

Evangelicals and the Far Right in Brazil: Political Attitudes and Voting Decisions

Evangélicos y extrema derecha en Brasil: actitudes políticas y decisiones de voto

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the evangelical vote in the 2022 presidential elections for Jair Bolsonaro, a populist and radical right-wing politician, hypothesizing the adherence of part of this segment to the right by exploring behavioral variables. We conclude by proposing a new exploratory analytical approach: Dominion Theology. Our paper makes use of several *surveys*, such as the Pesquisa Termômetro da Campanha (IPESPE/ABRAPEL), in order to examine the behavior and voting decision of evangelical through the logit type estimation model, with the vote for Bolsonaro as the dependent and the main variable the evangelical identity

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(binary, as opposed to all other religions). The result indicates that the extreme right mobilized evangelicals not only electorally, but ideologically, through political proposals and a moral-theological discourse.

Keywords

Presidential elections, Radical Right, Electoral Behavior.

Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo explicar el voto evangélico en las elecciones presidenciales de 2022 para Jair Bolsonaro, un político populista y de derecha radical, con la hipótesis de que parte de este segmento adhiere a la derecha, explorando variables de comportamiento y concluyendo con la propuesta de un nuevo enfoque exploratorio de análisis: la teología de la dominación. El artículo utiliza diversas encuestas, como la Encuesta Termómetro de Campaña (IPESPE/ABRAPEL), para examinar el comportamiento y las decisiones de voto de los evangélicos. El modelo de estimación utilizado fue del tipo logit, con el voto a Bolsonaro como dependiente y la variable principal la identidad evangélica (binaria, frente a todas las demás religiones). El resultado indica que la extrema derecha movilizó a los evangélicos no sólo electoralmente, sino también ideológicamente, a través de propuestas políticas y de un discurso moral-teológico.

Palabras clave

Elecciones presidenciales, Derecha radical, Comportamiento electoral.

The peak of the extreme right presence in Brazil occurred in the 2018 elections, leading towards Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. A radical populist and popular right-wing leader, who obtained votes from 70% of the evangelical electorate, his election was favored by the end of corporate financing in elections; the reduction from 1 year to 6 months of mandatory party affiliation by candidates and the reduction of the official campaign period, including the free time for electoral propaganda, from 90 to 45 days. (Nicolau, 2020). However, people do not approach political phenomena in a neutral and dispassionate way, and are instead conditioned by their identities. Bolsonarism is a phenomenon that has found fertile soil, as Brazilian elites have managed to articulate their conservative positions with an electorate that holds similar positions. In general, Brazilian public opinion is against abortion, approves religious teaching in schools, is in favor of reducing the age of criminal responsibility, supports the militarization of schools and is divided on LGBTQIA+ marriage, racial quotas in universities, the death penalty, weaponry and privatization of companies (Rennó, 2022, p. 152). All of these opinions are endorsed by Layton et al. (2021), through the argument that religion, gender, and education played significant roles in consolidating polarized electoral bases in Brazilian 2018 elections.

The last Brazilian presidential election, which took place in 2022, led to the formation of a *Frente Ampla* (translated as: "Broad Front") that unified parties of different ideological inclinations from right to left in support of former president Lula da Silva (Partido dos Trabalhadores – PT). This front united around the flag of democracy, as the political groups feared the upcoming autocratic regime that could prevail with Bolsonaro's re-election. The electoral campaign was polarized, during which the president continued to attack the legitimacy of electronic voting machines and the electoral institutions. Similarly to former US president Donald Trump, Bolsonaro made frequent use of digital platforms to misinform the electorate (Silva & Telles, 2022), and the victory of the *Frente Ampla*, in 2022, during the election's runoffs, occurred by a minimum difference of only 1.8 percentage points, totaling just 2,139,645 of the votes out of a total of 118,552,353 voters.

The elections, held in a post-pandemic environment, were unprecedented, as the two main candidates had once been presidents and the evaluation of former President Lula's mandates was one of the factors for his victory, even in a country where voters self-declared mostly on the right (Telles et al., 2023). Because both have been presidents, their results – 1st. and 2nd. Places –, fall within the explanation of retrospective voting (Fiorina, 1981), in which macroeconomic factors such as unemployment, GDP growth rate and inflation become cognitive shortcuts in the voting decision. To attract votes, it was necessary for voters to have in perspective that one of them had had a better economic performance during their mandates.

But, in addition to the economy, other factors, such as religion, may have been predictors of the vote.

The explanations for the Bolsonaroism phenomenon are varied. For example, before 2018, research already identified the growth of right-wing parties in municipalities and states (Lavareda & Telles, 2020; 2022; Krause et al., 2020; Paiva & Pietrafesa, 2022), and in this sense, academic reflections on the new right and the extreme right have grown in recent years in Brazil. (eg. Telles, 2015a; 2015b; 2018a; Solano, 2018; Rocha, 2021; Cruz et al., 2015; Nicolau, 2020; Singer, 2002; Rennó, 2022; Telles & Silva, 2025). And so, studies on the relationship between evangelicals and politics have increased, both in political science and in theology (Pereira, 2023; Silva, 2024). This article, thus, aims to analyze the relationship between evangelical identification and right-wing ideology by proposing an exploratory hypothesis about the relationship between the Theology of Domination and the ideological and electoral behavior of evangelicals.

Our argument presents a perspective that is not based on behavioral analyses (voting, church attendance, access to social policies) (e.g., Layton et al., 2021; Ferreira & Fuks, 2021; Silva, 2019) but focuses on the ideological shift to the right within the majority of the evangelical electorate. We seek to verify what are the political attitudes and perceptions of evangelical voters about institutions and democracy, since the majority of them opted for the reelection of Jair Bolsonaro, an anti-system president with authoritarian ideas and ideologically identified as a right-wing extremist. The change in population distribution by religion in Brazil is at an accelerated pace, and while evangelicals are not yet the majority, they have expanded in society, in institutional representation and are attracting followers through an organized communication network formed by social media, television and radio channels. Projections based on data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (Guadalupe, 2020), for example, indicated that evangelicals will make up half or more of Christians in the coming decades. The 2022 census showed that the evangelical population grew, but at a slower rate than expected, while the Catholic population declined, and according to the Census, 56.7% of the population defines itself as Catholic and 26.9% as Evangelical.

Evangelical are historically conservative, but in the last two decades their votes have actively shifted towards right-wing or far-right candidates in the Legislative and Executive (Guadalupe & Carranza, 2020; Smith, 2015; 2019; Souza, 2020; Oliveira, 2020; Mariano & Oro, 2011). Smith (2019) analyzes Brazil's religious diversity and argues that religious institutions influence political decisions through social norms, mobilization networks, and specific discourses. She also discusses how the growing presence of evangelicals has challenged traditional alliances between Catholics and the political left.

