


ARTICLE

# “I Will Bless Those Who Bless You”: Evangelicalism and Support for Israel in Latin America

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## Abstract

The relations of the Evangelical movement and Israel have drawn the attention of many scholars of religion, public opinion, and political science in the last two decades. This study examines the influence of Evangelicals on their country's policy toward Israel. I conduct the first quantitative, cross-national research, investigating the links between the size of the Evangelical population of a country and its support for Israel. Analyzing 198 UN General Assembly votes of 18 Latin American countries from 2009 to 2019, my results show that as the Evangelical population in a country grows, so does its support for Israel. Unpredictably, I also find that a state of armed conflict between Israel and the Palestinians does not decrease the support for Israel.

## Introduction

The literature on religion and foreign policy has been constantly growing in recent years (Sandel and Fox 2013). The research focuses mainly on specific religious groups and their particular attitudes and positions toward international affairs (Jelen 1994; Nelsen et al. 2001; Furia and Lucas 2006; Baumgartner et al. 2008; Froese and Mencken 2009). One of the most prominent religious groups that have attracted the attention of public opinion scholars is the Evangelical movement. Evangelicals were found to be significantly more hawkish than other religious groups (Jelen 1994), more supportive of the second Iraq War (2003) and the ‘War on Terror’ generally (Baumgartner et al. 2008), and more sympathetic toward the State of Israel (Mayer 2004; Pew Research Center 2006; Pew Research Center 2014; Brookings 2015; Gries 2015).

The Evangelical support for Israel is explained by theological, cultural, historical, and strategic motivations (Inbari et al. 2021). There are, however, two major gaps in the existing literature. First, the question remains open as to whether this support is translated into an active pro-Israeli policy at the national level. The few studies that

investigated this question were qualitative and focused almost entirely on the George W. Bush Administration (e.g., Haynes 2008) and more recently on Donald Trump's Administration (e.g., Spector 2019). More broadly, despite increased attention to the role of religion in international relations, its influence in the actual process of shaping states' foreign policies remains "relatively unexplored" (Warner and Walker 2011).

Second, even the studies that investigated the Evangelical support for Israel without exploring the actual effects on foreign policy were conducted almost entirely on the US Evangelical movement. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether this is a unique US phenomenon or a worldwide, global, transnational movement, as the majority of Evangelicals do not live in the United States, but rather in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

In this paper, I intend to fill these two gaps. The main research question of this paper is: *How does the proportion of Evangelicals in the population of a country affect its attitudes toward Israel?* Investigating the voting patterns of 18 Latin American countries in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), I hypothesize that the larger the Evangelical population in a country the higher its support for Israel. My empirical results confirm the main hypothesis. Unpredictably, the occurrence of an armed conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in the year of voting was found to have had no significant impact on the level of support of these countries for Israel.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it takes the research on Evangelicals and foreign policy one step forward by providing quantitative evidence from several countries regarding the effect of Evangelicals on foreign policy. Second, it offers a new usage of UNGA votes as a database for future and more generalizable research on the effect of religious-based foreign policy attitudes on actual foreign policy. Lastly, it expands the literature on the relations between Evangelicals and Israel outside of the United States.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I present a *theoretical framework* that focuses on the existing literature on public opinion, religion, and foreign policy. Thereafter, I elaborate on the *motivations* behind Evangelical support for Israel and suggest possible *mechanisms* through which this support can be translated into a national foreign policy. Next, I depict the *data and method* used to test the links between the number of Evangelicals in a given state and its support for Israel. Then the *results* of the research are presented and analyzed. Finally, a *discussion* section emphasizes the contributions of the research and reviews possible directions for future studies.

### *Literature Review: Public Opinion, Religion, and Foreign Policy*

In the field of public opinion and foreign policy, the "Almond-Lippman consensus" had been the prevailing wisdom among public opinion scholars since the end of World War II. The "Almond-Lippman consensus" maintains that public opinion on foreign policies is volatile and lacks structure and coherence so that it might be best described as "non-attitudes" (Holsti 2004, 58). Consequently, public opinion has very little impact on foreign policy (Almond 1960). This perception, however, was challenged by several scholars since the 1990s (Wittkopf 1990; Russett 1990; Peffley and Hurwitz 1993; Alterman 1998; Holsti 2004; Page and Bouton 2008), who argued that public opinion can be coherent and actively affect foreign policy.

Important progress in the field has been made with a series of studies that have furthered our understanding of the variables that shape the attitudes of the public on foreign policies. One of these variables is religion, or more precisely, religious affiliation (Wittkopf 1990; Jelen 1994; Ribuffo 1998). In this context, perhaps the most prominent religious group studied has been the US Evangelical movement.

