


ARTICLE

When do progressive evangelicals mobilize? Intra-denominational competing identities in Chile's constitutional process

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Abstract

Over the last decade, and throughout the Americas, evangelicals have strongly mobilized in defense of socially conservative agendas or against so-called “gender ideology,” sparking general and academic interest. Much less is known about progressive evangelicals. Using the unique juncture presented by the constitutional process in Chile, we study the politicization of a progressive evangelical identity and ask when these religious groups mobilize. We argue that intra-denominational competition for evangelical identity has played an important role in progressive evangelical mobilization, and more specifically the wish to differentiate themselves from conservative evangelicals, introduce a distance from the political right, and show the internal diversity of the community. This process occurs in response to an initial (conservative) politicization of religion. Drawing on campaign materials, surveys, and interviews, we provide evidence for this argument highlighting that policy preferences and theological interpretations are core differences among both groups, sparking countermobilization.

Keywords: Evangelicals; religious mobilization; Chile; constitutional process

On October 18, 2019, an unprecedented cycle of protests in Chile surprised observers both in and outside the country. Triggered by a spike in the subway fare, demands multiplied to plea for structural change and address the multiple legacies of the neo-liberal model implemented during Pinochet's dictatorship: inequality, segregation, social insecurity, and elite privileges. In the context of extended human rights violations in response to protests, the political response was to initiate a process to rewrite the constitution. The 1980 constitution, a legacy of the authoritarian regime, is seen as an obstacle to accomplishing many of the popular demands (Fuentes and Joignant, 2015)—including greater redistribution and a more prominent role of the state in the provision of social services.

In this setting, soon after a constitutional agreement took form and actors prepared for the initial plebiscite taking place in October 2020, evangelicals started manifesting their views on the process, expressing their religious identity, mainly in opposition to a new constitution. A more striking development was the emergence of evangelical groups in favor of a new constitution. The demands supported by these evangelicals were not distant from those defended by the general population, i.e., expansion of social rights, protection of the environment, and recognition of indigenous rights. Moreover, this stance showed a different side of religious mobilization, distancing Chilean evangelicals from the conservative stereotypes they are often associated with (Boas, 2016). In this article, we ask: Why would groups whose demands are not significantly different from those of the general population appeal to their religious identity in a political campaign? More generally, when do (progressive) religious actors mobilize?

We argue that the unique juncture presented by the constitutional process created the opportunity for progressive evangelicals to mobilize to differentiate themselves from the already mobilized conservative evangelicals. This latter group had organized in the last decade mostly in opposition to “gender ideology” and a series of policy discussions on sexuality politics (Smith and Boas, 2020). Evangelicals supporting a new constitution (defending the approve or *apruebo* option in the plebiscite) disputed the association between evangelicals and the political right. In this sense, it was an intra-denominational competition for evangelical identity that sparked this process of mobilization.

In the second half of the 19th and early 20th century, the dispute over the role of religion and the Catholic Church in public affairs was a central structuring cleavage of the party system, both in Chile and in Latin America (Scully, 1992). In the 21st century we are witnessing a resurgence of religion in politics, with two key differences: first, this time around, religion is one of multiple sources of political conflict in a much more fragmented political arena (Luna, 2017, 56–58). Second, in many countries, evangelicals are now the most visible religious actor, displacing Catholics (Pérez Guadalupe and Grundberger, 2018). Although they are still the majority of the religious population in most countries in the region, the political capital of the Catholic Church has been considerably reduced, due in great measure to sexual abuse scandals.

In recent years, the presence of evangelicals in the political arena has notably increased in Chile. Civil society organizations have emerged in response to the legislative debates regarding the expansion of LGBTQ+ and women’s rights, including discrimination, civil unions, abortion, and gender identity laws. The 2016–2017 round of local and legislative elections saw then-record numbers of evangelical candidates (numbers that again grew in the 2021 elections), and two evangelical parties were created after several failed attempts (Mansilla *et al.*, 2019). These developments have led to an increased salience of evangelicals in public debates and a general association with socially conservative positions, and consequently, with the political right.

In this article, we study the participation of evangelicals in the constitutional plebiscite held in October 2020, particularly from the perspective of progressive evangelical groups. Drawing on 19 semi-structured interviews, multiple campaign materials, Twitter feeds, and survey data, we identify the main motivations and challenges

progressive evangelicals face in their political engagement, particularly in contrast to more conservative groups.

In what follows, we first discuss the main approaches to religious actors' mobilization and present our argument for the mobilization of progressive evangelicals. We then provide an overview of evangelicals and politics in Chile, highlighting the recent politicization of conservative positions as part of a broader trend of mobilization in Latin America. Section four describes the sources of data used to build our argument. Section five moves on to the current constitutional process emphasizing the opportunity it presents for the mobilization of progressive evangelicals. We identify policy differences as sparking a dispute over evangelical political identity as the main motivation for progressive countermobilization. We end with some reflections on the potential role of progressive evangelicals and future research agendas.

1. When do religious actors mobilize?

The comparative literature on religious social and electoral mobilization—mobilization based on religious identity—has highlighted two central motivations for political action: policy goals and religious competition. Policy goals have varied in time, space, and across denominations and are based on different interpretations of doctrine. Issues of concern have included the defense of human rights (Gill, 1998), social justice (Rodriguez, 2009; Kirkpatrick, 2019), sexuality politics, gender, and the family (Grzymala-Busse, 2015; Smith, 2019; Smith and Boas, 2020), and the regulation of religion (Cerqueira and Tuñón, 2019; Boas, *Forthcoming*). In these cases, structural changes and/or new issues brought onto the agenda motivate religious actors to organize as they sense a core belief is under threat.

Religious competition arguments, particularly in Latin America, highlight how the growth of evangelicals in the last decades of the 20th century has motivated the Catholic Church to organize in defense of human rights (Gill, 1998), indigenous mobilization (Trejo, 2009), and to shift away from social justice to gender and sexuality issues (Smith, 2019). Secularization and the growth of the non-religious have also sparked a reaction and increased political engagement from both Catholic and evangelical clergy, and in the opposite direction, movements of secularists responding to the association between religion and politics, particularly as a backlash to the religious right (Campbell *et al.*, 2020).

A third understanding of religious mobilization comes from American politics. In the current highly polarized political landscape, religious identities have become associated with partisanship. Margolis (2018) argues that partisan identification can drive religiosity with long-term effects, reversing the common understanding of the relationship between social and political identities. Mason (2018) has shown that social sorting—including along religious lines—magnifies the strength of partisan identity well beyond what we could expect based on policy preferences. In this literature, religious identification is tangled with politics in a mutually reinforcing relationship.