Smith (2015, 2019) explores the central role of religion in Latin American politics, with a particular focus on Brazil, analyzing how religious institutions influence electoral behavior and the functioning of democracy. The author argues that evangelical churches operate as mechanisms of political mobilization, shaping narratives and promoting conservative agendas, especially on issues of sexual morality. This activity contributes to the transformation of electorates, generating

polarizations based on religious and cultural values. Furthermore, Smith highlights the tension between religious pluralism and democratic equality, emphasizing how mobilization led by religious leaders can both strengthen political participation and exacerbate divisions within democratic contexts.

Why did the Brazilian evangelical electorate adhere to a far-right candidate and almost elect Bolsonaro? To respond, we do a series of descriptive analysis based on data from different sources, including the Campaign Thermometer, a survey conducted by the partnership between Institute of Social, Economic and Political Research (IPESPE) and the Brazilian Association of Electoral Researchers (ABRAPEL) to exam the voting behavior and information consumption; the Latinobarômetro, particularly from their historical series of trust in institutions, from 1995-2020; and data from the V-DEM, the historical series of the Liberal Democracy Index.

The article is organized into three sections. The first discusses the concept of the radical right and the participation of evangelicals in Brazilian politics. The second explores the transformations of the Brazilian electorate. The coinciding values of the extreme right and the precepts of neo-Pentecostal theology will be analyzed. This symmetry of values has impacted the electoral dynamics, driving the emergence of anti-system leaders and parties. In section 3, econometric tests are carried out to verify the association between voting intention, perception of democracy, political attitudes and evangelical religion, compared to other religions.

1. Theoretical premises: the radical right and the participation of evangelicals in politics

Traditional political elites are being challenged by new radical right movements that have managed to force changes on the political agenda. These movements are gradually gaining seats in local, regional, national and international governments, with positions in various parties, in addition to competing with traditional political groups on how to legislate. Analysis of the causes of this phenomenon range from unfavorable international scenarios (Dyck, 2022; Rodrik, 2021), new social and cultural configurations (Lazić, 2009) and immigration (Mierina & Koreleva, 2015), producing political instability and new challenges for representative democracies (Coppedge et al., 2022). There is a fatigue in relation to modern politics understood and explained by rationality, indicating a search for regression to pre-modern politics (Blay, 2019; Rocha, 2021; Souza Silva, 2024).

At the same time that adherence to religious and non-secular doctrines is growing in society as more recent research shows an increase in the crisis of representation and a decrease of public trust in political institutions, democracy, parties and their governments (Mair, 2013). The representation crisis, the serious economic problems and the spread of false information through social media led to the creation of windows of opportunity for the emergence of *outsiders* and rad-

ical movements, which managed to mobilize the electorate and articulate political parties to compete for institutional positions and obtain funding to propagate their ideas.

The radical right is divided into a variety of positions, political preferences and political antagonism. These formations emerged from changes in the political climate: dissatisfaction with the parties; the cartelization of traditional parties, globalization and nationalist movements. The current radical right is a symptom of a democratic *malaise* – a crisis of confidence in representative democracy: In Europe, the core of this ideological family is defined by ethno-nationalism, anti-establishment populism and anti-establishment rhetoric. These currents, in general, are authoritarian, have an anti-pluralist stance, reject liberal democracy and cannot be classified based on an economic cleavage, because the emphasis they give to the role of the State can vary from economic liberalism to a more interventionist (Dalton et al., 2011). As a result of the void of representation (Mair, 2013), the search for religious movements or the reaffirmation of traditional values that were capable of guaranteeing security in group belonging grew, producing agenda, ethnic and religious conflicts in various parts of the world (Löwy, 2015).

In Brazil, the right has traditionally been fragmented and its cadres disputed proportional elections in multiple parties, and were once organized especially in the post-electoral season through the formation of parliamentary fronts, such as Ruralista, da Bala and Evangelical. (Cruz et al., 2015). The political cadres of the Brazilian right had their main social bases in the most economically underdeveloped regions; they generally did not assume themselves as such and tended to present themselves in elections as liberals, with the aim of distancing themselves from an old right, associated with the military and authoritarian period (Mainwaring et al., 2000).

This scenario has changed in the last decade and the rights have expanded to urban and more economically developed centers. And, with the expansion of evangelicals, the extreme right articulated greater aversion to secular ideas to attract public opinion and Christians to the new techno-media public sphere, building itself as a defender of the traditional family, women and children. In this vein, feminist and LGBTQI+ demands were “distorted” as a supposed gender ideology and a threat to families and religious values. (Miskolci, 2021).

The values of the Brazilian extreme right, coinciding with many precepts of the Theology of Domain, are configured as a radical reaction to secular and post-materialist values (Pereira, 2023; Telles et al, 2025), as categorized by Inglehart (1997). And as new concerns were established, voters began to seek other agendas, such as gender equality, approval of abortion, acceptance of homosexuality, new family standards, among others (Py, 2020). On the other hand, audiences adhering to traditional and survival values react to post-materialist and secular ideas. According to Borges and Vidigal (2023), in terms of the political offer, the new Brazilian right is organized into three major fronts: the traditional right, the evangelical right and

the anti-political right, with the evangelical right being mobilized by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and the cultural war discourse.

Religions, especially Christian ones, generate a system of values, beliefs and institutions that, in addition to organizing society, promote persuasion and ideologies that facilitate collective action (Boas & Smith, 2015). Evangelicals, in general, are conservative in various topics, such as the conception of the family and the space of women in it, disapproval of reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ demands (Souza, 2020; Oliveira, 2020; Mariano & Oro, 2011; Lima, 1983 *apud* Cowan, 2014). The moral crisis, liberation theology, authoritarianism and resistance to social justice were themes that separated evangelicals into left and right, and the latter triumphed in this religious segment, especially among neo-Pentecostals. The evangelical political right in Brazil became presumptuous and its leaders instrumentalized the moral crisis discourse for electoral purposes (Cowan, 2014; Reis & Santander, 2019).

2. Democratic backsliding, expansion of evangelicals an election of the extreme right

a. Democratic backsliding in Brazil

The trajectories of European and North American democracies are different from the Brazilian, but they present some characteristics that are quite similar. Among the multiple experiences that characterize attempts at democratic setbacks, the victory of Giorgia Meloni, in 2022, affiliated with a new party, Fratelli D'Italia, which ran in coalition with the extreme right, rescued Catholic Christian values. The candidate's campaign had the motto "God, Fatherland and Family", precisely the same used in the 2018 elections by the Brazilian president-elect, Jair Bolsonaro.