Many studies of public opinion, foreign policy, and religion in the United States point to a direct link between religious affiliation, and specifically Evangelicalism, and support for Israel. Mayer (2004) found that Fundamentalists Evangelical Christians are the most pro-Israel religious group in the United States (after American Jews) and that they oppose policies pressuring Israel for concessions in the negotiations with the Palestinians. Gries (2015) presented similar results, finding that white Evangelical Protestants had the largest gap between their 'warmth' toward Israel and 'coolness' toward Palestinians. Baumgartner et al. (2008) found that Evangelicals are more likely to take Israel's side in its conflict with the Palestinians and push for a more pro-Israeli stance in the Middle East in general. Inbari and Bumin (2020) found that more than a third of Evangelicals would support Israel if it annexed the West Bank. Several surveys conducted in the United States have shown similar tendencies. A survey made by Pew Research Center in 2014 found that Evangelical Protestants wanted the United States to increase its support for Israel more than any other religious group. Another survey made by the Brookings Institution in 2015 found that Evangelicals are more likely to support Israel than non-evangelicals.

Nevertheless, these studies all focus on personal preferences, while falling short of explaining whether such tendencies influence and shape foreign policy at the national level. Even if at the individual level, Evangelicals do hold more positive attitudes toward Israel, the answer to the question of whether these attitudes lead to pro-Israeli policies at the national level remains open.

This gap in the literature is not unique to the Evangelical case. As aforementioned, most of the studies investigating the actual influence of religion on foreign policies are qualitative by nature, and focused on specific case studies (e.g., Haynes 2008). Such studies, while rich in details, are limited in space and time and make generalization very difficult.

The second weakness of the existing research is more specific to the Evangelical case, and it is related to its narrow geographical scope. The nexus between Evangelicals and support for Israel has been investigated almost exclusively in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The general neglect of non-US Evangelicals demonstrates a serious problem in the literature as only 15–20% of the Evangelicals worldwide live in the United States. The rest of the Evangelicals live mainly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Before referring to the main hypothesis of this study, I should address two more questions: First, why would Evangelicals support Israel in the first place? Second, how can Evangelical support be translated into foreign policy?

### *Motivations*

The literature focuses on four major reasons to explain Evangelical support for the Jewish people in general and the State of Israel specifically.

*“I will bless those who bless you”*. One of the main defining characteristics of the Evangelical faith is biblical literalism (Bebbington 2003). This view does not see the Bible as a collection of allegories or metaphors but as an accurate description that should be read as such, in literal terms. In this regard, Evangelicals commonly refer to the famous verse from Genesis 12:3: “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse, and; all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” This, when read literally, is a demand for other nations to support Israel, but also an explicit threat to those who fail to do so.

Evangelicals take this promise of blessings very seriously. In his book, *Earth’s Final Moments* John Hagee, the founder of CUFI (Christians United for Israel), described the destiny of every nation that turned against the Jews: “Where are the Babylonians? Where are the Romans? Where are the Greeks? Where are the Persians? Where is the Ottoman Empire? Where is that lunatic Adolf Hitler and his Nazi hordes? They are all historical footnotes in the boneyard of human history” (Hagee 2011). Jerry Falwell, a well-known Evangelical pastor from VA claimed that “God has blessed America because America has blessed the Jews [...] If this nation wants her fields to remain white with grain, her scientific achievements to remain notable, and her freedom to remain intact, America must continue to stand with Israel” (Spector 2009, 24).

This line of argumentation is not unique to Evangelicals in the United States. In 2018, after her country moved its embassy to Jerusalem, Sarah Angelina Solis, Guatemala’s ambassador to Israel declared: “I feel this is a gift from God. I know that a lot of blessings will come after this decision. This is a promise in the Bible, in Genesis, and I don’t think, I’m sure many blessings will come for Guatemala” (Mitchell 2018). Similarly, Pastor Eduardo Gómez of Colombia claimed that since the beginning of the blessing events for Israel in Casanara (“Casanara blesses Israel”), this Colombian department went through an impressive growth of agriculture production. Now, he says, the land produces the “softest coffee, the finest oil and has no illicit crops” (Gómez 2019).

*God’s Chosen People*. Another implication of the literal reading of the Bible is the emphasis on the special relations between God and Israel (Inbari et al. 2021). For centuries, the attitudes of the Christian world toward the Jews were influenced and shaped by the “replacement theology.” This theory, also known as supersessionism, asserts that the church “replaced the Jews as the chosen people of God” (Carroll 2002, 58). Many Catholics nowadays still adhere to this theology. Evangelicals, in contrast, believe that the unique relations that the Jewish people had with God did not end with the coming of Christ: “God never rejected the Jews or replaced them because they could not see Jesus as Messiah. God still loves and cherishes the Jewish people and has a glorious future in store for them” (Hagee 2016, 156). God’s Covenant with Abraham is, hence, permanent, and irrevocable (Miller 2014).

Deputy Otoni De Paula (2021) of Brazil, in a speech in the Brazilian parliament in May 2021, read a letter signed by the “Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the National Congress” while holding the flag of Israel. This letter was an act of support toward the State of Israel during Operation “Guardian of the Walls” that took place at the time. He quoted from the Bible saying “I have great sadness and constant pain in my heart for the Jewish people. They are my brothers, my earthly family. I want to

help them so much because they are the people of Israel, the chosen children of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and the victory in the 6-day War in 1967 that brought to the reunification of Jerusalem and the capture of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) is perceived by Evangelicals as proof that the prophecies regarding the Jewish people are still relevant and are taking shape in our lifetime (Spector 2009; Durbin 2013). This literal reading of the Bible may also lead to claims about Israel’s rights over “Greater Israel” (Judea and Samaria), for God has given this land exclusively to the Jewish people (Baumgartner et al. 2008).

