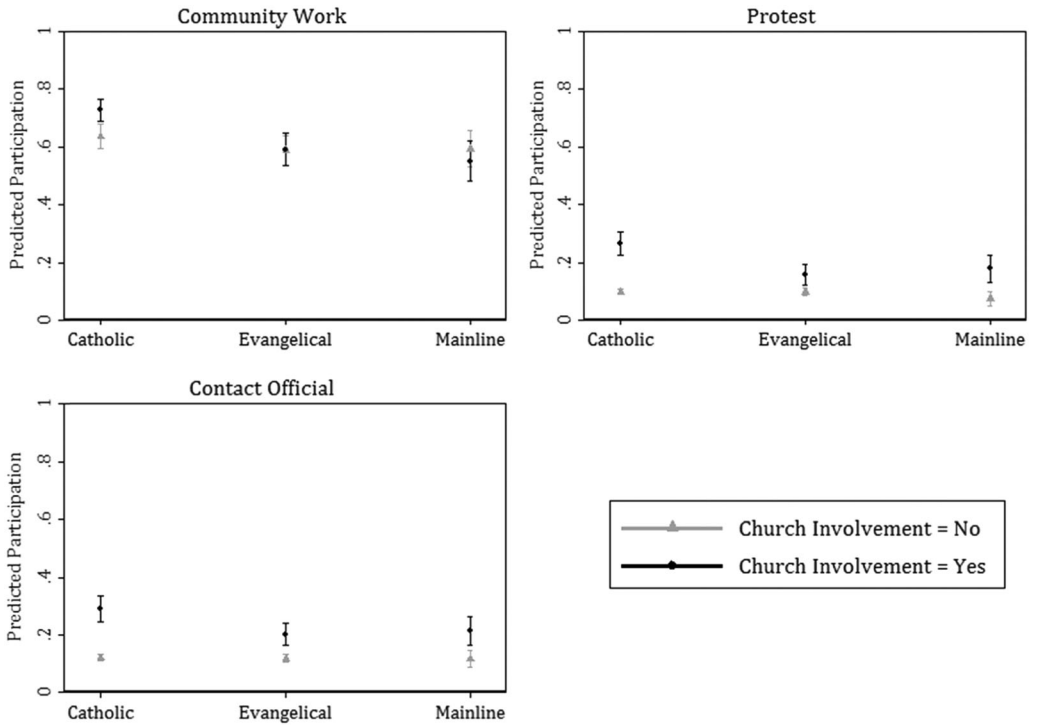
In addition to the results for our primary variables of interest, the results in Table 2 highlight the uniqueness of the Latin American context. Identifying as black, for example, is positively associated with all three outcome variables, which in some ways may vary from the historic pattern of participation in the U.S. context. Also, being female is negatively associated with all three outcome variables, perhaps a surprising outcome given that women are viewed as being traditionally more religious and highly involved in their community in the United States. However, these findings are also consistent with recent research by Espinal and Zhao (2015), who show that there is indeed gender segmentation in the civic and political arenas in Latin America. Lastly, education and income, which are reliable predictors of participation in the U.S. context, are not consistently related to our outcome measures, perhaps due, in part, to the nature of the political activities in question. These findings for the relationship between demographic variables and participation highlight the importance of examining patterns of civic skill development and participation in different contexts.

Finally, although it appears through our previous models that Protestants have an advantage in terms of civic skill development and rely more on civic skills for participation, we also test empirically whether the direct translation of civic skills into political participation is equivalent for Catholic and Protestant individuals. To do this, we interact our measures of religious affiliation with church involvement and prayer group membership. This allows us to determine whether individual Catholics or Protestants tend to benefit more politically from their religious activities. The results of these models (similar to those found in Table 2) are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

As the comparative differences show, it is not Protestants that benefit most in terms of political participation from their religious participation, but Catholics. Engagement in leadership opportunities and participation in prayer groups lead to positive and significant gains in participation, while the results are decidedly mixed among both Evangelical and Mainline Protestant groups. When significant, increases in political participation are much smaller than those found among Catholic respondents. Combined with the results above, we see that Protestants are more likely to take on these roles within their religious communities, but do not necessarily translate those roles into political action, at least to the extent that Catholics do.