Another example is Germany, where the AfD (Alternativ für Deutschland), a party founded in 2013, brings patriotism as a central mobilizing element with the motto *Unser Land zuerst. Alles für Deutschland* – "Our country comes first. All for Germany". Nationalism was also part of Bolsonaro's electoral campaigns - My party is Brazil -, and his government was identified with the slogan «Beloved homeland Brazil». Nationalism was also present in the election campaign speeches of US President Donald Trump, who used the slogan "America First". Furthermore, Trump and Bolsonaro have always tried to delegitimize democratic institutions and have questioned election results when defeated. For example, Trump encouraged the invasion of the Capitol in January 2021 and the Brazilian president and his supporters were behind the attempted coup d'état in Brazil, which took place in January 2023.

These cases reinforce symptoms of institutional crises produced by disaffection to democracy, a growing feeling in public opinion and in the leadership of several western countries. Polarized discourses are present in populist governments, and, with a conservative bias, they encourage the polarization of "us" against "them"; in

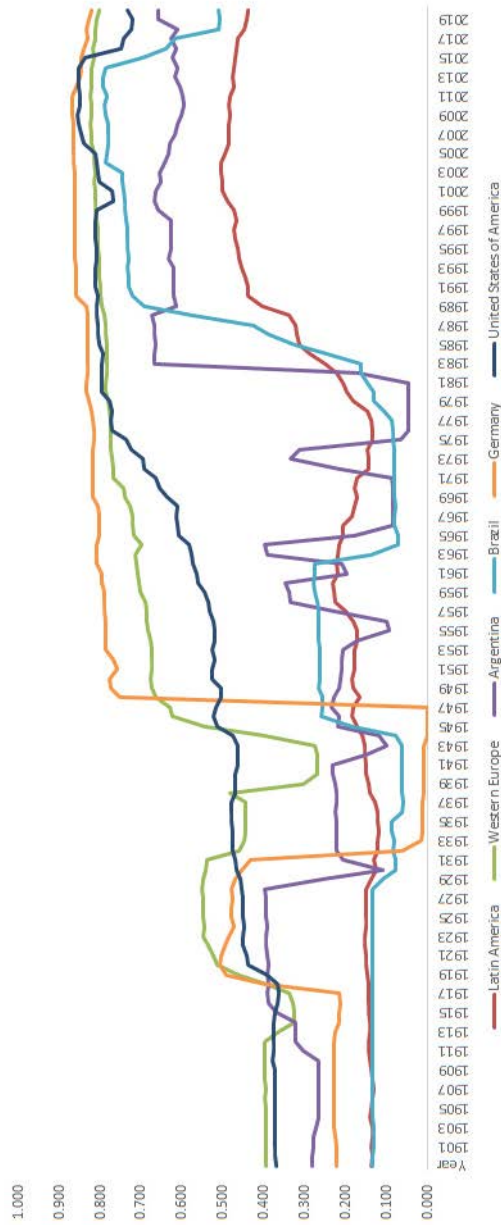
populism, the “people” and the “anti-people”. In the history of populism in Latin America, political narratives tend to highlight internal and external enemies, such as social elites associated with foreign countries, political parties and opposing politicians. It is no coincidence that populism emerged at times of disappointment with liberal democracy and political systems.

According to the report by the *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (IDEA, 2021), Brazil is one of the examples of democratic backsliding, when compared to the largest electoral democracies in the world. In the V-DEM ranking (Coppedge, 2023), some aspects stand out. Firstly, as shown in Graph 1, the significant advances observed since the installation of the new Brazilian democracy and the political transition, in 1985.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 21st century, the new Brazilian democracy reached rates not far from those of the West. Compared to Latin America, Brazil had advances in democracy identifiers well above the average for the region; however, from 2016 onwards, a decline in the V-DEM ranking is observed. In relation to Latin American countries, in the post-2014 period, Brazil showed the greatest democratic erosion, and the index varied negatively more than the average for the region. Along with Mexico and Peru, the country was one of the clearest cases of the worsening crisis of representation in Latin America (Silva, 2021; 2022; Telles & Silva, 2025). This crisis was measured with distrust in political parties, the reduction of party preference, the increase in dissatisfaction with democracy and with distrust in representative institutions (legislative, executive, parties) as indicators, while maintaining trust in non-representative institutions such as the Armed Forces and the Church, presented in Graph 2. Furthermore, there was a worsening in the perception of economic conditions motivated by the increase in the perception of corruption.

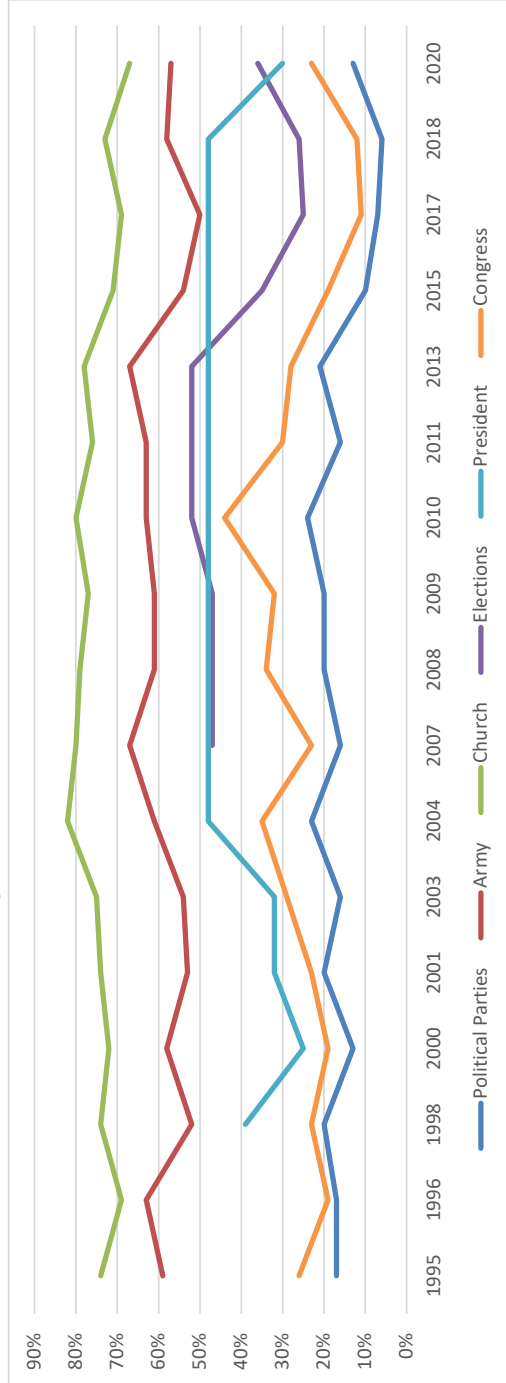
The reduction in the positive evaluation of Brazilian democracy is associated with numerous political and institutional factors. Among them, the intense mobilizations motivated by dissatisfaction with the quality of public services in 2013 (Gohn, 2014) and discontent with the direction of the economy, since the legitimacy of democracies and the perception of their effectiveness are increasingly dependent on their performance economic (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995). Corruption media scandals, Operation Lava Jato practices (Telles, 2015a; Baptista y Telles, 2018) and protests in favor of the removal of President Dilma Roussef, ended up creating a climate in public opinion that was contrary to political parties and politics, opening up an opportunity favorable for the emergence of the extreme right, which culminated in the election of *outsider* and populist mayors in 2016 (Lavareda & Telles, 2020) and Bolsonaro in 2018 (Krause et al., 2020; Telles, 2025).