*Gratitude.* Another core principle that shaped the relations between the Christian world and the Jews for centuries was the allegation against the Jews for their part in the crucifixion of Christ. This belief was the source of many persecutions against the Jews throughout history (Brog 2016).

Today, among Evangelicals, a sense of gratitude for all that the Jews and Judaism have contributed to Christianity is replacing the ancient animosity. The Jews have given humanity monotheism, the Old Testament, and Jesus the Messiah himself. According to Hagee (2016), the Jews “have given Christianity the Scriptures, the patriarchs, the prophets, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the twelve disciples, and the apostles. In return for these many gifts,” Hagee concludes, “Christians should give practical support to the modern State of Israel” (Spector 2009, 32). In this regard, Evangelicals commonly note the verse from Romans 11:17–18 that describes Judaism as the olive tree root that nourishes and supports its branches (Christianity) (Durbin 2013, 512).

*Eschatology.* Lastly, many Evangelicals follow a theology called pre-millennial dispensationalism. This school of thought predicts that before the second coming of Jesus, a few stages must be fulfilled. First, the Jewish people must return to their homeland. Then, after they would rebuild the Temple, a time known as “the great tribulation” would begin. During this time, an Anti-Christ would arise in Israel, take over the Temple and institute a “reign of terror” (Inbari et al. 2021). Finally, a great battle will take place in Israel as nations would try to invade the Holy Land. This period will come to an end with the return of Christ who will defeat the Anti-Christ, take over his kingdom and establish a one-thousand years reign of peace and justice (Kilde 2004). Therefore, some scholars suggest, Evangelicals support Israel not because of the sympathy they share toward the Jewish people but as a strategy to “accelerate an eschatological crisis that will deliver the world to Armageddon and bring Christ back” (Burge 2010, 121–122).

To sum up, theological-based support for Israel can stem from biblical interpretations that emphasize the special relations between God and the people of Israel or the promises of blessings to those who support the Jewish people; from a sense of gratitude toward the Jewish people; and as practical mean to accelerate the second coming of Christ. It is noteworthy that some scholars suggest other, more cultural-historical explanations. Hummel (2019), for instance, suggests that Evangelical support for Israel should be seen as a Jewish-Christian brotherhood that is based on the Judeo-Christian tradition.

### *Mechanisms of Influence*

Religious groups can influence foreign policy in ways similar to other interest groups, including “lobbying elected representatives and members of the Executive Branch, making campaign contributions, voting in elections, molding public opinion” (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 41). In addition, they can influence presidents and Congress members in another manner if the politicians share similar religious beliefs. All these strategies have been used by Evangelical groups.

*Electorate power.* Religious groups can promote their members to positions in both the legislative and the executive branches. Alternatively, they can vote as a bloc and support only candidates who are committed to their agendas.

A good illustration of the growing use of Evangelical electorate power can be seen in Brazil. Since as early as 1985, Evangelical groups have realized that their share in the population is not reflected properly in the representative institutions of the country. In 1985, leaders of the Evangelical Church “Assembly of God” announced that “they would begin endorsing and supporting candidates to run for office” (Polimedio 2018). This campaign was accompanied by the slogan “brother votes for brother” and brought impressive results. The number of Pentecostal Evangelical representatives in the Chamber of Deputies, Brazil’s lower house of the National Congress, grew from two in 1983–1986 to 18 in 1987–1990 (Freston 1993, 73).

Today the Brazilian “Evangelical Bench,” a group of Evangelical politicians from different parties, aiming at “defending Evangelical interests” (Beal and Stangler 2009), makes for 84 deputies (out of 513) in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies (Dame 2018). Prominent members of this group have been promoting pro-Israel policies since as early as 2005 (Grin et al. 2019). Moreover, Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s current president, was elected mainly because of the significant support from Evangelicals, with more than 70% of Pentecostal Evangelicals voting for him (Hunter and Power 2019, 77). Interestingly, although he is Catholic, Bolsonaro was baptized in 2016 by an Evangelical pastor at the Jordan River, an act that led to the endorsement of dominant Evangelical leaders (Polimedio 2018).

Bolsonaro’s close ties to the Evangelical Bench have “shaped his campaign promises and presidential platform, as he has fully embraced their values” (Grin et al. 2019). That included their pro-Israeli agendas such as recognizing Jerusalem, as Israel’s capital, moving the embassy to the city and supporting Israel in international forums. In his presidential election campaign, one of Bolsonaro’s main promises was to move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (a promise that has yet to be fulfilled).

In Guatemala, where Evangelicals make up to 40% of the country’s population, the previous president, Jimmy Morales, was an Evangelical Christian. Under his presidency, Guatemala moved its embassy to Jerusalem shortly after the United States. Other countries in the region also have Evangelical candidates running for the presidency: Venezuela, Chile, Costa Rica, and Honduras (Lissardy 2018).