These explanations share a focus on understanding mobilization across religious denominations. In other words, this literature tends to look at evangelicals, Catholics, or non-religious as groups sharing social and political identities.¹ In this article, we argue that intra-denominational differences can be equally important

for understanding religious mobilization. At the same time, we focus on progressives evangelicals, that have received comparatively little attention in a literature that has centered on the recent wave of conservative mobilization (for some exceptions see e.g., Boas, [Forthcoming](#), chap. 6; Kirkpatrick, 2019; Smith and Veldman, 2020).

Our argument builds on existing literature by presenting a two-stage explanation for the intra-denominational politicization of religious identities. In stage 1, due to threats such as the adoption or discussion of policies that represent a menace to religious doctrine, or sparked by the competition across denominations, some actors organize along religious lines. While mobilization can also be proactive, we focus on threats as the most common factor identified in the literature. Those highly mobilized usually constitute a minority, but in time they can appeal to growing numbers of faithful. This political presence of religion presents a challenge for those who do not share the contours of that mobilization and feel increasingly marginalized, leaving them with two central options: exit or countermobilization.

In stage 2, then, the initial politicization of religious identity leads some faithful within that denomination to question the content of such mobilization. Some might opt to exit, disengaging from their church or fully leaving the denomination. This, for example, is the case of the Exvangelical movement in the US, in response to the growing alignment between white evangelicals and the Republican Party. For other individuals, the response to the conservative politicization of religion is a countermobilization to differentiate themselves and highlight the diversity within that religious community. As such, we argue, this countermobilization disputes the political uses of religion from the initial stage. Both exit and countermobilization take place at the same time; we do not attempt to explain why some individuals opt for one or the other (we come back to this point in the conclusions). [Figure 1](#) presents this general argument.

The empirical analysis focuses on the countermobilization alternative. As we discuss below, policy threats have been central in the recent mobilization and organization of conservative evangelicals in Chile. Over the last decade, evangelicals have become increasingly associated with the political right in their defense of a conservative understanding of sexuality and the family, as the country rapidly secularizes and passes legislation expanding the rights of women and the LGBTQ+ population. This is what we call the initial politicization of religion. As a response, some groups of evangelicals have disputed the association between evangelicals and the right, pointing to the diversity of the religious community and building an identity as progressive evangelicals. Moreover, we argue that this countermobilization is rooted in policy

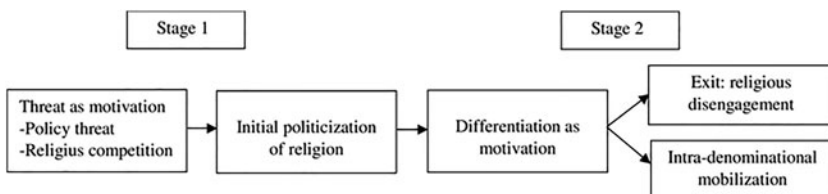


Figure 1. A model of the politicization of religious identities.

differences that in a highly polarizing context—as plebiscites tend to be—become reinforced as part of distinct social and political identities. Overall, this argument contributes to understanding when progressive evangelicals might mobilize in a global context where religious actors have been at the forefront of the backlash against equality policies (Corredor, 2019).

In addition to the general model of the motivations that guide mobilization and activism in each stage, we also discuss the relevance of the context to see this countermobilization. While responses to the initial politicization of religion may be common in forms such as declarations, public letters, etc., particular junctures are more likely to spark the more uncommon call to support an electoral alternative. These junctures include polarized elections, or, as in the case of Chile, a constitutional process where the stakes are high.

2. The initial politicization of evangelicals

The following pages apply the argument of the intra-denominational competition for the evangelical identity to the case of Chile. Chile presents an interesting case because, despite having the second largest evangelical population in South America, evangelicals have generally had a low political salience and descriptive representation (Boas, *Forthcoming*). That we are now seeing greater religious mobilization presents an opportunity to explore the factors leading to such politicization, which may serve to illuminate similar processes in other countries in the region.

2.1 Chile's religious landscape

According to the latest surveys, evangelicals in Chile represent around 14–18% of the population, a number that has remained stable during the last decade but that constitutes a significant growth from 6.1% of the population in 1970 and even more from 1.44% in 1920 (Beyer and Fontaine, 1991). Within the evangelical world, the great majority belong to Pentecostal churches (75–90%)—corresponding mostly to local denominations—while the traditional branches (also referred to as historical churches) such as the Methodists and Baptists or the neo-Pentecostals remain a minority within the evangelical world (Lindhardt, 2012, 3). In Latin America, the term “evangelicals” encompasses all these denominations.

As *Figure 2* shows, over the last 15 years, the religious landscape has been characterized by a pronounced drop in Catholic affiliation—from 70 to 42% –, compensated by the growth of the non-religious, rising from 12 to 37%. The fact that the share of evangelicals has remained relatively stable indicates that now they are mostly second and third-generation (Fediakova, 2004). This is somewhat different from most of South America, where evangelicals have grown in the 21st century, mostly converting from Catholicism (Pew Research Center, 2014). These changes in the national religious landscape have in turn implied a reordering of the political influence of religious actors.

As the dominant religious institution, the Catholic Church had great political influence during the 20th century, through the Conservative and Christian Democratic parties, lay organizations, and religious-based social mobilization. The

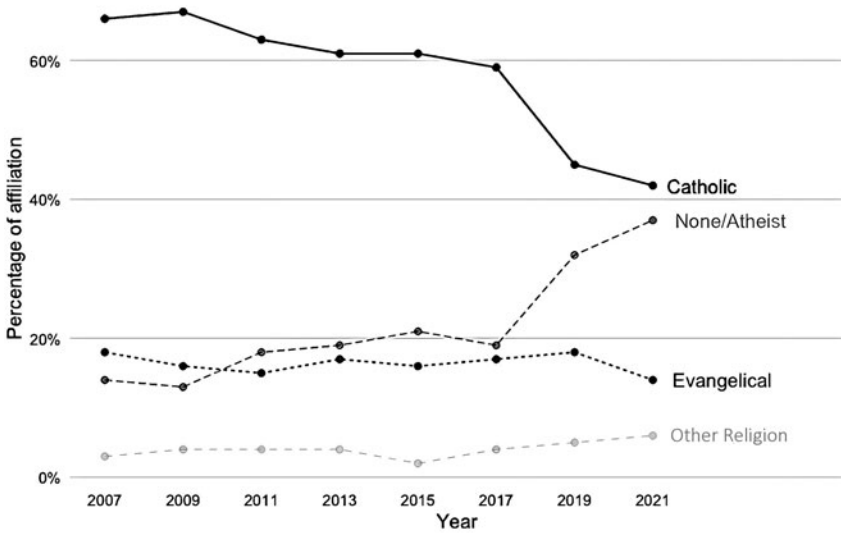


Figure 2. Religious affiliation in Chile.