Graph 1: Liberal Democracy Index (V-DEM).



Source: V-DEM, 2020. <https://www.v-dem.net/data.html>, elaborated by authors.

Graph 2: Trust in Institutions (1995 – 2020)



Source: Latinobarometer, 2020, elaborated by the authors.

b. Presidential elections and the support of evangelicals

After winning four consecutive elections, PT was defeated in 2018 by a candidate supported by important evangelical leaders and politicians amidst a troubled scenario and institutional political crisis¹. Bolsonaro used social networks to disseminate moral discourses, apocryphal negative advertisements on WhatsApp with themes such as sexuality, associating PT and its candidate with the depravity of families and communism. The social media campaign had topics such as anti-system politics, militarism and nationalism (Galvão, 2016) in addition to the promise of releasing weapons for the population (Alves, 2016), attracting on the 2nd. turn nearly 70% of the evangelical electorate.

During his tenure, President Bolsonaro constantly attacked and threatened democratic state institutions and fundamental human rights principles and acted as a populist leader. Based on studies of populist governments that came to power in Latin America, Aguerre (2017) listed 5 constituent elements that make up populism namely: a) authoritarianism; b) exaggerated reliance on charismatic leadership; c) appeal to the people as the main objective of political activity; d) anti-liberalism.

The president ran for re-election in 2022 and was defeated only in the 2nd round by former President Lula (PT). In these elections, a significant part of Bolsonaro's campaign became more centered around religious issues with missionary aspects² (Telles, 2022; Telles et al., 2023). In addition to moral issues, polarization was reinforced by the battle between good and evil, according to the dominion theology. On the one hand, candidate Lula was associated with the Devil and accused of defending an agenda in favor of abortion, drugs, and corruption. On the other hand, candidate Bolsonaro was associated with the figure of Jesus, the side of good³. During the campaign, this polarization reached its peak on social media with widespread coverage of Bolsonaro's wife praying at an event promoted in the Chamber of Deputies by the evangelical parliamentary front. Michele Bolsonaro kneels, cries, and prays for the three branches of the Brazilian parliament: *"You are powerful, Lord, to heal our nation. You are powerful, Lord, to heal our nation. Thank you for your spirit being present."*

Lula was elected. However in both the first and second rounds, evangelicals voted predominantly for Bolsonaro, with 62% and 66% of the vote, respectively.

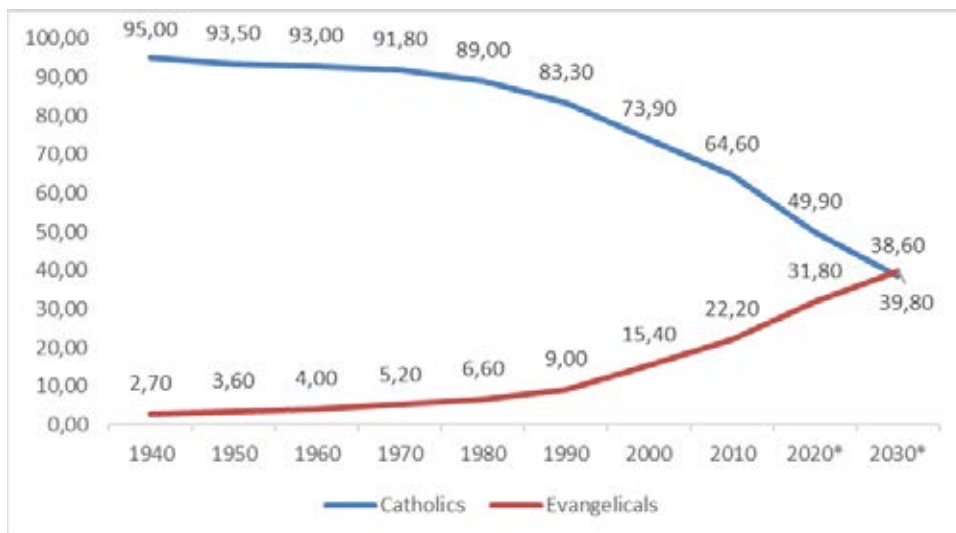
1 Impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, in 2016, and the arrest of Lula, whose candidacy was withdrawn during the elections.

2 For the purposes of this article, the term missionary is understood as that perceived by the believer as a life mission, usually wrapped in the idea of spreading the gospel and winning souls for the Kingdom of God.

3 <https://oglobo.globo.com/politica/eleicoes-2022/noticia/2022/08/diabo-surge-como-figura-recorrente-na-primeira-semana-da-eleicao-presidencial.ghml>

In turn, Lula obtained respectively only 31% and 34% of the evangelical vote. Lula had an advantage among voters without religious affiliation, which was decisive for his victory⁴.

Graph 3: Religious affiliation in Brazil (1940 – 2030*)



Source: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), elaborated by authors.

* Refers to projections⁵.

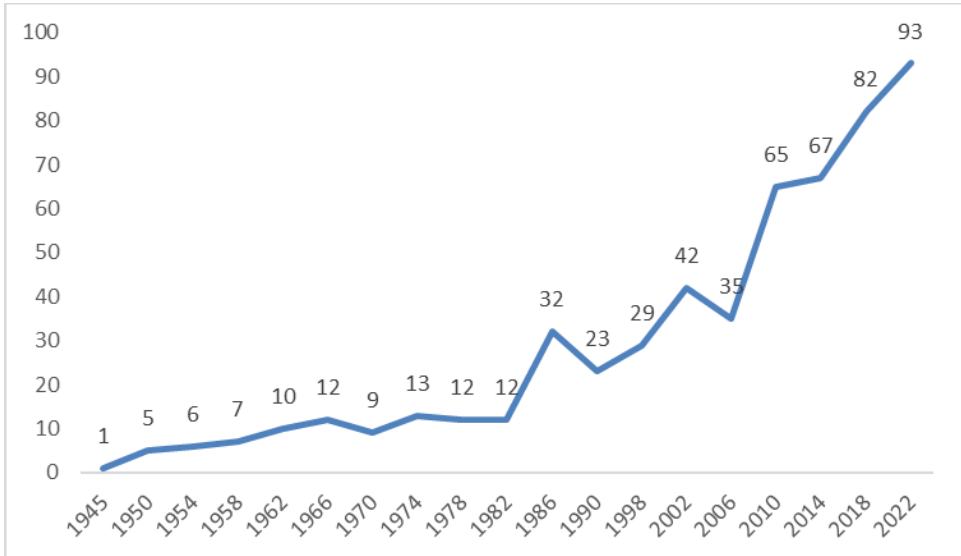
The support of evangelicals has become more important for political leaders and their parties as a result of changes in the profile of the electorate, as such alterations affect elections and politics, and also create conditions for the rise of new parties and anti-system leaders. (Masciulli et al., 2016). A change occurred in religious affiliation, which impacted voter behavior and political strategies. It is observed, through Graph 3, that there has been an evangelical growth in the past decades, and movements linked to Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal Churches, and even charismatic Catholics had an influence on campaigns, political representation and the Bolsonaroist government.