*Lobbying.* Lobbying is also a very common strategy for influencing foreign policy decision-makers. This practice is perhaps most prominent in the United States where many interest groups (economic and ethnic) attempt to shape the US foreign

policy (see Smith 2000). The successes of the CUFI, an Evangelical organization with nine million members, which lobbies for pro-Israel policies in both the Congress and the White House illustrate the significant power of lobbying. The CUFI yearly summit features high profiled political figures. The 2019 summit included former Vice President Mike Pence, the former National Security Adviser John Bolton, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and many Senate and House members. This organization was one of the main forces that led former President Trump to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem (Evans 2018; Spector 2019).

In Latin America, an organization called the Latino Coalition for Israel (LCI) is also pursuing similar objectives. In 2018, it launched the Latin American Jerusalem Task Force that promoted the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the transfer of Latin American embassies to the city. As Lourdes Aguirre, LCI director declared: “It is our desire to see other Latin American nations follow the bold decision and leadership of President Trump and President Morales” (Aguirre 2018).

*Shaping public opinion.* Religious groups and religious leaders can also mold the general public opinion on foreign policy. In the era of mass media, this task has become much easier than in the past. In the last decades, religious figures in Latin America have established radio stations, TV shows, and sometimes even their own TV networks. They also have a strong presence on social media (Lissardy 2018). Through mass media and social media, they can, more efficiently than ever shape public opinion, including issues related to foreign policies.

This phenomenon, known in the Christian context as ‘televangelism’, started in the United States with Evangelical preachers such as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson but has expanded to Latin America as well. Figures such as Carlos Luna of Guatemala and Edir Macedo of Brazil are just two examples of this phenomenon (Smith and Campos 2005). Both of them preach their support of Israel through many channels.

Another way Evangelicals influence public opinion regarding Israel is to conduct rallies and marches for Israel that have become more and more prevalent in the region. The “Casanara blesses Israel” annual event in Colombia is a good illustration of such a rally. In this event 15,000–20,000 people gather to hear Evangelical pastors preaching on behalf of Israel and praying for Israel. It also includes singing of Israeli songs and Israeli dancing as well as speeches from local Jewish leaders and representatives of the State of Israel (Gómez 2019). The ‘March of Glory’ is an annual event for the Independence Day of Israel that takes place in Mexico City annually and gathers thousands of Evangelicals (AJN 2018). Similar events take place in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and other countries in the region (Ynetnews 2014; Aurora 2019).

*Inter-personal relations with Evangelical politicians.* Apart from the general strategies applied by interest groups, in some cases religious groups and leaders have another way of influencing foreign policy. Presidents, high-ranking officials, or parliament members who consider themselves religious, are all important channels for religious leaders and groups to convey their perspectives and influence foreign policies.

Perhaps the most famous example of such a case is the George W. Bush Administration. After his election, religious figures gained access to White House officials and the President himself. Evangelical leaders “were able to arrange sessions with senior White House aides” (Haynes 2008, 148). Moreover, influential positions in the Bush administration were manned by religious figures. Michel Garson, Bush’s policy adviser and speechwriter was a member of an Evangelical Episcopal church in VA. He was one of the “driving forces behind Bush’s emphasis on a global spread” and was also the one to coin the term “axis of evil”. (LaFranchi 2006).

Building on both the theological and the political science bodies of literature, the main hypothesis of this research is that *the larger the Evangelical population in a country, the higher the country’s support for Israel*.

## Research Design

To test my hypothesis, I conduct cross-sectional time-series research, analyzing 198 votes of 18 Latin American countries at the UNGA from 2008 to 2019.<sup>3</sup> I focus on this region for two reasons. First, almost all countries in Latin America have an Evangelical population, which varies from 2% to 43% (see Figure 1). Second, to some extent, Latin American countries have many common characteristics, such as language, culture, and history. This helps to eliminate other factors that may affect the support for Israel and better distills the particular influence of the Evangelicals. The 18 Latin American countries I investigate are the ones that were surveyed by the Latino Barometer consecutively from 2008 to 2018.<sup>4</sup>

To operationalize the dependent variable –support for Israel— I use roll-call votes from the UNGA. UNGA votes have long been used as an indicator for states’ preferences and attitudes in many studies (Oneal and Russett 1999; Gartzke 2000; Voeten 2004; Bearce and Bondanella 2007; Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Onderco 2014; Neto and Malamud 2015). I choose to follow this path for two reasons: (1) a country’s vote provides “valuable information” about its preferences on global issues (Oneal and Russett 1999, but see Dixon 1981), and (2) the UNGA is the only international forum in which almost all countries vote on various international affairs regularly over many years (Voeten 2000).

Scholars who analyze UN votes are divided over the question of which votes to count as indicators of foreign policy preferences. While some scholars analyze all UNGA votes (e.g., Dreher et al. 2008), others focus on “important” or “relevant” votes only (e.g., Wang 1999). For the purposes of this research, I only analyzed votes concerning the State of Israel and the Palestinian issue. The data I analyzed, therefore, includes all the UNGA votes regarding Israel, Palestine, the Jewish settlements, Jerusalem, the West Bank the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and Hamas.