Source: Encuesta Bicentenario UC.

first two decades after the return of democracy in 1990 were characterized by the low political engagement of evangelicals; they saw themselves as apolitical and that they should not be involved in politics *as evangelicals* (Fediakova, 2007). Some minority groups of evangelicals bet on gaining space in national politics with little success (Mansilla *et al.*, 2019). As a result, the electoral representation of evangelicals remained consistently low, with an average of only two representatives in the lower chamber, less than 2% (Boas, *Forthcoming*, chap. 1). According to Boas (*Forthcoming*), the lack of representation was largely due to the overrepresentation of conservative Catholic values in the legislature—a result of the institutions inherited from the dictatorship. These actors were successful at blocking progressive reforms on abortion, sex education, and even divorce (Htun, 2003; Blofield, 2006). Therefore, evangelicals did not need to mobilize as their interests regarding sexuality and family issues were already being defended. It is only in recent years, as the Catholic Church has been deeply hit by sexual abuse and cover-up scandals, that its influence has waned, opening a space for evangelical activism (Mardones, 2021).

2.2 Conservative politicization of evangelical identity

The decreasing role of authoritarian institutions, the decline of the political influence of the Catholic Church, a favorable international climate, and the progressive governments of President Michelle Bachelet set the stage for an expansion of rights after long legislative battles. An anti-discrimination law (2012), civil unions for all couples (2015), abortion in cases of risk to the health of the mother, fetus with conditions incompatible with life, and rape (2017), and a gender identity law (2018) have all garnered sufficient support to become laws. And in all these instances, evangelicals mobilized in opposition.

This religious mobilization is part of a wave in Latin America that has followed a mainly conservative line. Various religious groups have rejected the discussion of proposed laws aimed at granting rights to previously excluded groups, such as LGBTQ+ or women, vetoing the discussion of abortion or same-sex marriage (Jiménez Enoa, 2019; Kourliandsky, 2019; Vaggione, 2020). Sex education and the inclusion of gender equality in the curricula have been another contentious area. Initiatives such as *Con mis hijos no te metas* (Don't mess with my children), initially born in Peru, have managed to go beyond national borders, becoming regional cooperation groups against "gender ideology" (Rousseau, 2020; Losiggio, 2021). On the other hand, some religious groups have been key players in important political disputes such as the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil and Costa Rica (Biroli and Caminotti, 2020).

In Chile, under threat from progressive agendas, new evangelical organizations formed to defend their views of Christian values. *Chile Cristiano* (Christian Chile), *Reforma Chile* (Chile Reform), *ConFamilia* (Comisión Nacional Evangélica por la Familia y la Vida/National Evangelical Commission for the Family and Life), and the local chapter of *Con mis hijos no te metas* all emerged motivated by the discussion of these progressive laws, participating in legislative committees, street mobilizations, and other activities.

This mobilization also moved to the electoral arena. In the legislative elections of 2017, a record number of 25 evangelical candidates ran for a seat and four were elected, all from the right-wing party National Renewal (Vilches, 2017). In addition, in 2019 New Time was the first legalized evangelical party in three regions in the North of the country, and in 2020, the Christian Conservative Party was formalized in four regions in the South, including Biobío and Araucanía—the two regions with the largest percentage of evangelical population. These successes came after at least five previous attempts to form political parties over the last decade, all of which failed to get enough signatures as required by the legislation.² Both the historical number of candidates and representatives elected to Congress, however, barely represents a 2.6% of the total, whereas evangelicals constitute around 17% of the Chilean population.

Due to their growing political identity as conservative actor, evangelicals have been sought after by numerous politicians. According to a recent estimate, in the 2017 presidential election far-right candidate José Antonio Kast obtained around a third of the evangelical vote compared to only 3% among non-evangelicals (he received 8% of the national vote) (Contreras *et al.*, 2021). Kast campaigned on a platform that included conservative positions on gender and family issues, directly appealing to evangelical constituencies as well as conservative Catholics. And his Republican Party formed in 2019 has also attracted evangelical figures into its ranks (Interview 2). As we show below, evangelicals do not necessarily hold right-wing views on other issues such as the role of the state in the economy, but their positions on sexuality politics have likely guided the vote of a portion of evangelicals, leading them to be associated with the political right (both the moderate and the far-right).

In consequence, over the last decades, there has been a politicization of the evangelical identity around a conservative agenda. Although comparatively limited in the scope of social mobilization and in electoral terms, this politicization represents a shift from previous decades. This politicization explains why as soon as the process to replace the constitution was announced in November 2019, evangelical groups started mobilizing against the new constitution, and why identifying as evangelical

increased the predicted probability of having voted *rechazo* by over 20% (Meléndez *et al.*, 2021, 21). In a scenario of political realignments, evangelicals have become one of the pillars of a small but potentially influential far-right coalition (Meléndez *et al.*, 2021). Somewhat unexpectedly, the far-right candidate Kast made it to the second round of the presidential elections in late 2021, supported by a coalition of his Republican Party and the Christian Conservative Party.

2.3 Data sources

To assess our argument that in the juncture presented by the constitutional process progressive evangelicals challenged the conservative evangelical political identity, we employ four different sources of data. With these data, we characterize both *apruebo* and *rechazo* evangelicals and argue that they have different theological interpretations of the role of religion in politics and different policy platforms, using these differences to challenge the politicization of evangelical conservative identity.

First, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with evangelical pastors and bishops, and lay evangelicals that were active in religious, social, and political organizations, both in the *rechazo* and the *apruebo*. Although we initially contacted a similar number from both sides, twelve of our interviewees are from *apruebo*, five from *rechazo*, and two did not publicly support a position. Several *rechazo* members were reluctant to participate, particularly after some figures were highly criticized and even threatened during the campaign. The interviews were carried out online, and we had a response rate of 68%.