There are multiple potential explanations for the disparity between Protestant involvement in the religious community and broader civic participation. First, this may reflect a lack of mobilization within Protestant churches to encourage adherents to utilize the skills they develop. This may be a result from the decentralized nature of the churches. Should Protestant churches wish for their followers to become more politically involved, they may be able to tap into this wealth of civic possibility. Indeed, some have claimed that churches can use politics to

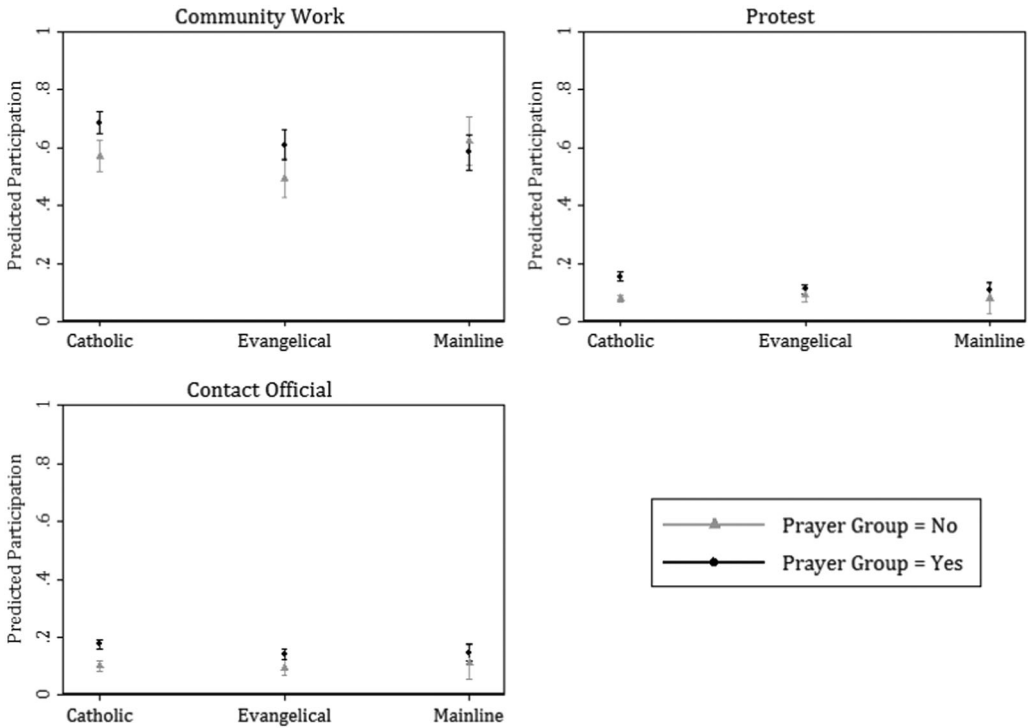
Figure 3  
 Religious and political participation by religious affiliation



compete for adherents in the religious marketplace (Audette and Weaver 2016). On the other hand, churches may choose to direct these skills toward salvific practices—presumably, the primary goal of churches—and less on political or community action (Dingemans and Van Ingren 2015; Hempel and Bartkowski 2008; Hempel, Matthews, and Bartkowski 2012). If true, it suggests, unlike evidence from the U.S. context, that increased participation in church activities may be responsible for decreased participation due to an increased focus on theological or spiritual development. Campbell (2004) offers a bridge between these explanations; he shows that Evangelical Protestants in the United States spend a great deal of time in church at the expense of political engagement, but that churches can intensely mobilize their members for political action under the proper circumstances. Thus, the distinction between Catholic and Protestant participation in Latin America may be explained, at least partially, by divergent inner- versus outer worldly focuses, and suggests that denominational factors shape involvement rather than predisposition to involvement. Nonetheless, data constraints limit our ability to fully disentangle the causal mechanism and relationship between civic skills and political mobilization.

This observed comparative mobilization advantage among Catholics would be unsurprising, though, given the long history of the Church’s cultural dominance in the region. Over time, the Catholic Church has developed an infrastructure for political influence. Instead of necessitating informal structures of political participation (limited to civic skill development, for example), the Church may directly mobilize adherents to influence the government and public policy. For example, using similar models as above, we see that Catholics are significantly more likely than Evangelicals, and especially Mainliners, to say that the church they attend tries to persuade government officials to protect the rights of the poor (an informal, and admittedly imprecise,