Following Thacker (1999), I measured voting coincidence with Israel as follows: Every vote was coded as 2 if the country voted in agreement with Israel, 0 if it voted in disagreement with Israel, and 1 if one country abstained and the other voted in favor or against. I discarded votes in which the country was absent.<sup>5</sup> As in most UNGA voting studies, my unit of analysis is the dyad year (see Dreher et al. 2008). The yearly averaged value is produced by summing up the country’s voting coincidence with Israel each year, divided by the number of the total votes at that





**Figure 1.** Evangelicals in Latin America 2018

year. Overall, 198 votes were analyzed. To operationalize the independent variable—the proportion of Evangelicals in the population of the country—I used data from the Latino Barometer.<sup>6</sup>

**Control Variables**

The model also includes several control variables that may affect attitudes toward the State of Israel in the UNGA votes.

**Trade with Israel**

High levels of trade between countries are believed to create interdependence and “unite people and nations in common bond” (ONeal and Russett 1997, 268). In

this vein, if a country's volume of trade with Israel is relatively high in terms of import and export, a weakening of the Israeli economy, say by sanctions or embargo, may damage the other country as well. Hence, the higher the interdependence, the higher the incentive to support Israel. In addition, some liberal scholars contend that the more we trade the more our interests and cultures converge. The data on the trade with Israel relative to the general trade of each country was collected from the [International Trade Center](#) and the [Israel Central Bureau Statistics](#).<sup>7</sup>

### *Jewish Population*

Jews, in general, are significantly more supportive of Israel than non-Jewish people ('Gentiles') (Green 2004). As the diaspora of the Jewish state, Jews around the world share a common history, culture and tradition with Israeli Jews. Moreover, as they are entitled to citizenship in Israel by the Law of Return, some even share a potential future. More generally, many Jews believe that "all Jews are responsible for each other" (Shain and Bristman 2002, 79). The data on the Jewish population was taken from the Berman Jewish Databank (2018).

### *Muslim Population*

Attitudes toward Israel are believed to be deeply dependent on one's perception of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Muslims share a common religion with most Palestinians and thus may "naturally side with Palestinian co-believers in their struggle" (Guth 2011, 19). A larger Muslim population is therefore expected to negatively affect the attitudes toward Israel. The data on the Muslim local population was taken from the Pew Research Center (2011).<sup>8</sup>

### *Armed Conflict*

Wars and armed conflicts with Arab countries and non-state actors (like the PLO and Hamas) have always affected Israel's relations with other countries. Due to the 1973 war, Cuba and other countries cut their diplomatic ties with Israel. During the Second Intifada, Oman and Tunisia closed their diplomatic missions to Israel. After Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009 in the Gaza Strip, Venezuela and Bolivia cut their diplomatic ties with Israel. Therefore, it is predicted that the occurrence of an armed conflict with the Palestinians will negatively affect the levels of support for Israel.<sup>9</sup>

I included in the model several variables that are commonly added in UNGA votes analysis: GDP, GDP per capita, level of democracy, and the existence of an Israeli embassy, on which the data was taken from the World Bank ([GDP by country](#), and [GDP per Capita](#)) and [The Freedom House](#).

## **Findings**

In order to account for the 1-year lag effect, all models were estimated in T-1 (see Flores-Macías and Kreps, 2013). Model 6 in [Table 1](#) is the full model in T-1. The values of the voting coincidence with Israel, are on a scale between 0 and 2 ([Figure 2](#)). The highest grade of convergence was with Guatemala in 2018 with a value of 1.28; the lowest value was 0 (with few countries in few different years). The mean value of

**Table 1.** The determinants of support for Israel 2008-2018 (OLS)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6 (T-1)	7
Evangelicals	0.00505*** (0.00168)	0.00488*** (0.00170)	0.00405** (0.00184)	0.00363* (0.00186)	0.00380** (0.00184)	0.00474** (0.00204)	
Trade	3.693 (6.105)		9.395 (6.797)		6.114 (7.027)	6.700 (7.766)	6.047 (7.088)
Embassy	0.0328 (0.0426)		0.112**		0.119** (0.0520)	0.113* (0.0575)	0.115** (0.0524)
Jewish P		0.0188 (0.0150)		0.0383* (0.0214)	0.0388* (0.0220)	0.0473* (0.0241)	0.0416* (0.0221)
Muslim P		-0.0450 (0.0379)		-0.0604 (0.0413)	-0.0581 (0.0422)	-0.0678 (0.0465)	-0.0666 (0.0424)
War	-0.0269 (0.0403)		-0.0305 (0.0398)		-0.0319 (0.0397)	-0.0624 (0.0439)	-0.0325 (0.0401)
Democracy			0.0334*** (0.0126)	0.0244** (0.0114)	0.0396*** (0.0130)	0.0429*** (0.0143)	0.0401*** (0.0131)
GDP			-0.00833** (0.00371)	-0.00481 (0.00394)	-0.00589 (0.00394)	-0.00154 (0.00424)	-0.00554 (0.00397)
GDP per capita			$2.25 \times 10^{-6}$ ( $5.97 \times 10^{-6}$ )	$-8.95 \times 10^{-7}$ ( $6.96 \times 10^{-6}$ )	$-3.40 \times 10^{-6}$ ( $6.97 \times 10^{-6}$ )	$-7.03 \times 10^{-6}$ ( $7.55 \times 10^{-6}$ )	$-8.45 \times 10^{-6}$ ( $6.58 \times 10^{-6}$ )
Constant	0.0551 (0.0527)	0.0746* (0.0386)	-0.163 (0.121)	-0.0209 (0.100)	-0.175 (0.121)	-0.167 (0.133)	-0.0721 (0.111)