Second, during the campaign leading to the plebiscite, we followed the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of the most politically active evangelical organizations, including *Evangélicos por Chile* (Evangelicals for Chile), *Evangélicos por el Rechazo* (Evangelical for the Rejection), *Evangélicos por el Apruebo* (Evangelicals for the Approval), *Plataforma Nuevo Pacto* (Platform New Deal), *Apruebo Evangélico* (Evangelical Approval), and *El Otro Canuto* (The Other Evangelical). We also analyzed the presence of evangelicals in the televised legal campaign.³

Finally, we use the 2019–2021 waves of the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey (ELSOC) to measure the opinions of *apruebo* and *rechazo* evangelicals and non-evangelical voters regarding gender and sexuality issues, social policies, and violence in protests. The survey covers urban areas of 13 regions of the country and is applied to men and women between 18 and 75 years of age.⁴

3. Evangelical mobilization and the Chilean constitutional process

The unprecedented protests that erupted on October 18, 2019, led to a political agreement—signed by most parties with representation in the legislature—to replace the constitution as a response to citizens' demands and to put an end to the violence that accompanied the mobilizations. The agreement stated that an initial plebiscite would ask voters to either approve (*apruebo* option) or reject (*rechazo*) the drafting of a new constitution and whether that process should be carried out by a fully elected convention or by a mix of acting legislators and some elected members. The new constitution would be submitted to a final plebiscite as the last step in the process.

The initial plebiscite took place in October 2020. The option to draft a new constitution received 78% of the votes and the fully elected assembly was supported by 79% of voters. The election broke participation records despite the critical health condition of the country due to the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵ In May 2021, the 155 members of the convention were elected, including 17 reserved seats for indigenous peoples, using a gender parity rule. Five evangelicals obtained seats: one from a leftist list, one independent, and three from the right-wing coalition. In September 2022, the constitutional proposal was rejected by 62% of voters.

3.1 Evangelicals and the constitutional process

As soon as the constitutional process was announced, evangelical groups emerged to voice their position toward a new constitution. The breadth of topics discussed in a constitutional debate and a blank slate as a starting point presented a unique opportunity for mobilization, not only for religious groups but also for feminists, environmentalists, animal rights activists, among others. Moreover, the importance of constitutional processes as key for religious mobilization is present in the comparative experience (see e.g., Freston, 1993; Balcomb, 2004). The Chilean constitutional debate then represents a particular juncture that accelerated ongoing processes of religious politicization.

Evangelicals on the *rechazo* side were the first groups to organize. Unlike their counterpart in the *apruebo*, this sector had previously established networks, which favored the mobilization of their supporters. Thus, through organizations such as *Evangélicos por Chile*, *Evangélicos por el Rechazo*, *Red Evangélica de Unidad Nacional* (Evangelical Network of National Unity), *Cristianos por Cristo y por Chile* (Christians for Christ and Chile), *Vanguardia Social Cristiana* (Social Christian Vanguard) and *ConFamilia*, the *rechazo* groups were critical of the constituent process, portraying it as born out of violence and, therefore, illegitimate. In addition, these *rechazo* supporters emphasized the dangers that a new constitution implied for Christian values as the discussion opened the door to deliberate on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, the right of parents to choose the education of their children, and the state regulation of religion.

The defense of what these groups understood as Christian values and more generally the role of religion in politics point to some theological differences. Members of historical churches, both pastors and laypeople, have been more clearly associated with progressive views. According to one interviewee and theologian, this had to do with historical churches' focus on social issues, whereas some Pentecostal branches followed prosperity theology which emphasizes individual success (interview 5). The divisions across denominations, however, are not stark as the *apruebo* movement also includes Pentecostals and the largest denomination is the Pentecostal Methodist Church, a local church that combines elements from mainline Methodism with Pentecostalism.

Rechazo members were largely content with the constitutional status quo and felt threatened by the general move of the country toward more liberal positions on social issues. For some of those interviewed, the attacks from liberals had been going on for years and the constitutional process would be one additional way to limit the

freedoms and rights of evangelicals. A pastor and member of a national party argued “What we see now is that the people who are promoting this process of constitutional change are people who do not like the church, who are trying to legislate issues that are bad, from our point of view, for the family that we work with, that their struggles are... bourgeois, because let’s be honest, feminism, LGBT movement, those are middle-class struggles, they are not the problems that exist in poor neighborhoods. There you have drug trafficking, there are gigantic drug problems, domestic violence, and that is where the Evangelical Church is” (interview 1).

For the members of the *rechazo*, the 1980 constitution managed to protect freedom of conscience, freedom of worship, the life of the unborn, and the family as the fundamental core of society, in addition to benefiting churches with tax exemptions. On the contrary, a new constitution could be a way for radical anticlerical groups to harm churches and limit all the freedoms that evangelical people have. In this sense, the constituent process would not offer real support for the evangelical world, being the promise of a blank slate one of the greatest threats.

In addition to domestic factors, a point strongly emphasized by the members of the *rechazo* was the Venezuelan experience. From their perspective, the complex political and humanitarian situation in Venezuela was a warning of what could happen in Chile if the constituent process went forward. Several videos of the *rechazo* that circulated on Facebook highlighted the closeness of some leftist politicians with the government of Nicolás Maduro, as well as statements in which these politicians emphasized the Venezuelan experience as an example to follow (Evangélicos por Chile, 2020). Moreover, the international experience was also used to warn the evangelical world about the spread of threats to the traditional family in the region, and how the current constitution protected the values of the country.

The Venezuelan experience also served to highlight one of the most discussed issues of the *rechazo* campaign: the violence of the process. The drafting of a new constitution in Chile was born out of a wave of social protests that at times reached great degrees of violence, including the burning of public buildings, metro stations, and churches. These episodes were highlighted in the *rechazo* spots, warning that a constitutional process would open the door to new waves of violence with the potential to destroy the country. In this sense, one of the most popular ideas within this sector of evangelicals was that a vote for approving a new constitution was a vote for violence and terrorism: “We do not want changes through violence. We want changes through dialogue.”⁶

Analyzing the data obtained via Twitter’s API, we collected the timeline tweets from one of the most visible *rechazo* accounts, *Evangélicos por el Rechazo*. This account, led by Kevin Valenzuela who would later appear in the televised campaign, served also as a platform to organize the vote against a new constitution. While not necessarily representative of the broader evangelical community, it is useful to consider a discourse that permeated the public debate.

