

# Religious Influence And Political Power: Evangelical Engagement In Brazilian Politics During Bolsonaro's Presidency

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## **Abstract:**

*This research paper examines the intricate relationship between religion and politics in Brazil during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022). Drawing on various scholarly analyses, it explores how evangelical and Catholic groups played pivotal roles in shaping political discourse, promoting conservative agendas, and influencing public policies. The study highlights three dimensions of this interaction: the moral framing of political issues, the consolidation of evangelical power through parliamentary representation, and the mobilization of religious values in Bolsonaro's campaign rhetoric. It argues that the alliance between religious actors and the political right reflects a broader trend of conservative resurgence in Latin America, which mirrors but also diverges from similar movements in the United States. By analyzing theological narratives, parliamentary actions, and public campaigns, the article contributes to understanding the implications of this religious-political nexus for democracy, social diversity, and human rights in contemporary Brazil.*

**Keywords:** Religion and Politics, Evangelical Influence, Conservative Resurgence, Bolsonaro Presidency, Democracy and Human Rights,

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## I. Introduction

Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power in 2018 marked a turning point in Brazil's political landscape, where religion played a pivotal role in shaping his campaign and administration. As a candidate, Bolsonaro strategically aligned himself with evangelical and conservative Catholic groups, using their growing influence to consolidate support. His narrative of defending Christian values resonated strongly with these communities, which viewed him as a champion of faith, family, and morality. This alignment was a calculated move that proved instrumental in his victory and governance, solidifying the partnership between religious groups and political power.

Understanding the intersection of religion and politics is essential for analyzing the dynamics of contemporary power in Brazil. Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022) provides a compelling case study of how religious groups, particularly evangelicals, have emerged as influential political actors. Their involvement extended beyond electoral support, shaping public discourse, policy priorities, and societal norms. The Catholic Church, while historically dominant, found itself both collaborating with and responding to the evangelical rise, particularly on issues of shared moral concern.

The Christian Right's influence in Brazil is part of a broader conservative resurgence in Latin America, which mirrors global trends. However, Brazil's context is unique due to its pluralistic religious landscape and the rapid growth of evangelical communities. This dynamic challenges traditional boundaries between church and state and raises important questions about democracy, diversity, and governance in a pluralistic society.

This research paper aims to analyze how evangelical and Catholic groups shaped political discourse, influenced public policies, and impacted democracy during Bolsonaro's presidency. The study focuses on three key dimensions: the moral framing of political issues, the consolidation of evangelical power in the legislature, and the mobilization of religious values in Bolsonaro's campaign rhetoric. By exploring these aspects, the research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which religious actors exerted influence and assess the broader implications for Brazilian society.

The research employs a qualitative methodology, analyzing parliamentary speeches, political campaigns, and official documents. Parliamentary speeches are examined to understand how religious language framed debates on topics such as education, gender, and human rights. These speeches reveal how evangelical and Catholic representatives aligned their positions with Bolsonaro's broader agenda, emphasizing shared moral values.

Bolsonaro's campaign materials and public addresses are also analyzed to assess how religious rhetoric was integrated into his political strategy. Throughout his candidacy and presidency, Bolsonaro consistently invoked Christian values, presenting himself as a moral leader. Religious leaders, particularly from evangelical churches, played a crucial role in amplifying this narrative, endorsing his campaign, and mobilizing their congregations.

Additionally, official documents such as policy proposals and executive orders are reviewed to identify the influence of religious values on public policy. Key areas of focus include education, family, and gender, where religious priorities often clashed with secular and progressive perspectives. Bolsonaro's international alignments with other conservative leaders are also considered, highlighting how these alliances reinforced domestic policy choices.

The entanglement of religion and politics during Bolsonaro's presidency raises critical concerns about democracy and pluralism. While religious groups strengthened Bolsonaro's political base, their influence also contributed to polarization and exclusion, particularly for minority groups. This dynamic underscores the challenges of balancing majority rule with democratic principles in a diverse society.