Figure 4  
Prayer group and political participation by religious affiliation



measure of lobbying activities).<sup>6</sup> Although the Church’s influence may be waning as governments secularize and the population shifts away from the Catholic Church, it nonetheless remains a powerful mobilizing force. On the other hand, Protestant churches must rely on the organizational capacity of their members and less established political movements to affect politics in many areas of Latin America. Combined with a possible focus on spiritual, rather than political, goals, this helps explain the civic skills divide between these religious families.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Religion has long been known to have an influence on Latin American politics (e.g., Gill 1994). Quantitative studies have frequently emphasized the identity aspect of religion: differences between those who identify as Catholic or Protestant and among those who do or do not attend religious services. While this line of research is indeed useful for examining broad religious differences, it often masks the social context under which individuals in Latin America practice their religion and understand political action. On the other hand, rich case studies have explored the growth of new religious movements and the political influence of churches in a range of Latin American countries. This research is an attempt to bridge these two lines of inquiry—to examine the social context of civic skill development and participation in the ancillary activities of churches through systematic empirical analyses.

The findings presented here highlight the importance of accounting for the acquisition of civic skills in religious organizations. We find that those who participate in church activities,

<sup>6</sup>Results for these models are available from the authors upon request.



beyond simply attendance at services, are significantly more likely to engage in three types of political activity: working with neighbors to solve community problems, participating in a protest, and contacting elected officials. In our models, they are among the most significant predictors of participation, meaning that accounting for these types of activities are crucial for understanding who participates in politics and how social movements are mobilized. Furthermore, we find significant differences in who develops civic skills through religious participation. We show that, consistent with studies in U.S. politics, Protestants are more likely to engage in the types of activities that promote skill development. Yet, unlike studies focused on the United States, Catholics in Latin America who do participate in church activities are more likely to translate that participation into that in the political realm.

These results also have important consequences as the religiopolitical landscape of Latin America continues to shift. Our results suggest that, if churches seek to influence the political process, their means for advancing their adherents' participation differ depending on religious affiliation. We find that Catholic churches do not provide as many opportunities to develop civic skills, or at least that their members do not partake in those opportunities to the same extent as adherents in Protestant churches. However, when Catholics do engage in these additional church activities, the Church has a number of ways to mobilize these skills for political action (e.g., using the church's connections to lobby elected officials).<sup>7</sup> The opposite is true for Protestant churches. These churches provide a range of opportunities for their adherents to get involved in church activities through prayer groups, Bible studies, church leadership, and other skill-developing activities. Yet, when they do participate, the skills developed are not necessarily translated into political action to the extent they are in Catholic churches. Thus, if Catholic churches seek to engage their adherents in the political process, they may consider providing opportunities for leadership and skill-building small group activities outside of church. If Protestant churches seek to engage their adherents in politics, they may consider directly mobilizing their members around issues of importance to the church.

While this paper posits a broad and important role for churches in developing civic skills, our analyses are limited in a number of important ways. We propose that political scientists should take care to measure how respondents participate in religious activity, and future studies should examine additional ways that individuals participate beyond those presented here. For example, one might consider leadership roles one takes up in the life of a church, such as in social service or fellowship groups, in assisting with or leading worship, or engaging in outreach and proselytizing. Furthermore, future studies should extend the context of these activities even further to examine the character of the groups and how they specifically contribute to political development and socialization. This could be accomplished by actively measuring skills themselves and how individuals translate their church experiences into political life. Lastly, although it is our intent to examine the effect of civic skills at a broad level across these 18 countries, the interaction of religious experiences with the local and broader political context of specific countries represents a fruitful avenue for further research. For robustness, such studies may be done among the political participation activities employed here or through more traditional measures of electoral politics.

In sum, this research offers a challenge to extend identity-based research on religion and politics in Latin America to the broader social context in which individuals live and experience their religious faith. While scholars of American politics have begun attempts to measure civic skill development and other means through which the social location of the church influences political participation, we may or may not find similar results in distinct political systems, religious cultures, and historical contexts. Indeed, we find support in Latin America for the theory in American politics that the decentralized nature of the Protestant church promotes civic skill acquisition, but perhaps divergent results when we examine how those skills are put into

<sup>7</sup>Indeed, the opportunities for coordinated mobilization efforts may be one advantage to a hierarchically oriented church.

practice by Catholic and Protestant mobilization. This is one example of what we anticipate to be a useful exchange of the comparative analysis of religious context.

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### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix S1.** Descriptive Statistics of Dependent Variables

**Appendix S2.** Interaction Terms: Involvement, Prayer Groups, and Community Work

**Appendix S3.** Interaction Terms: Involvement, Prayer Groups, and Protest

**Appendix S4.** Interaction Terms: Involvement, Prayer Groups, and Contacting Officials