As seen in Figure 3, the most common words used in the posts were related to criminal attitudes, with frequent use of the words criminals (*delincuentes*) and terrorists (*terroristas*). We can also see words that make a direct reference to the social uprising of October 2019, such as violence (*violencia*), homeland (*patria*), destruction (*destrucción*), and left (*izquierda*, referring to the left-wing parties). The

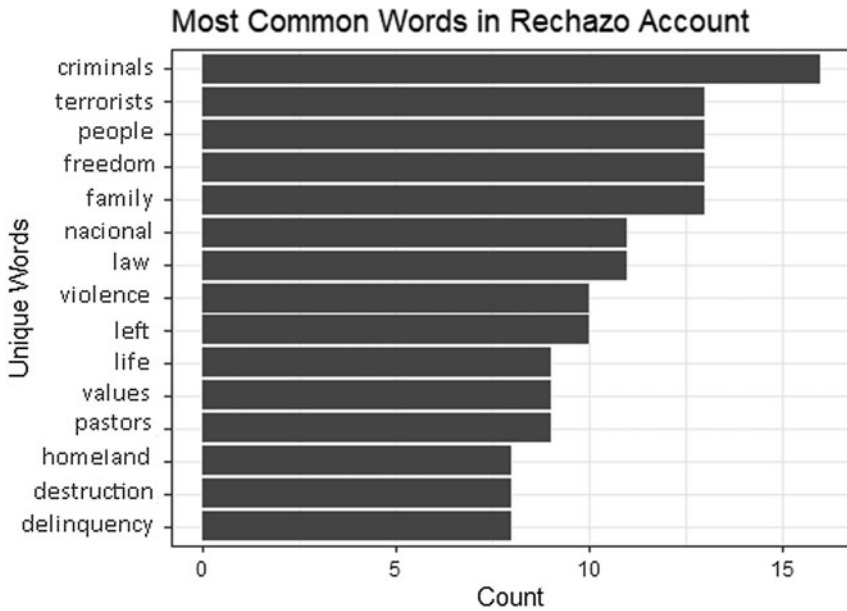


Figure 3. Most common words in *Rechazo* Twitter account.

prevalence of these words is a clear sign of a common speech among the *rechazo* that emphasized the social uprising in Chile as a violent event, where people who participated were linked to criminals or even to terrorist acts against the homeland. Family (*familia*) and values (*valores*) were also a latent concern in their tweets, highlighting the fear that, with a new constitution, the traditional family and values would be threatened.

While *rechazo* members considered that there are many areas in which the country should move forward, particularly in improving the pension system, indigenous recognition, and decreasing crime, constitutional change was not the way to solve them. From their viewpoint, constitutional replacement would take too long considering the urgency of these issues, so changes in laws would be more effective. In addition, *rechazo* members stated that a constituent assembly would do the same job than Congress does, increasing the number of politicians—that have very low levels of public trust. One *rechazo* member stated, “in this environment and seeing the political class we have and those who are proposing it [the new constitution], I would not open that door, because obviously, it is not going to end well” (interview 4).

Organizations of evangelicals in favor of a new constitution, on the other hand, emerged soon after the process was announced. Different groups of laypeople and pastors raised their voices against the idea that “all evangelicals vote *rechazo*” and urged the faithful to take a position thinking about what was best for the country. In this sense, *apruebo* evangelicals’ position was very similar to that presented by the general population in favor of a new constitution, considering the process as a way to expand social rights and end the legacies left by the dictatorship.

While the protection of religious freedom was an issue that evangelical organizations in favor of a new constitution considered important, the focus of their campaign was primarily on social justice. Unlike their *rechazo* peers, progressive evangelicals recognized the social, political, and economic problems that sparked the wave of mobilizations in 2019. In that vein, they understood the plebiscite as an opportunity to move the country forward. Concretely, issues such as a new social security system, better healthcare, recognition of indigenous peoples, and free and good quality education were recurrent among those interviewed, consistent with the main demands of citizens. One of the interviewees recognized that “All of us who are in favor of the *apruebo* want to materialize a democratic milestone that makes Chile a fairer, more egalitarian, less biased, less exclusionary country, where all voices have a place and where the legitimacy of this legal architecture is given by citizen participation. We hope that many people will participate in all phases of the process and that this constitution will be much more similar to popular demands” (interview 5).

Going back to Twitter, in the analysis of the most common words of the *apruebo* option—through the account *Evangélicos por el Apruebo* (Evangelicals for the Approval)—we can see a radically different set of concepts, as shown in Figure 4. The most used words were peace (*paz*), justice (*justicia*), and freedom (*libertad*). The attitudes and speech of the *apruebo* were more optimistic, openly calling to vote for a new constitution, and avoiding the “scare campaign” of the *rechazo*.

From this initial analysis, we can highlight two central differences: First, there were different theological interpretations of the role of religion, with *rechazo* members emphasizing the need to protect a conservative interpretation of Christian values

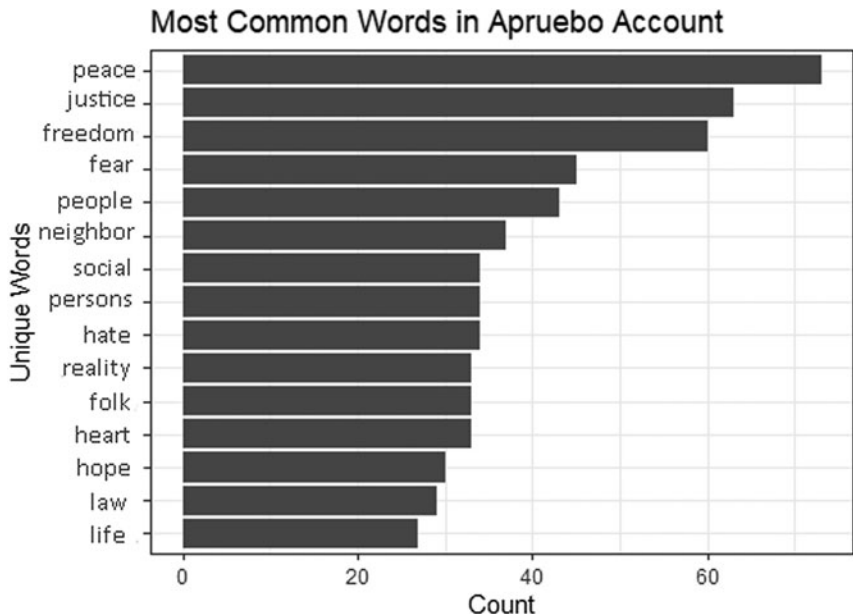


Figure 4. Most common words in *Apruebo* Twitter account.

and *apruebo* stressing the importance of freedom of conscience to freely decide the vote, and a stricter separation between the religious and political spheres. Second, in terms of agenda, the *rechazo* campaign highlighted family and sexuality issues and the violence of the protests with the *apruebo* focusing on expanding social rights. In the next section, we explore these policy preferences further using public opinion.

3.2 Evangelicals and Policy Preferences

Using the 2019 and 2021 waves of the ELSOC survey, in this section, we compare *rechazo* and *apruebo* evangelical and non-evangelical voters' opinions on three key issues at the core of evangelicals' campaign: gender and sexuality issues, the role of the state on social rights provision, and violence in the context of protests.