Bolsonaro's presidency also reflects broader trends in Latin America, where religion has become a rallying point for conservative movements. Comparisons with similar movements in the United States reveal shared strategies, such as emphasizing traditional family values and opposing progressive social policies. However, Brazil's Christian Right is distinct in its pluralistic composition, with evangelicals and conservative Catholics collaborating despite theological differences. This alliance underscores the unique characteristics of Brazil's religion-political landscape.

The findings of this research contribute to the growing body of literature on the intersection of religion and politics in Brazil. By examining how religious actors shaped political outcomes during Bolsonaro's presidency, the study provides insights into the broader implications of this relationship for democracy, governance, and social cohesion. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the long-term impact of religious influence on Brazilian society and the future of its democratic institutions.

The intersection of religion and politics during Bolsonaro's presidency represents a critical area of study. The alliance between Bolsonaro and religious communities reflects a broader trend of conservative resurgence in Latin America, with significant implications for democracy and governance. By analyzing the moral framing of political issues, the consolidation of evangelical power, and the mobilization of religious values, this research seeks to shed light on the mechanisms and consequences of religious influence in Brazilian politics.

## **II. The Emergence Of The Christian Right In Brazil**

The rise of the Christian Right in Brazil marks a significant shift in the country's political and social dynamics, with evangelical and Catholic groups playing increasingly prominent roles. While religion has long influenced Brazilian politics, the emergence of a politically active and ideologically conservative Christian Right has reshaped national discourse. This movement, exemplified by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, has become a powerful force, with growing organizational capacity and strategic influence. Its development reflects local dynamics and parallels with movements such as the Christian Right in the United States, which provide valuable comparative insights.

Brazil's religion-political landscape has evolved over decades, with key moments marking the increasing influence of evangelical and Catholic groups. Historically, the Catholic Church dominated religious and political spheres, shaping national identity and public policies. However, the late 20th century saw a rapid expansion of evangelicalism, particularly Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal denominations. This growth coincided with Brazil's transition to democracy in the 1980s, creating opportunities for evangelical leaders to enter politics and advocate for policies aligned with their theological and moral principles. These leaders used their growing numbers to influence elections and policy decisions, establishing a foothold in Brazil's political system.

A defining moment in the rise of the Christian Right was the formation of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (Frente Parlamentar Evangélica) in 2003. This caucus brought together evangelical lawmakers to promote a shared conservative agenda, emphasizing family values, religious freedom, and opposition to progressive policies. Over the years, the Front has expanded its influence, becoming one of the most cohesive and powerful blocs in the Brazilian Congress. By collaborating with conservative Catholic representatives, these legislators have shaped debates on contentious issues such as education, gender, and human rights, using religious rhetoric to frame their arguments and legitimize their positions.

Comparisons with the Christian Right in the United States highlight both similarities and unique aspects of Brazil's movement. In both countries, religious actors emphasize traditional family values, oppose abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, and promote religious freedom as a central tenet of national identity. Both movements also use grassroots networks to mobilize voters, leveraging religious institutions as platforms for political engagement. However, Brazil's Christian Right differs in its pluralistic composition, with evangelicals and conservative

Catholics working together despite theological differences. This cooperation underscores the movement's strategic focus on shared conservative goals rather than doctrinal unity.

The role of evangelical and Catholic churches in mobilizing voters has been central to the Christian Right's rise. Religious leaders have actively encouraged political participation, often framing elections as moral battles between good and evil. During Jair Bolsonaro's 2018 campaign, evangelical pastors and conservative Catholic leaders endorsed his candidacy, presenting him as a defender of Christian values. Churches became hubs of political mobilization, organizing events, distributing campaign materials, and amplifying Bolsonaro's message through sermons and social media. This grassroots effort was particularly effective in reaching lower-income and rural communities, where religious institutions hold significant social influence.