4 ESEB: https://www.cesop.unicamp.br/por/banco_de_dados. Accessed July 2025.

5 However, the 2022 Census revealed that although the evangelical population in Brazil continued to grow, the increase fell short of previous projections. According to the data, 26.9% of the population identified as evangelical, a significant increase of 5.2 percentage points, but lower than the almost 10 percentage points anticipated. (See: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/c0r12xd17rko>)

For this reason, despite the victory of the Frente Ampla, coordinated by PT, their support was not expanded in the National Congress.

Graph 4: Number of Evangelicals elected in the Chamber of Deputies (1945 – 2022)



Sources: Fábio Lacerda/Evangelical Candidature Database (2018) and Marini and Carvalho <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/estrategia-corporativa/>. For the year 2022: «Profile of the evangelical bench in the National Congress in Brazil». Ricardo Mariano (USP), Dirceu André Gerardi (FGV/Cebrap), Marina Lacerda (USP). Elaborated by authors.

As can be seen in Graph 4, the change in religious affiliation is also expressed in the growth of the federal legislative group, identified as evangelical. It was in the last decade, between 2010 and 2020, that the greatest increase in the political representation of Evangelicals occurred, especially the more conservative sectors, totaling 93 Evangelicals elected in the last election. A qualitative look at the scenario, considering case studies (Solano, 2018) points to a potential change, not only in terms of institutional representation, but even in attitudes and behavior of the evangelical electorate.

Evangelical deputies were predominantly from right-wing parties and managed to elect the most voted federal deputy, with almost 1.5 million votes. In terms of denominations, the Assembly of God Church had the highest representation in the Chamber of Deputies — 24 deputies, followed by the Universal Church with 14 deputies and the Baptist Church with 10, attended by the president’s wife, Michelle Bolsonaro. In total, the Chamber of Deputies and state legislative assemblies had

a record number of elected politicians who used evangelical denominations such as “pastor”, “bishop” and “missionary” in disputes. With the Bolsonaroist wave, part of the candidates started to adopt evangelical terms that did not appear in their previous candidacies.

The Liberal Party (PL), of the defeated president, obtained the largest bench in the federal legislature. In the legislative, there was a realignment of the party system with two movements: 1) the loss of representation of the main parties consolidated in the new Brazilian democracy (PT, PSDB and MDB) and the emergence of legislative representation of new right-wing parties; 2) the growth of the right in the electorate, with elected politicians with more extremist agendas.

3. Vote and political attitudes of evangelicals

To test whether there was a relationship between the intention to vote for Bolsonaro and the evangelicals, we used data from the surveys Termômetro da Campanha (Thermometer of the Campaign), carried out by the partnership between the IPESPE and ABRAPEL. Organized into eight waves of surveys with a nationally representative sample, the survey interviewed 1100 respondents in each round, totaling, with a margin of error of 3 percentage points. The interviews were carried out by telephone and the samples were calculated from a two-stage selection, the first being a probabilistic screening of each region of the country, followed by the use of random-digit-disk, with gender, age and municipality size quotas.

In this article, we use two waves of this research, whose information collection took place between September 29 and October 28, 2022, encompassing the two rounds of the presidential election, totaling 2200 cases. Data were collected on the demographic profiles of the electorate, their sources of information on politics, the evaluation of the government and campaign issues, the spread of false information, electoral preferences, etc. In this article, we will use the first and the last wave of the survey.

The statistical model used for the analysis was *logit* type, having as dependent the “vote for Bolsonaro” and the main explanatory variable was the evangelical identification (binary, as opposed to all other religions). As controls, the following sociodemographic variables: sex, age, race/color and income. Due to the socio-historical context of Brazil, we separated race/color into whites, the reference variable in the model, and non-whites (here blacks, browns, indigenous peoples and yellows are included). The model also had its effects fixed in time, in order to control the random error produced by variation in the context of the campaign.

To analyze political attitudes, data from the Latinobarometer, which measures various aspects of public opinion in Latin American democracies, were also used. From the Latinobarometer we extracted the historical series of political culture

variables between the years 1995 and 2020. This historical series largely illustrates the deepening dissatisfaction with democracy and distrust in representative institutions, indicators of a crisis of representation.

3.1. Vote and evaluation of government: logit model

To interpret the 2022 presidential elections, a *logit model* was utilized, with the vote for Bolsonaro as the dependent variable and the main explanatory variable the evangelical identification (binary, as opposed to all other religions). As controls, we have the following socioeconomic variables: sex, age, race/color and income. Due to the socio-historical context of Brazil, we separated the race/color variable into whites, the reference variable in the model, and non-whites (here blacks, browns, indigenous peoples and yellows are included). The model also had its effects fixed in time, in order to control the random error produced by variation in the context of the campaign.