Evangelicals' reported participation in the plebiscite was 55% compared to 69% among non-evangelicals, confirming previous studies on evangelicals' relative political disengagement (Fediakova, 2004).⁷ In terms of vote choice, and also in line with previous research (Meléndez *et al.*, 2021), evangelicals supported the *apruebo* alternative less than non-evangelicals (72 and 85%, respectively), although still providing majority support for the winning alternative.

We explore whether there are significant differences in relevant policy issues between four groups: *apruebo* and *rechazo* evangelicals and non-evangelicals. As discussed above, the conservative politicization of evangelical identity has emerged as a response to policy changes that affect core Christian values in a context of weakening of the Catholic Church. In other words, as a comparatively conservative sector of the population on gender and sexuality issues, there are real policy concerns that motivate evangelical mobilization. We thus expect *rechazo* evangelicals to exhibit more conservative positions on gender and sexuality policies and violence than *apruebo* evangelicals, while *apruebo* evangelicals are expected to be more conservative than non-evangelical *apruebo* voters. In questions related to social rights, we do not expect any relevant differences between groups.

We estimate linear regression models for nine questions in our three categories of interest (gender and sexuality issues, support of violence, and welfare). All questions are measured on a five-point Likert scale. Our models include dummies for evangelicalism and *apruebo*, their interaction, and controls for sex, age, education, and ideology (full models are included in the Appendix). Figure 5 plots the average adjusted predicted values for each group, for all nine models. In line with our priors, there are no relevant differences between groups for the social rights related policy positions (whether education should be publicly provided, higher taxes for redistribution, pension funds should be private, and targeted welfare spending). The exception is taxes, where we see differences between non-evangelicals *apruebo* and *rechazo* voters—with *apruebo* showing greater support for higher taxes—but not within evangelicals. In all questions, however, *rechazo* evangelicals do lean toward rejecting a greater role of the state in relation to *apruebo* voters.

Also in line with expectations, *rechazo* evangelicals are more conservative than *apruebo* evangelicals on two out of three gender and sexuality issues. *Rechazo* evangelicals are more than one point less likely to support legalizing abortion without conditions and adoption by same-sex couples than *apruebo* evangelicals, *ceteris*

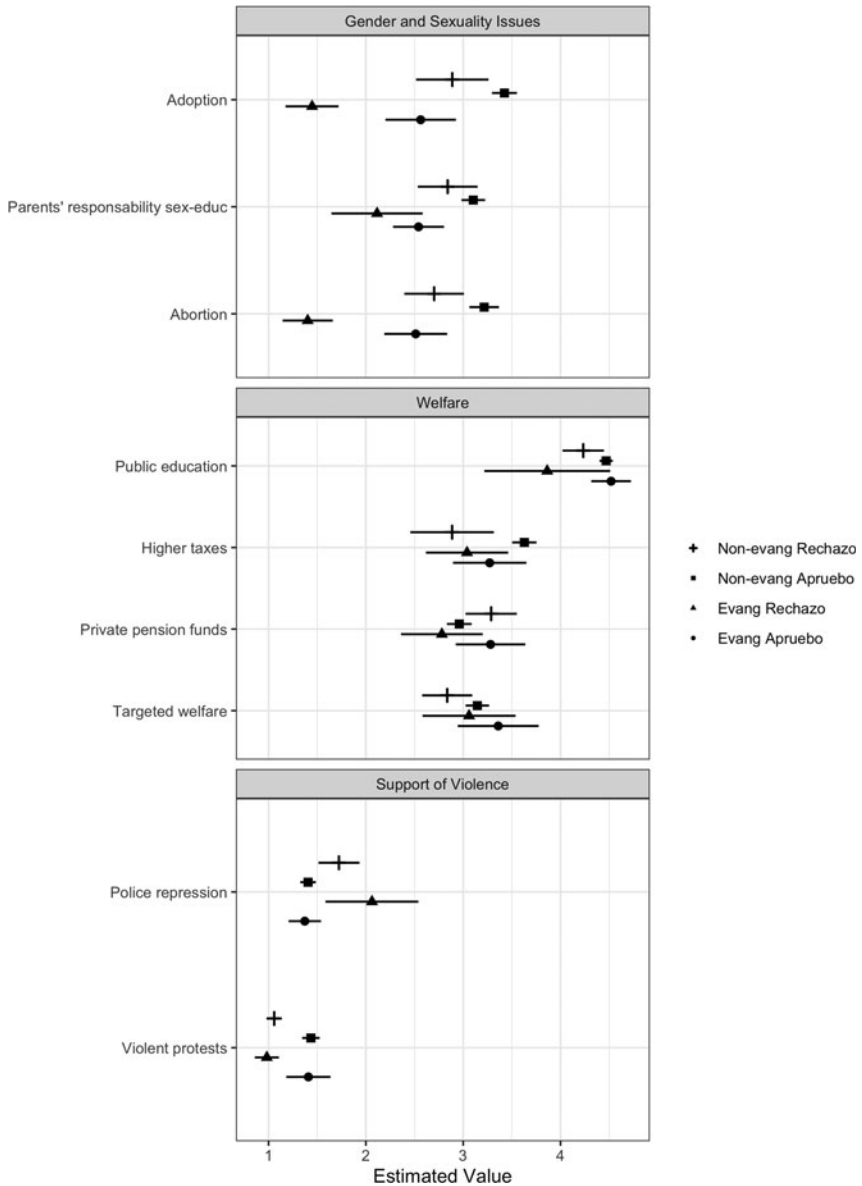


Figure 5. *Apruebo* v. *rechazo* evangelicals' preferences on selected policy issues. Source: ELSOC 2019–2021. 95% confidence intervals.

paribus. *Rechazo* evangelicals are also more likely to believe sex-ed to be the parents' responsibility, although the difference is not statistically significant. As expected, non-evangelical *apruebo* voters are the most supportive of abortion and same-sex adoption, and interestingly, there is no statistically significant difference between non-evangelical *rechazo* and evangelical *apruebo*. Finally, in questions related to the

justification of police repression in the context of protests and the legitimacy of violent protests, differences across groups are small and are between *apruebo* and *rechazo* voters, with religious denomination not relevant.

As we can see, there are significant differences in policy preferences between *rechazo* and *apruebo* evangelicals, which we argue lie at the core of each group's mobilization. On gender and sexuality, these differences between *apruebo* and *rechazo* are larger than among non-evangelicals. That evangelicals in the *rechazo* are most conservative on gender and sexuality issues supports the argument about the initial (conservative) politicization of religious identity that has led them to associate with the right and adopt more radical stances on the overall constitutional process. Likewise, survey data supports two key claims by those leading the evangelical *apruebo* movement: that many groups of evangelicals place their focus on conservative stances and that evangelicals are diverse. Building an alternative evangelical political identity, not focused on gender and sexuality, is thus at the core of *apruebo* mobilization, as qualitative evidence indicates.