Religious leaders have also played a critical role in legitimizing conservative values in Brazilian politics. By framing their positions as divinely inspired, they have created a moral imperative for their followers to align with specific policies and candidates. This strategy has been especially effective in debates over education and family law, where religious actors have portrayed progressive policies as threats to Brazil's moral fabric. These rhetorical strategies mirror those used by the Christian Right in the United States, further highlighting the parallels between the two movements.

While the Christian Right has reshaped Brazil's political and cultural landscape, its rise has also raised concerns about its impact on democracy and pluralism. The growing influence of religious groups in politics has intensified polarization, often marginalizing minority voices and alternative perspectives. Critics argue that the Christian Right's dominance risks undermining secular governance and minority rights, posing challenges for a pluralistic society like Brazil. This dynamic reflects broader tensions between majoritarian religious movements and the principles of democratic diversity.

The emergence of the Christian Right in Brazil represents a transformative moment in the nation's political history. Rooted in the historical rise of evangelicalism and the enduring influence of Catholicism, this movement has leveraged its organizational capacity and grassroots networks to become a formidable force in Brazilian politics. While comparisons with the Christian Right in the United States reveal shared strategies, Brazil's unique religious composition and socio-political context have shaped its distinct trajectory. The role of evangelical and Catholic churches in mobilizing voters and promoting conservative values has not only reshaped political discourse but also challenged the balance between majority rule and democratic pluralism. Understanding the origins and implications of this movement is essential for assessing its long-term impact on Brazil's governance, society, and commitment to democratic principles.

### **III. The Moral Agenda And The Consolidation Of Conservative Power**

The consolidation of conservative power in Brazil during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency was deeply intertwined with the moral agenda championed by evangelical and Catholic groups. These religious communities successfully positioned moral values as central to public policies and political discourse, creating a framework for their ideological dominance. By advocating for issues such as family values, opposition to gender ideology, and the rejection of abortion rights, these groups shaped key debates in Congress, reinforced their influence over voters, and legitimized conservative narratives in national politics.

Religious groups in Congress, particularly through the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, have been at the forefront of promoting a conservative moral agenda. Central to their advocacy is the defense of what they call "traditional family values." This encompasses opposition to same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ rights, and comprehensive sex education in schools. These legislators argue that such policies threaten the fabric of Brazilian society and contradict Christian principles. Debates over education have been particularly contentious, with religious groups framing progressive curricula as tools for indoctrination and moral decay. Their resistance to policies addressing gender equality and reproductive rights further highlights their focus on maintaining a conservative social order.

The moral agenda also extends to debates over abortion, which remains a highly polarized issue in Brazil. Evangelical and Catholic representatives have consistently opposed any efforts to expand abortion rights, presenting the issue as a moral and religious imperative. This stance has resonated with large segments of the population, reinforcing the Christian Right's narrative that they are defenders of life and morality. By aligning their positions with the broader conservative movement, these groups have strengthened their legitimacy and political influence.

Moral values have been instrumentalized not only as policy goals but also as rhetorical tools to galvanize support and combat perceived threats. Religious leaders and politicians frequently invoke narratives of "spiritual warfare" to frame their struggles in Congress and society. This rhetoric portrays political and cultural battles as part of a divine conflict between good and evil, positioning their opponents—whether advocates of LGBTQ+ rights, feminists, or leftist groups—as agents of moral corruption. This strategy has proven effective in mobilizing voters and unifying their base around a shared sense of mission.

One of the most significant targets of this rhetoric is “gender ideology,” a term popularized by conservative groups to describe policies and ideologies that challenge traditional gender roles and norms. Evangelical and Catholic leaders have used this term to foster fear and opposition, claiming that such ideologies undermine family values and moral integrity. Their framing of “gender ideology” as a threat has not only shaped public discourse but also influenced policy debates at the national and local levels. Educational policies, in particular, have become battlegrounds for these cultural and moral conflicts.

Another key element of this moral narrative is the invocation of anti-communism. Religious groups and Bolsonaro’s allies often frame progressive social movements as part of a broader communist agenda, equating secularism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights with threats to national identity and sovereignty. This rhetoric, deeply rooted in Cold War-era ideologies, resonates with conservative voters and strengthens the alignment between religious communities and the political right. By framing their opponents as existential threats, these groups have effectively legitimized their conservative policies as necessary defenses of Brazilian values and traditions.