(Continued)

**Table 1.** (Continued.)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6 (T-1)	7
Observations	198	198	194	194	194	194	194
$R^2$	0.047	0.049	0.103	0.087	0.118	0.122	0.098

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

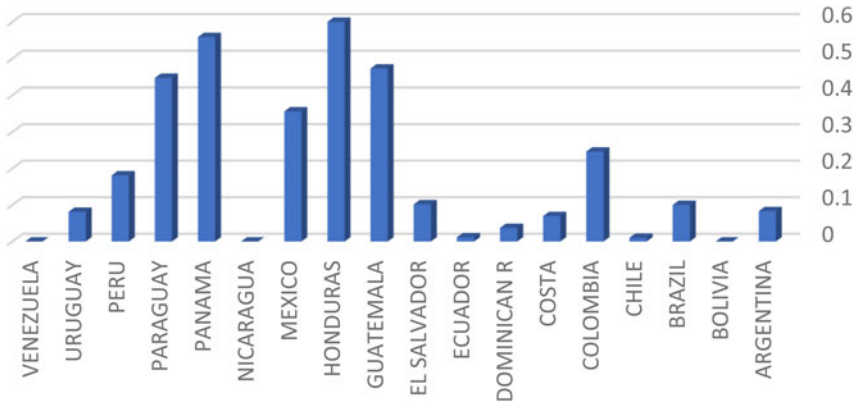


Figure 2. Average voting convergence with Israel 2008–2019

convergence was 0.166. These results may seem relatively low overall. However, when compared to the general convergence with Israel in the UNGA, a different picture is disclosed. For instance, in 2018, the average voting coincidence with Israel in Latin America was 0.318. The convergent average for all countries in the same year was 0.26.

As Table 1 demonstrates, my results confirm the main hypothesis of the research: the larger the Evangelical population in a given country, the higher the predicted support for Israel at the UNGA. The estimated coefficient of *Evangelicals* is positive and statistically significant in all the models. In the full model (5), it is significant at the 5% level. According to the estimated coefficient, a ten-percentage point increase in the Evangelical population increases the voting coincidence with Israel by 0.04, which is equal to 25% of the mean.<sup>10</sup>

Both the *Jewish population* and the *Muslim population* were found to be statistically insignificant. This may be due to the relatively small size of these communities in Latin America (0.5% Muslims and 0.06 Jews).<sup>11</sup>

The insignificance of armed conflict as a determinant of support for Israel is perhaps the most surprising finding of the study. In the period of 2008–2018, Israel and the Palestinians engaged in three rounds of military clashes: Operation Cast Lead (December 2008–January 2009), Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012) and Operation Protective Edge (August 2014).<sup>12</sup> As Figure 3 demonstrates, while in 2014 a slight decline in the average coincidence was measured, in 2009 and 2012 the average coincidence grew.

The Israeli-Palestinian military conflict seems to affect Latin American countries unevenly. In 2009, after Operation Cast Lead, Venezuela and Bolivia cut their diplomatic ties with Israel. However, these two countries had not voted with Israel even once in 2008 and never did ever since. Conversely, the voting coincidence of countries such as Panama, Colombia and Costa Rica grew from 2008 to 2009. Overall, despite the armed conflict in these years, the average voting coincidence with Israel, in general, grew from 2008 to 2009 by 40%. In 2012, after Operation Pillar of Defense, the voting coincidence with Israel grew by 50%. However, in 2014, after Operation Protective Edge, the voting coincidence dropped slightly by 1.5%.

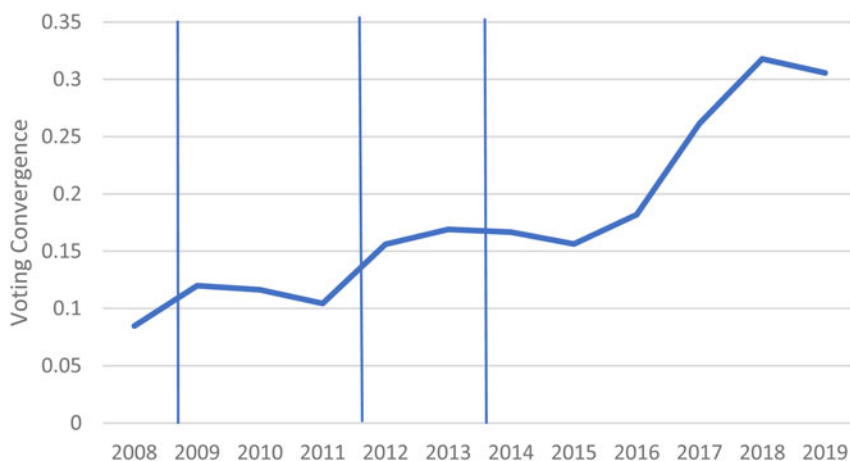


Figure 3. Support for Israel

### The Latin American Shift

Latin America's religious landscape is changing. Traditionally a virtually fully Catholic region, Latin America today is almost 20% Evangelical (Pew Research Center 2014). This shift is manifested in the political arena. Evangelicals seem to have a tremendous influence especially in the poorer areas and "candidates are seeking the Evangelical votes" says Marta Lagos, director of the Latinobarometer (Lagos 2019). Moreover, in a process similar to the one the Evangelical community went through in the United States, Evangelicals in Latin America have moved from being suspicious and detached from politics to being highly involved and influential politically. Today, Evangelical mayors, parliament members, ministers, and presidential candidates are very active in many countries in the region.