3.3 Identity as motivation for countermobilization

"I think there is a prejudice that evangelicals are mostly right-wing. That is very much installed. People think that when a person is Christian-evangelical they are simple-minded, right-wing, and other things. Ignorant, other things, but it's really not like that" (interview 5). This statement from an *apruebo* member and part of a left-wing party reflects a common perception about evangelicals, resulting from their conservative politicization over the last decade. Our evidence indicates that contesting this view has been a key motivation for progressive evangelical mobilization.

Previous research has highlighted how the politicization of religious identities often occurs in *reaction* to the political views of other religious communities. Gaddini (2022) finds that British evangelicals positioned themselves mostly on the Remain option guided by favorable views on immigration, one of the key issues of Brexit. Interestingly, a strong motivator for these evangelicals to take an openly political stance was the election of Donald Trump and the rejection of many of the views held by American evangelicals, particularly anti-immigration. Before Trump and before Brexit, many British evangelicals tended to prefer a stricter separation between religion and politics, but these events changed those perceptions.

We found similar arguments in Chile. "There is an obsession among the right to capture evangelicals. I wish there were no *rechazo* or *apruebo* evangelicals (...) I believe those of us who are here have been forced to. I personally started this mostly from an apologetic perspective to demystify, de-caricature evangelicals, and show their diversity" (Interview 9). One characteristic of *apruebo* evangelicals was a stricter separation of religion and politics and opposing conservatives' goal of bringing a religious interpretation into the political arena.

Differentiating themselves from conservative evangelicals was not only a discursive position of our interviewees but part of the campaign dynamic for the October 2020 plebiscite. One of the most commented events on Twitter during the plebiscite campaign was the appearance of Kevin Valenzuela, a member of *Evangélicos por el Rechazo*, on the first day of the televised legal campaign (or *franja*). In his

appearance, Valenzuela emphasized the violence that had given rise to the constitutional process and how it was motivated by Satan, implying that no good Christian should vote for the approve option. The video was immediately met with criticism from members of the *apruebo* and even from the *rechazo*.

The polemic video mobilized progressive evangelical groups across the country. The same afternoon the controversial video was broadcasted, the organizations *Evagéllicos por el Apruebo*, *Plataforma Nuevo Pacto*, and *Apruebo Evagéllico* issued a statement rejecting Valenzuela's declarations and called the faithful to vote conscientiously, making visible the plurality of positions within the evangelical world. In addition, the Council of Historical Protestant Churches of Chile published a declaration rejecting that certain groups presented themselves as representing the evangelical community (Vera, 2020). Days later, different social organizations and political parties of the *apruebo* invited some of the leaders of the *Apruebo Evagéllico*, such as Esteban Quiroz and Alejandra Acevedo, to promote their position in the televised campaign.

In fact, one of the key concerns for the members of evangelical organizations in favor of a new constitution was to show not only a distinctive discourse but also a more conciliatory way of communicating their message. From their perspective, the discourse of the *rechazo* groups was marked by an old fashion, violent, and discriminatory way of educating the population. One of the main leaders of *Evagéllicos por el Apruebo* and later candidate to the convention claimed, "Today to see an evangelical who sends people to hell, who demonizes other positions... It is not only extemporaneous, but that kind of political profile is very harsh and violent, and nobody wants it. So, our brothers do this and ridicule us all along the way, because people outside see us all as the same. We fight to make a difference" (interview 7).

One of the most voiced criticisms by *apruebo* members was how the sectors against a new constitution played on the fears of evangelical voters. For many of those interviewed, the *rechazo* emphasized the possible obstacles that evangelicals could have under the new constitution to freely exercise their faith in the public sphere and even how the new rules could jeopardize the very existence of their faith. The *apruebo*, on the other hand, underscored how the right to assembly, free speech, and freedom of worship are internationally enshrined and that a new constitution could not limit these freedoms. In this sense, one of the interviewees commented, "*Rechazo's* arguments tend to have feet of clay as the arguments are not solid, and respond more to a logic of fear, of something that could happen. In short, when you invite them to analyze the *rechazo* position with solid arguments, the truth is that they lack legal and juridical basis" (interview 8).

Overall, *apruebo* evangelicals criticized both the content, the tone, and the goals of *rechazo* evangelicals, motivating the formation of a new platform. Unlike conservative evangelicals, when the constitutional process started, there were no recent experiences of organizing. There were, however, a set of individuals who had separately developed concerns and lifted initiatives such as the blog *El Otro Canuto*. The plebiscite provided the opportunity for them to come together under the *evagéllicos por el apruebo* umbrella (Interview 9). A key goal was to show the diversity within the evangelical community and that it is possible to engage in politics as moderate or progressive evangelicals. We, therefore, argue that the search for a different political and religious platform helped built this collective identity of *apruebo* evangelicals.

Table 1. Evangelical candidates' Facebook advertisement for 2021 Constitutional Convention election

	Political Party	Total Campaign (CLP)
1	Christian Conservative Party	978.720
2	Independent	1.370.773
3	National Renewal	6.195.200
4	Progressive evangelical (self-financed)	1.187.519
5	Republican Party	3.151.492
6	UDI (self-financed)	3.683.618

The preceding analysis is not meant to claim that in this process both sectors of mobilized evangelicals became equally relevant. Conservative evangelicals retained their organizational advantages and preexisting links to right-wing parties. We were able to identify 53 evangelical candidates for the May 2021 Constitutional Convention election, 38 of which (or 72%) were associated with right-wing parties, and only 13 (25%) were progressive candidates (two were independents not aligned). Moreover, if we look at advertisement investment on Facebook during the campaign (presented in Table 1), only evangelical candidates from the right received party financing. National Renewal, a mainstream right party, made the most significant investment (electing two of their candidates). Progressive evangelicals only spent modest amounts. Overall, right-wing evangelical candidates spent more than ten times what progressive did, indicating the unequal footing they competed in.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we argued and provided evidence that a strong motivation for *apruebo* members' organizing was building an identity in opposition to *rechazo* and conservative evangelicals. *Apruebo* members rejected the *rechazo* campaign that framed the new constitution as a threat to Christian values. This mobilization, in turn, responds to the initial politicization of evangelical identity as a reaction to the advance of progressive legislation on sexuality and family policies.

The argument presented contributes to the literature on religion and politics that has centered on policy threats and inter-denominational competition as drivers of religious-based mobilization and provides a framework to understand how different processes of religious politicization interact. It also complements the growing literature on anti "gender ideology" by providing a broader perspective on contemporary evangelicals in Latin America and sheds light on a reaction to evangelical conservatism that is present in other countries (Vital da Cunha, 2021).