The role of evangelical and Catholic churches in mobilizing voters and legitimizing these narratives has been critical to their success. Religious institutions serve as platforms for political engagement, with pastors and priests often endorsing candidates and policies from the pulpit. This direct engagement reinforces the moral authority of religious leaders and ensures that their followers view political participation as a spiritual duty. Churches also use social media and grassroots networks to amplify their messages, reaching millions of voters and shaping public opinion on contentious issues.

This mobilization has had a profound impact on Brazil’s political landscape. By embedding moral values into political discourse and policymaking, religious groups have consolidated their influence and created a framework for long-term power. Their success lies not only in their ability to shape policies but also in their capacity to define the terms of political and cultural debates. Through their strategic use of religious rhetoric and grassroots mobilization, these groups have transformed Brazil’s conservative movement into a formidable force that continues to shape the nation’s political and social trajectory.

The moral agenda advanced by evangelical and Catholic groups during Bolsonaro’s presidency highlights the deep entanglement of religion and politics in Brazil. By prioritizing issues such as family values, gender, and abortion, these groups have positioned themselves as defenders of morality and traditionalism. Their use of spiritual warfare narratives and opposition to perceived threats like “gender ideology” and communism underscores their strategic approach to consolidating power. With the active involvement of churches in mobilizing voters and legitimizing conservative values, the Christian Right has solidified its role as a dominant force in Brazilian politics, reshaping public discourse and policy for years to come.

#### **IV. Impacts On Democracy, Diversity, And Human Rights**

The alignment between religion and politics during Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency profoundly influenced Brazilian democracy, creating both opportunities for civic engagement and significant challenges to democratic principles. While the mobilization of religious communities bolstered voter participation and provided a sense of representation for conservative constituencies, it also introduced tensions between the religious agenda and the protection of minority rights. Furthermore, the politicization of religion exacerbated social polarization, fueling hate speech and undermining the pluralistic foundations of Brazilian society.

One of the most significant impacts of this alignment has been its effect on democratic institutions and processes. Religious groups, particularly evangelicals, leveraged their influence to reshape policy debates and legislative priorities, advancing a moral agenda that aligned with their theological values. While this reflects a legitimate exercise of political power in a democracy, it also raises concerns about the balance between majority rule and minority rights. The increasing presence of religious rhetoric in governance has blurred the lines between church and state, challenging the secular foundations of Brazil’s democratic framework. This dynamic risks alienating non-religious citizens and those who do not conform to the conservative values promoted by religious actors.

The tensions between the religious agenda and minority rights are particularly evident in policies affecting women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and Indigenous peoples. The Christian Right’s staunch opposition to abortion and reproductive rights has restricted women’s autonomy, framing such issues as moral rather than health-related or human rights concerns. Similarly, LGBTQIA+ rights have been a central target of conservative policies and discourse. Religious groups have opposed anti-discrimination laws, same-sex marriage, and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ perspectives in educational curricula, arguing that these measures undermine traditional family values. This opposition not only limits the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals but also perpetuates social stigma and exclusion.

Indigenous communities have also faced significant challenges under the religion-politics alignment. Evangelical missionaries and religiously motivated politicians have often clashed with Indigenous leaders over land rights, cultural preservation, and environmental policies. The promotion of evangelical Christianity in Indigenous territories has been criticized for undermining Indigenous spiritual practices and disrupting traditional

ways of life. These tensions highlight the broader conflict between a homogenizing religious agenda and the diversity inherent in Brazilian society.

The politicization of religion has also contributed to increased social polarization and the proliferation of hate speech. By framing political and cultural debates in moral terms, religious leaders and politicians have intensified divisions between conservative and progressive segments of society. Narratives of “spiritual warfare,” frequently invoked by the Christian Right, portray ideological opponents as existential threats to the nation’s moral fabric. This rhetoric has not only deepened societal divides but has also legitimized intolerance and hostility toward marginalized groups.