One of today's most important "agendas for Evangelicals is support for Israel" (Chesnut 2019). And so the Latin American attitudes toward the Jewish state, which was traditional not so supportive (Freston 2020), is changing as well. Evangelical support, however, is not confined only to UN General Assembly votes.

Following the United States, the next two countries to move their embassies to Jerusalem were from Latin America: Guatemala and Paraguay (the latter has since moved its embassy back to Tel Aviv). Brazil, Honduras, and Colombia have opened different diplomatic missions in Jerusalem. In 2019, ten years after former president Evo Morales cut off relations with Israel, the new government in Bolivia has restored the relations. In 2017, 7 years after it cut off its relations with Israel, Nicaragua has also restored the relations.

On a different front Honduras, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, and Guatemala all designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. In addition, in 11 Latin American states, a pro-Israeli caucus consisting of legislators and ministries was established in local parliaments.<sup>13</sup> The Israeli Export to Latin America has almost doubled from 2004 to 2018 (The Israeli Export Institute). Tourism to Israel from Central and South America more than tripled from 2004 to 2018 (World Tourism

**Organization**). These trends perhaps should not be solely explained by the growth of Evangelicalism in the continent, but the rise of Evangelical Christianity certainly encouraged them (Özşahin and Tekin 2020).

However, this does not mean that these countries turn their backs on the Palestinians. Unlike the Israeli and the Palestinian point of view, Latin American states do not see support for Israel or Palestine as a zero-sum game (Kacowicz 2017). Recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel or a transfer of the embassy to the city is not necessarily perceived as a hostile act toward the Palestinians, nor is the recognition of a Palestinian state regarded as a hostile act against Israel.

Nevertheless, supporting Israel has its price. According to Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández, as he claimed in an interview to I24 (2019): Because of Honduras' votes in the UN in favor of Israel, Honduras' ambassador to the UN who was supposed to become the next UNGA president was not elected. After Guatemala moved its embassy to Jerusalem, the country was taken out of committees in the OAS (Organization of American States) and suffered from international pressure for its decision.<sup>14</sup> Jair Bolsonaro had to backtrack (temporarily according to him) from his campaign promises to move the Brazilian embassy to Jerusalem because he did not want to sever economic relations with the Arab World, which is the main consumer of Brazilian meat (Özşahin and Tekin 2020).

The Latin American shift toward Israel is not ignored by the Israeli government. Former Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed in 2020 that “we have no better friends than Christians who support Israel around the world” (Kresch 2020). In September 2017 Netanyahu made the first visit of a sitting Israeli prime minister to Latin America visiting Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico. This trip he said, “marks a new era in relations between Israel and Latin America” (Keinon 2017). In December 2018, Netanyahu also became the first Israeli prime minister to visit Brazil in which he met with President Bolsonaro, President Piñera of Chile and President Hernández of Honduras. In sum, it is reasonable to assess that as long as the Evangelical movement continues growing in Latin America, the relations of Latin countries with Israel are expected to continue improving.

## Conclusions

The Evangelical movement is the fastest-growing religious movement in the world, growing three times faster than the world population and twice faster than Islam (Milne 2009).<sup>15</sup> Geographically, the movement that started in Great Britain and the United States has churches today in Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and other African countries. In Asia, there are Evangelicals in China, South Korea, the Philippines, India, and Indonesia. In Latin America, Evangelical churches are active in almost all countries of the region. Some estimate the Evangelical movement globally at 660 million (Lifeway Research 2020).

Moreover, Evangelicals seem to be more interested and involved in politics than other religious groups. Lifeway Research (2018) found that 87% of Evangelicals say that politics is at least “somewhat important to them” and 30% say it is “extremely important” for them, while among non-evangelicals 78% say politics is “somewhat important” for them and only 18% say it is extremely important. It should not

come as a surprise then, that Evangelicals have become a powerful political force in shaping foreign affairs (Mead 2006). Accordingly, this rapidly growing religious movement should be the subject of more international relations studies.

This study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, many studies and surveys have consistently found a correlation between being Evangelical and high levels of support for Israel (Mayer 2004; Pew Research Center 2006; Baumgartner et al. 2008; Pew Research Center 2014; Brookings 2015; Gries, 2015). The main novelty of this research is that it advances the existing findings one step forward. My empirical results from Latin American countries confirm the underlying assumption that many scholars have presumed: a higher ratio of Evangelicals in a given country is correlated with higher levels of support for Israel. In other words, Evangelicals seem to be able to translate their support for Israel to the national-policy level (in this case, support for Israel at the UNGA). More broadly, it contributes to the literature on religious groups and foreign policy as it presents important evidence of the actual influence of a religious movement on states' policies in the UNGA.