Table 1: Logit Model of Voting Intent for Bolsonaro (2022)

Category	β	standard error	Exp β	p-value
Evangelical	1,085	0.101	2,960	< 0.001 ***
Man	0.491	0.093	1,633	< 0.001 ***
Age	0.003	0.003	1,003	0.408
From 2 to 5 SM	0.751	0.112	2,119	< 0.001 ***
More than 5 SMS	0.461	0.125	1,586	< 0.001 ***
Not white	-0.439	0.095	0.644	< 0.001 ***
Constant	-1,250	0.189	0.286	< 0.001 ***

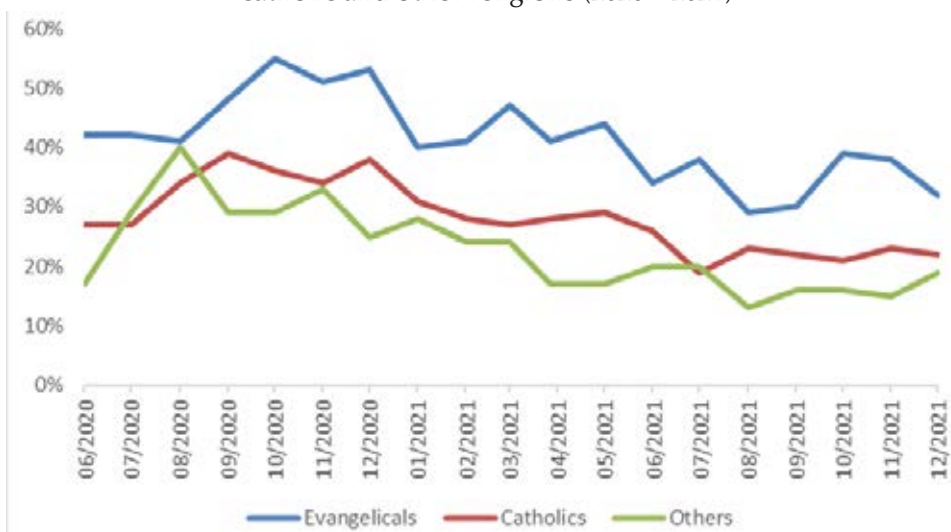
Source: Campaign Thermometer Survey of the Ipespe/Abrael 2022, elaborated by authors.

As can be seen in Table 1, being evangelical is the sociodemographic variable most correlated with voting for Jair Bolsonaro and increased the chance of voting for the then president by 1.9 times (p -value < 0.00), when compared to the other religions. In addition, being a man increased the odds of voting for Bolsonaro by 0.6 (p -value < 0.00), when compared with the population with the lowest income (up to two minimum wages). Receiving between 2 and 5 salaries increased the chance of voting for the PL candidate by 1.2 times and earning more than 5 salaries by 0.6. Finally, self-identifying as non-white reduces the chance of voting for Bolsonaro by 0.4 times.

The effect of the vote and evangelical support in the election and in the assessment of the Bolsonaro government is noteworthy. This adherence to Bolso-

narism was more intensified from 2016 onwards, when the president of the Social Christian Party (PSC), Pastor Everaldo, baptized Bolsonaro in Rio Jordão⁶. As can be seen in Graph 5, which presents the results of a series of surveys carried out between 2020 and 2021 by the Institute of Social, Political and Economic Research (Ipespe), evangelicals evaluated the government positively - as good or excellent -, on average 13 percentage points more than Catholics.

Graph 5: Positive evaluation of the federal government by evangelical, catholic and other religions (2020 – 2021)



Source: Ipespe Report December 2021, elaborated by authors.

The trend of positive evaluation of the federal government by evangelicals, even if it was diminished, accompanied the candidate throughout the 2022 campaign, transferring this evaluation to the voting intention. Aggregating the electoral polls carried out by ten research institutes throughout the year 2022, it was found that 61.9% of evangelicals declared their intention to vote for Jair Bolsonaro, while among Catholics they were 44.2%, which is a significant difference (Gerardi & Almeida, 2022).

There is empirical evidence that the positive assessment of the government by evangelicals is related to their belief that Bolsonaro was sent by God. When

6 Although he has declared himself Catholic in some embarrassing political moments, Bolsonaro was baptized in a public act, photographed, filmed and widely publicized in evangelical media networks in 2016, just over two years before the election that would crown him president. The baptism took place on May 12, 2016, when the Brazilian Senate was voting on the impeachment of then-president Dilma Rousseff, and was carried out by Pastor Everaldo (Everaldo Dias Pereira), then president of the PSC (Partido Social Cristiano), as reported by Jornal Extra in its online edition on 05/12/2016 (Extra, 2016).

analyzing Minas Gerais, the Brazilian state with the second largest electoral college, it is found that 11.4% of the population believe in the affirmative and, among evangelicals, this figure rises to 26.3%. This belief served as an intervening variable of the positive assessment of the federal government in 2021, at the peak of the pandemic, being a moderator between evangelical self identification the approval of Bolsonaro's work (Camargos, 2022).

3.2. Democracy and trust in institutions

As already highlighted, the V-DEM data point to a democratic backsliding in Latin America and in Brazil after 2016. From the Latinobarometer and other sources, the reasons were recorded as a result of a deepening crisis of representation. At the same time, confidence in the Armed Forces grew.

Table 2: Democracy support variables by religion

Variable	Category	Evangelical	Other	chi-square	p-value
Democracy as the best form of government	Agree	70%	69%	2.73	0.26
	Disagree	27%	25%		
	DK/NR	4%	6%		
Would not worry in case of an undemocratic government	Agree	52%	53%	0.60	0.74
	Disagree	43%	41%		
	DK/NR	5%	6%		
Support for a military government	Supports a military government	39%	33%	4.17	0.12
	Does not support a military government	55%	60%		
	DK/NR	6%	7%		

Source: Latinobarômetro, 2020, elaborated by the authors.

When asked about their agreement with the phrase «democracy is the best form of government», there are no distinctions between evangelicals and people of other religions. We can understand these data from the conservative discourse that emerged in recent years in Brazil as it did not explicitly reject the term democracy. On the contrary, leaders and followers of the radical right claimed that their opponents – from liberals to the left – would be the true authoritarians: remember that the 1964 Military Coup was also carried out “in the name of democracy” and against “communist rule”.

However, despite claiming to be the only democratic group, opposing the supposed authoritarianism of the left and liberals, the radical right delivered speeches and acted to erode confidence in democratic and electoral institutions/ and repudiated ideas contrary to values considered Christian, from the perspective of dominion theology, with the idea of a cultural war between good (Christian) values and evil (pagan) values, where fundamentalist Christian values should dominate all areas of culture, politics and society (Pereira, 2023 Smith, 2019). When asked if they would accept an authoritarian government, but one that was effective, or even if they would support a military government, the proportion of agreement between evangelical respondents and other religions is similar, and it is not possible to indicate which religion produces effects on these perceptions.

Table 3 - Trust in Institutions by religion

Variable	Category	Evangelical	Others	chi-square	p-value
Military	Trust	63%	55%	13.11	0.00
	Do not trust	33%	44%		
	DK/NR	4%	2%		
Police	Trust	49%	47%	1.46	0.48
	Do not trust	50%	52%		
	DK/NR	1%	1%		
Church	Trust	77%	63%	20.39	0.00
	Do not trust	22%	36%		
	DK/NR	1%	1%		
National Congress	Trust	26%	22%	2.16	0.34
	Do not trust	71%	75%		
	DK/NR	4%	3%		
Government	Trust	30%	26%	2.96	0.23
	Do not trust	68%	73%		
	DK/NR	1%	1%		
Judiciary	Trust	40%	35%	7.14	0.03
	Do not trust	56%	63%		
	DK/NR	4%	2%		
Parties	Trust	12%	13%	0.80	0.7
	Do not trust	86%	86%		
	DK/NR	two%	1%		

Variable	Category	Evangelical	Others	chi-square	p-value
Elections	Trust	35%	37%	0.48	0.79
	Do not trust	62%	61%		
	DK/NR	3%	2%		
President	Trust	36%	28%	7.84	0.02
	Do not trust	63%	71%		
	DK/NR	1%	1%		

Source: Elaborated by the authors from the Latinobarômetro, 2020.