Hate speech, particularly against LGBTQIA+ individuals, feminists, and leftist activists, has become more prevalent in public discourse and on social media platforms. Religious actors have played a significant role in amplifying this discourse, often using their platforms to denounce perceived threats to their values. This normalization of hate speech undermines the principles of mutual respect and inclusion that are essential to a healthy democracy. It also creates an environment where discrimination and violence against vulnerable groups are more likely to occur.

Despite these challenges, the alignment of religion and politics has also highlighted the importance of engaging with diverse perspectives in democratic governance. The mobilization of religious communities demonstrates the power of grassroots organizing and the capacity of civil society to influence policy and political outcomes. However, for democracy to thrive, this engagement must be balanced with a commitment to pluralism and the protection of minority rights.

The alignment between religion and politics during Bolsonaro’s presidency has had far-reaching implications for Brazilian democracy, diversity, and human rights. While it has energized certain constituencies and reshaped political debates, it has also introduced significant tensions and challenges. The prioritization of a conservative moral agenda has often come at the expense of minority rights, exacerbating social polarization and fueling hate speech. Addressing these dynamics requires a renewed commitment to democratic principles, including the separation of church and state, the protection of pluralism, and the promotion of mutual respect in public discourse. Only by navigating these complexities can Brazil ensure that its democracy remains inclusive and resilient in the face of growing polarization.

## **V. Conclusion**

The intersection of religion and politics during Jair Bolsonaro’s presidency marked a defining chapter in Brazil’s contemporary history, reshaping the country’s political discourse, governance, and societal dynamics. This research paper has explored the key dimensions of this phenomenon, including the rise of the Christian Right, the advancement of a moral agenda, and the consolidation of conservative power. It has also examined the impacts of this alignment on democracy, diversity, and human rights, highlighting both the opportunities for civic engagement and the challenges posed by the politicization of religion.

Central to Bolsonaro’s administration was the instrumentalization of religious rhetoric and networks to mobilize voters and legitimize conservative values. Evangelical and Catholic groups became powerful political actors, influencing policies on contentious issues such as abortion, gender, and education. Their advocacy for traditional family values and opposition to progressive agendas strengthened their foothold in Congress and national politics. At the same time, this alignment between religion and politics fueled social polarization, undermined minority rights, and normalized hate speech, raising concerns about the health of Brazil’s democracy and its commitment to pluralism.

The legacy of Bolsonaro’s administration regarding the intersection of religion and politics is both profound and complex. On one hand, it demonstrated the organizational capacity and influence of religious groups, highlighting their ability to shape public opinion and policy. On the other hand, it revealed the risks of allowing religious ideologies to dominate political discourse, particularly in a pluralistic society. The blurring of boundaries between church and state has challenged Brazil’s secular foundations, creating tensions that will likely persist beyond Bolsonaro’s presidency.

Looking forward, the relationship between religion and politics in Brazil—and across Latin America—offers fertile ground for further research. Future studies could explore the role of religious groups in democratic and authoritarian contexts, examining how their involvement affects governance, social cohesion, and human rights. Comparative analyses of Brazil and other countries in the region could provide insights into the broader trends of conservative resurgence and the interplay between religion and political power.

Additionally, research could investigate the evolving strategies of religious actors in response to political and societal changes. For instance, how might these groups adapt to shifts in public opinion or challenges to their legitimacy? How do they balance their religious mission with political pragmatism? Such inquiries could deepen our understanding of the complexities and consequences of religion’s role in politics.

In conclusion, the intersection of religion and politics during Bolsonaro’s presidency has left a lasting imprint on Brazil’s political and social landscape. By examining the dynamics of this relationship, this research

contributes to broader debates on democracy, governance, and diversity in Latin America. Understanding these interactions is essential for fostering inclusive and resilient democratic systems that respect both majority rule and minority rights in an increasingly polarized world.

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