Second, it offers a new usage of UNGA votes as a database for future and more generalizable research as to the influence of religious-based foreign policy attitudes on actual foreign policy. Third, it expands the existing literature on the Evangelical movement geographically outside of the United States to include more Evangelicals communities.

The literature on the motivations for support for Israel, however, also deserves a geographical broadening beyond the United States. As aforementioned, almost all the existing research on the motivations was conducted in the United States. Indeed, it found some interesting patterns. In 2018, LifeWay research found that 33% of US Evangelicals support the state of Israel because "the Bible says God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people", 14% support Israel primarily because "the Bible says Christian should support Israel" and only 12% support Israel primarily because "Israel is important for fulfilling a biblical prophecy" (an eschatological motivation).

Inbari et al. (2021, 16) who investigated theological, political, and cultural motivations of Evangelical support for Israel in the United States found that such support is indeed affected by theological justification and cultural and religious affinity with the Jews, but not by geopolitical/security concerns, feelings of guilt for historical persecution or feelings of common political/democratic institutions. They also found that support for Israel is generational and social. Younger Evangelicals show less support for Israel than older Evangelicals and that socialization, i.e., frequency of hearing other Evangelicals talking about Israel, is an important predictor for a high level of support.

Yet there are good reasons to suspect that the motivations for support in Latin American countries might be different to some extent. Some Latin American states were historically less supportive of Israel than the United States (Freston 2020) and do not share with Israel common geostrategic interests as the United States does. Moreover, unlike the United States, which was always predominantly Protestant, Latin America was, and still is, predominantly Catholic. Furthermore, many Evangelicals in Latin America were born Catholic and converted to Evangelicalism or are the second generation of converts. According to Pew Research Center



(2014), only one in ten (9%) Latin Americans were raised in Protestant Churches but nearly one in five (19%) are now describing themselves as Protestant. Therefore, although Evangelical today, they may hold slightly different justifications for supporting Israel than their US equivalent.

Lastly and more generally, the next advancement in the field of religion and foreign policy must be more focused on the actual effect of religion on foreign policy. Not all individual preferences regarding foreign affairs can be (or are) translated into national foreign policy, even in democratic systems. The common presumption that some of them have an impact upon the shaping of foreign policy has to be put to a test. The methodological challenges of such projects are clear but should not discourage scholars from examining these important questions.

**Competing Interest.** I hereby declare that I am not aware of any conflict of interest associated with this submission.

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## Notes

1. One Pew Research Center survey did investigate these tendencies among Pentecostals outside of the U.S. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2006/10/pentecostals-08.pdf>. This survey implies that this phenomenon is not unique to the U.S. The survey found that even in countries with no direct political stake in the Middle East and in which most of the people have no opinion or no clear preferences between the two sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Pentecostal Evangelicals stand out in their support for Israel, compared to other Christians. This research included Guatemala, Brazil, Chile, Kenya, Nigeria, India, the Philippines, South Korea, and the USA.
2. De Paula Otoni. 2021. Dep. Otoni de Paula Registra Nota Pública em Solidariedade e Pela Paz em Israel. ParlaTube Brazil, on YouTube, May 21. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z\\_IA8L2oEsQ&ab\\_channel=ParlaTubeBrasil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_IA8L2oEsQ&ab_channel=ParlaTubeBrasil) (viewed on 6.12.2021).
3. And also 2019 for the LAG (T-1) model.
4. The countries investigated in the research are Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.
5. Here I follow Voeten's (2012) approach to cases of absence but see Barro and Lee (2005) for a different approach.
6. This survey did not take place in 2012 and 2014. Therefore, to account for the number of Evangelicals in 2012 I used the average percentage of the years 2011 and 2013 and for 2014 the average of 2013 and 2015. The regression was applied also without the years 2012 and 2014 and the results remained similar and significant.
7. The ITC is a joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the UN. In each year I calculated the sum of all the imports and exports to Israel and divided it by the sum of the overall imports and exports of each country.
8. The research was conducted in 2011 and the numbers are accurate for 2010. However, according to the Pew Research Center, these numbers are not expected to change significantly until 2030.
9. Three large-scale military operations took place during that period: Operation Cast Lead from December 27, 2008 to January 18, 2009, Operation Pillar of Defense from November 14, 2012 to November 21, 2012 and Operation Protective Edge from July 8, 2014, August 26, 2014.
10. I also estimated an additional 2sls model to address endogeneity. The results were not reported as it did not change the coefficient of the ID considerably.

11. World Jewish Population 2018, Berman Jewish Data Bank, <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/1060>; Pew Research Center, Muslim population by Country. <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-ountry/>.
12. UNGA voting takes place mostly in November and December each year.
13. Israel Allies Foundation, Member nations. Retrieved 6.6.21. <https://israelallies.org/member-nations>.
14. As Gloria Garces told me in an interview on 6.1.21.
15. These numbers were measured from 1960 to 2000.

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