Future research should look at the underexplored question of when individuals that do not identify with the conservative politicization of their churches may opt to exit or countermobilize, the alternatives included in our model. In line with existing research in the US (Djupe *et al.*, 2018), we can hypothesize that individuals for whom religion represents a more important part of their lives might be willing to look for alternative churches and mobilize politically to challenge the dominant conception of evangelical identity. This commitment was generally present in our

interviewees, as for most the constitutional process was not their first attempt at challenging dominant views on evangelicals and politics. Exploring the specific conditions under which these decisions are made opens an important research agenda in Latin America.

Whether progressive Chilean evangelicals will be able to sustain their presence in the political arena is beyond the scope of this paper, but we end with some insights into this question. On the one hand, survey data shows that evangelical politicization is overall low, as they show less participation in the plebiscite, and that their more moderate views on gender and sexuality issues leave ample opportunity to mobilize evangelicals based on other agendas. However, three important constraints paint a grim picture for sustained progressive evangelical activism. First, and unlike conservative evangelicals, is the lack of a distinctive set of issues to identify their political activism. Their agendas can be easily merged with that of other groups, and showing the diversity among evangelicals as their core issue likely has comparatively little mobilization capacity. Second, progressive evangelicals' views on the relationship between religion and politics favor a greater distance between the two spheres; they are generally reluctant to form religious political parties and believe religion should not guide politicians' actions. As such, progressive evangelicals face an important organizational challenge. And third, parties on the political left have a distant relationship with religion in general, and evangelicals in particular, due to both prejudices about their beliefs and a general disregard for appealing to religious communities. While the intra-denominational challenges to conservative religious mobilization may open a path of collaboration with the left—for example, during the last campaign groups of evangelicals met with the leftist candidate and now president Gabriel Boric –, that may not amount to more of a permanent relationship.

Progressive evangelicals remain an understudied subject. The strict identification of white evangelicals with the Republican Party in the United States—in part due to terminological differences and progressive Protestant churches not identifying as evangelicals—has left little room for contesting this relationship. Latin America, however, shows more fluid political identities in general and among evangelicals in particular. It remains to be seen how strong of a motivator is the need to be set apart from a vocal and well-organized conservative minority.

5. List of cited interviews

1. Evangelical pastor and member of *Rechazo Evangélico*. Online interview, October 19, 2020.
2. Member of *Rechazo Evangélico* and *Chile Cristiano*. Phone interview, September 30, 2020.
3. Evangelical pastor and member of *Apruebo Evangélico*. Online interview, October 16, 2020.
4. Member of *Rechazo Evangélico*. Online interview, October 8, 2020.
5. Member of *Evangélicos por el Apruebo* and member of a left-wing party. Phone interview, October 16, 2020.
6. Member of *Partido Conservador Cristiano* and *Rechazo Evangélico*. Phone interview, September 29, 2020.

7. Spokesperson of *Apruebo Evangélico*. Phone interview, October 17, 2020.
8. City councilor and member of *Evangélicos por el Apruebo*. Online interview, October 13, 2020.
9. Spokesperson of *Apruebo Evangélico*. Phone interview, September 30, 2020.

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Replication data: Survey data used in this paper is available from Harvard's Dataverse at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/SOQJ0N>.

Notes

1 One exception that considers interdenominational competition is Boas' (Forthcoming, chap. 4) analysis of how the Assemblies of God and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God have competed for political representation and influence in Brazil.

2 Information obtained from the Electoral Service, available at <https://www.servei.cl/partidos-en-formacion/> [visited May 18, 2021]. For the establishment of a new political party, Chilean legislation requires the signature of at least 0.25% of citizens that voted in the last legislative election, per each one of the existing 16 regions, with a minimum of 500 people. To obtain legal status, this requirement must be met in either eight regions or three neighboring regions, being able to run candidates only in those regions in which they have legal status.

3 The electoral law indicates that national TV channels must freely exhibit electoral spots for 30 minutes a day. The *apruebo* and *rechazo* options were given equal time.

4 Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies COES (2022) "Estudio Longitudinal Social de Chile 2016-2021," available from Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LQMURF>.

5 Although only 51% of eligible voters participated in the plebiscite, this was the highest percentage since 2012 when voluntary voting was introduced as well as the highest number of voters ever, with over 7.5 million people. Only the second round of the presidential election in December 2021 has surpassed the plebiscite's participation numbers.

6 Rechazo spokesman Daniel Rozas on video posted by @ElRechazo, February 13, 2020. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/ElRechazo/status/1228017885932670976?s=19>

7 As is common in electoral surveys (Atkeson, 1999), respondents overreported both turnout and support for the *apruebo*.

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Appendix: Plebiscite Vote Choice and Evangelical Preferences on Selected Issues

	Adoption	(2) Parents' sex-educ	(3) Abortion	(4) Public educ	(5) Higher taxes	(6) Private pension funds	(7) Targeted welfare	(8) Police repression	(9) Violent protests
(Intercept)	2.61*** (0.41)	2.71*** (0.34)	2.61*** (0.41)	3.96*** (0.26)	3.17*** (0.45)	4.29*** (0.40)	4.25*** (0.36)	1.55*** (0.26)	2.02*** (0.20)
Evangelical	-1.32*** (0.21)	-0.71* (0.29)	-1.32*** (0.21)	-0.34 (0.35)	0.22 (0.31)	-0.61* (0.26)	0.05 (0.28)	0.34 (0.26)	-0.15* (0.08)
Apruebo	0.39* (0.18)	0.21 (0.17)	0.39* (0.18)	0.22 (0.12)	0.64** (0.23)	-0.35* (0.15)	0.24 (0.15)	-0.25* (0.12)	0.23*** (0.06)
Gender (female)	0.22 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.10)	0.22 (0.13)	0.20** (0.07)	-0.06 (0.12)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.19 (0.11)	-0.17* (0.07)	-0.13 (0.08)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)
Education level	0.06 (0.03)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Ideology	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Evangelical × Apruebo	0.71* (0.28)	0.24 (0.32)	0.71* (0.28)	0.43 (0.36)	-0.52 (0.37)	0.79* (0.32)	0.03 (0.34)	-0.40 (0.28)	0.15 (0.15)
Deviance	1,888.88	1,462.89	1,888.88	577.89	510.68	1,555.86	1,347.46	1,392.73	1,284.20
Dispersion	1.76	1.42	1.76	0.56	0.82	1.46	1.31	0.82	0.80
Num. obs.	1,074	1,031	1,074	1,031	625	1,068	1,029	1,703	1,615

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

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