When analyzing trust in institutions, no significant differences were found between religion and trust in the National Congress, in the government, in parties and in elections. However, among evangelicals, trust is greater in the military (8 percentage points), in the Church (14 percentage points), in the Judiciary (5 percentage points) and in the President (8 percentage points). The data are limited to the beginning of 2021. In this context, it was already possible to perceive the confidence of evangelicals in the Church and in the Armed Forces, fundamental organizations of Bolsonarism, from the ideological conformation, campaign speeches and wide occupation of the military in positions on first and second echelons of government.

3.3. Interest in politics, ideology and campaign messages

Based on data on trust in institutions and adherence to democracy, no differences were recorded in the behavior of voters of different religious denomination, but there is a specificity in the behavior of evangelicals, who adhere more to Bolsonarism. In table 4 we explore the effects between religion, interest in politics and ideology.

Table 4: Interest in politics and ideology, by religion

Variable	Category	Evangelical	Others	chi-square	p-value
Interest in politics	Any interest	13%	12%	1.54	0.82
	Very interested	65%	65%		
	Little interest	11%	12%		
	Not Interested	8%	8%		
	DK/NR	3%	two%		

Variable	Category	Evangelical	Others	chi-square	p-value
Ideology	Right	52%	34%	33,413	0.00
	Centre	7%	11%		
	Left	18%	28%		
	DK/NR	24%	27%		

Source: ABRAPEL/IPESPE Campaign Thermometer, 2022, elaborated by authors.

With regard to engagement in politics, apparently, evangelicals do not differ from other voters. If religion is not an explanatory factor for political engagement, could it be a theological and even ideological issue? Our hypothesis is that evangelicals suffered cross pressures between the retrospective economic vote and their religious identity. The economic indicators were quite negative and, therefore, little could explain that this was the main factor in the positive assessment of President Bolsonaro among evangelicals.

Therefore, identity with evangelical religion interferes with this positive assessment of the government and, consequently, is expressed in the majority vote of evangelicals for the extreme right candidate. The religious agenda penetrated Bolsonarism and this reverberates both as a producer of values of political culture, and on the new form of action of evangelicals in politics: the anti-abortion agenda, contrary to same-sex marriage, to feminist movements and LGBTQIA+, and the defense of the traditional family model. All these aspects are embodied in the struggle of good against evil and the creation of a Christian Nation (Borda, 2020; Cowan, 2014; Smith, 2019; Rocha, 2020; Reis & Santander, 2019; Py, 2020; Pereira & Santana, 2022).

From this perspective, it is worth resorting to a more qualitative analysis of the understandings that evangelicals have about democracy and about the «democratic» ideal they aspire to. Pereira and Santana (2022, p. 1044), for example, state that, in the doctrine of domination, within the project of influence over the governmental sphere, political-religious leaders have proclaimed a political system called «theonomy» which, according to the authors, deals with a mere «euphemism for the concept of theocracy». This euphemism contradicts the rationale for ambivalent Democrats among evangelicals, as presented in Table 2.

This argument becomes more robust when one looks at ideology. More than 90% of the electorate who voted for Bolsonaro declared themselves as right-wing (IPESPE/ABRAPEL, 2022). Although it can be argued that Brazilian voters are unaware of the exact meanings of the terms right and left (Singer, 2002; Telles & Storni, 2011), in the last decade a strong anti-PT sentiment has emerged in the country, which has made part of the electorate reject leftist parties and its ideas, mainly the PT. (Paiva et al., 2016; Samuels & Zucco, 2018). However, the explicit positioning of Bolsonarism as a right-wing ideology, the “pride of being a patriot”,

the dissemination of Christian and conservative values, the fear of indoctrination of the “communist left” in schools and in the family, repositioned the evangelical electorate to the more radical right. Thus, 52% of evangelicals declared themselves to be ideologically right-wing and only 18% as left-wing, while in the general populations identification with the right is 34% and with the left reaches 28%, this difference being statistically significant.

According to research on misinformation among evangelicals, carried out by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Fonseca & Brasil, 2021), evangelicals are more present in WhatsApp groups (92%), against 71% of Catholics, 57% of spiritists and 66.7% among believers of other religions⁷. The study also pointed out that evangelicals have greater interpersonal trust in publications produced by WhatsApp groups of this religion, compared to the standards of Brazilian society⁸.

Table 5: Reception and belief in Fake News, by religion

Belief	Evaluation	Category	Evangelical	Others	Chi-Square	Phi	P-Value
Fraud in Voting Maching	Received	Yes	29%	27%	0,37	-0,02	0,54
		No/NR	71%	73%			
	Believed	Yes	50%	36%	18,92	-0,13	0
		No/NR	50%	64%			
Closure of Churches	Received	Yes	28%	23%	2,57	-0,05	0,11
		No/NR	72%	77%			
	Believed	Yes	31%	19%	20,12	-0,14	0
		No/NR	69%	81%			

Source: ABRAPEL/IPESPE Campaign Thermometer – 2022, elaborated by authors.

Disinformation circulated widely during the 2022 campaign and, as already mentioned, within the perspective of good *versus* evil. Although there is no significant difference in the sources from which they obtain information about politics, evangelicals receive more fake news about the possibility of voter fraud. Another fact that points to this adherence of the evangelical segment to Bolsonaroism is the belief in the news that, if elected, former President Lula would close the Churches. Although this particular case of *Fake News* has spread in a similar way among all

7 Church WhatsApp groups are used to spread misinformation, research shows. Available at: <https://sintufrj.org.br/2021/08/grupos-da-igreja-no-whatsapp-sao-usados-para-disseminar-desinformacao-mostra-pesquisa/>. Accessed in March 2023.

8 UFRJ research points out the spread of fake news in religious groups on WhatsApp. Available at: <https://desinformante.com.br/pesquisa-da-ufrj-aponta-propagacao-de-fake-news-em-grupos-religiosos-no-whatsapp/>. Accessed in March 2023.

religious and non-religious segments, evangelicals are the only group where the proportion of those who believed in this news is greater than the proportion of those who received it.

Through this understanding, greater intergroup trust means that fake news can have a more significant effect within the evangelical segment. This leads to confirmation bias, as evangelicals had already received previous information or already have prior attitudes and political filters that endorse misinformation.

A new hypothesis to explain conservative evangelical behavior

Despite right-wing ideologies and their extreme dominance among evangelicals, they have never been able to form confessional parties nor had the strength to propose competitive presidential candidates. However, the right began to systematically recruit religious cadres for parties and, since the beginning of the millennium, evangelicals have reinforced their political activities and their seats in the legislature (Boas & Smith, 2015). Evangelicals were apathetic about participating in politics, as they separated the heavenly world from the earthly. However, in the early 1980s, influenced by the Christian Right in the United States, starting with the elections for the National Constituent Assembly in 1986, Brazilian neo-Pentecostal evangelicals replaced the belief that “believers don’t get involved in politics” with the idea that «brother votes for brother». In the 2000s, they mobilized the motto that the “people of God” needed to influence the nation’s leadership and increase their electoral bases, which then became visible in the size and political strength of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (Smith, 2019; Reis & Santander, 2019; Pereira & Santana, 2022; Pereira, 2023).

During his government, evangelical doctrines were assumed by President Bolsonaro, who professed conceptions contrary to human rights and political minorities, based on the Dominion Theology (Rocha, 2020; Silva, 2024). This theology believes in the existence of a battle of good *versus* evil to free people from oppression caused by demons, with a view to building a Christian Kingdom. In political terms, *evil* would be expressed by former president Lula and the left, as they would represent the lack of Christian morals and disrespect for families, such as support for policies for the LGBTQIA+ public and gender equality. Politics was replaced by hatred of enemies (Rocha & Solano, 2019) and a distorted conception of society (Borda, 2020; Pereira, 2023).

Evangelicals began to justify their participation in the “seven spheres of influence” which are at the core of dominionism dogma, in order to build Christian Nations. This religious segment was mobilized by its leaders to engage in different dimensions of their lives: in the family, at home; in religion, in the Church; in education, at school; in government and politics; in the media, in communications; in

the arts and entertainment; in economics and science and technology. Regarding the participation of evangelicals in politics, in the words of the American missionary Loren Cunningham, the bible is clear: «The people of God should be involved in politics. (...) If God raised up godly leaders in ancient Egypt and Babylon, he can do it today.» (Cunningham, 2012).

Silva (2024) explored the influence of Dominion Theology, a dogma that seeks the Christianization of seven spheres of societal influence, such as family, economy, and government, promoting active political and social engagement. This theology is associated with postmillennial eschatology, which posits that Christ's return will only occur after society has been broadly Christianized, fostering strategies like the Seven Mountains Mandate. It also shows how this theology is instrumentalized by evangelical and political leaders to legitimize conservative actions and discourse, serving as a pillar of support for Jair Bolsonaro's campaigns in the 2018 and 2022 elections.

The research revealed that 21% of respondents were familiar with Dominion Theology, a significantly lower number compared to other theologies, such as Spiritual Warfare (86%).

Furthermore, only a small proportion of respondents considered that this theology had a direct influence on their lives, indicating a more limited impact compared to the others. According to this data, the evangelical public does not perceive that there is a Dominion Theology, but they do perceive the "struggle of good against evil" (spiritual warfare). Pereira (2023) points out that these two theologies go hand in hand in Brazilian Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. The study also observed that church attendance influenced perceptions of these theologies, with greater adherence to Spiritual Warfare among those who regularly attended services.

Given that these theological trends are linked to the process of political-electoral engagement, this raises a hypothesis to be further explored: the ideological realignment of conservative evangelicals toward the political right is associated with the diffusion of these theological strands in public debate. As Pereira and Santana (2022) emphasizes, although Dominion Theology is less well-known, it has the capacity to integrate other theologies into its public agenda. This hypothesis could be tested by conducting studies with smaller participant samples and more in-depth behavioral research techniques, such as focus groups or experiments.

Conclusions

Despite losing the presidential elections and how former President Bolsonaro is now ineligible, his supporters have been growing since the 2022 presidential elections. This is sustained by the fact that the former president had more votes in his candidacy for re-election than in his first election. His party (PL) obtained the largest bench in the Chamber of Deputies and evangelicals increased their

participation in the federal legislature. Brazil turned to the right before 2018 and the party of the president-elect (PT) remained a minority in Congress, as the reduction of the PT and the left had already been occurring since 2016 in city halls (Telles & Freitas, 2022).

Attacks on institutional politics by Operation Lava Jato and corruption scandals also increased political disbelief. Furthermore, the emergence of the radical right is also related to the negative perception of the economy, the preference of the middle classes for neoliberalism and their resistance to social and income redistribution policies (Telles, 2015b). With the institutional crisis and distrust in politics, the Armed Forces, the police and the Church have become valued institutions, as demonstrated by Latinobarómetro in its numerous surveys on Latin America.

The development of new political attitudes in younger and middle-class segments, in addition to the new post-materialist agendas that penetrated the political agenda, produced reactions on the part of the most conservative groups. In addition, anti-political sentiment, negative partisanship, economic malaise and increased perceptions of corruption have opened up opportunities for the entry of *outsiders*, radical and populist leaders in a society with a strong presence of traditional and conservative values. These leaders produced skillful forms of communication, connecting their speeches to religious values, especially those of dominion theology.

The main results of this article confirm that evangelicals in Brazil were the social segment that proportionally most adhered to the right-wing ideology. Being evangelical increased the tendency to vote for candidate Bolsonaro and to support him at all stages of his government, including during the pandemic, when over 700,000 people died due to lack of public policies to combat the coronavirus.

The text proposes an exploratory hypothesis that the ideological shift of conservative evangelicals toward the political right is influenced by the public dissemination of theological trends like Dominion Theology. Despite its limited recognition, Pereira and Santana (2022) note that Dominion Theology effectively integrates other theological perspectives into its broader public agenda. Future research could test this hypothesis using smaller participant samples and advanced behavioral study methods, such as focus groups or experimental designs.

Although we found no differences between evangelicals and other religions regarding trust in institutions, evangelicals were more likely to positively evaluate President Bolsonaro. Although they declare themselves little politically engaged, evangelicals are very engaged in cross-cutting themes, which involve social aspects and imply political positions. Furthermore, despite consuming similar sources of

political information and receiving equal amounts of misinformation, evangelicals were more likely to believe in fake news. This may indicate changes in the cognitive strategies used to deal with information, which should be explored in future work.

This study serves as a starting point for understanding how one of the groups recognized for supporting the extreme right in Brazil behaves. Despite not being able to establish causal inferences, the findings of this article can thus mobilize hypotheses to be tested during case studies and compared in the construction of the movement that weakens and threatens Brazilian democracy.

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