The Expansion of LGBT Rights in Latin America and the Backlash

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Abstract and Keywords

After two and a half decades of progress, the struggle for LGBT rights in Latin America started to experience a new form of backlash in the mid-2010s. Backlashes against LGBT progress are not new, but the current backlash in Latin America has a new element: the entry of evangelical churches as powerful veto players. This chapter discusses how religious groups, in particular evangelicals, are taking advantage of institutions of liberal democracy to block progress on LGBT rights. It applies theories of collective action and social movement to demonstrate how evangelicals have become the most powerful actors blocking progress.

Keywords: LGBT rights, backlash, evangelical, ideology of gender, nongovernmental organization, social movement theory, Catholic church, abortion rights, homophobia, political parties

IN the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Latin America experienced a remarkable improvement in LGBT rights and policies. Outside of the north Atlantic, no region has had more progress on LGBT rights. By 2016, some of the most progressive legislation and government policies toward LGBT groups could be found in Latin America. Yet, or perhaps as a consequence, a new conservative backlash against this progress has emerged.

This chapter focuses on this backlash. There is a debate in the literature about what constitutes a backlash. A common approach is to define “backlash” in terms of public opinion: “if the public turns against some policy in response to a group’s attempt to advance its agenda” (Bishin et al. 2016). But focusing only on public opinion may miss other forms of counter-reaction.

In defining backlash, my focus here is on organizational development. There are times when groups that were already opposed to a particular policy develop new organizational strength that allows them to engage politically more successfully than before. Often, this organizational resurgence is the result of what Falleti and Mahoney (2015) call “reactive
processes,” situations in which major events, such as efforts to change policy, trigger reactions and counterreactions. In reactive processes, groups emerge or get stronger as they seek to block or alter implementation. This organizational resurgence, I argue, can be considered an additional type of backlash. It is a type of backlash that is not dependent on opinion shifts (i.e., opinions becoming deeper or more widespread). All that is needed is that the existing countergroup develop new political resources, strategies, and capacity to fight back.

I argue that conservative groups challenging LGBT rights in Latin America have undergone a major change in organizational composition—the entry of evangelical groups. These churches have acquired an impressive capacity to influence politics. Homo-/transphobia, of course, has always existed. But as LGBT rights have expanded, evangelicals are now providing forms, organizations, arguments, resources, and alliances to challenge new or existing progress.

Backlashes against LGBT rights expansion are not new in Latin America (see Corrales and Pecheny 2010). In countries where LGBT rights began to expand at an earlier time, the movement always confronted resistance. Even in Latin America, when the first minor strides for LGBT rights were made (in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina in the 1970s), the response of the state was harsh, second only perhaps to the response by the Catholic clergy (Díez 2016; Encarnación 2016; Schulenberg 2013).

What is new about the current backlash in Latin America is that this time it is being led, or propelled, by evangelicals and Pentecostals, as they are often called in Latin America. Evangelical and Pentecostal churches are a subgroup of Protestantism within Christianity. They focus on literal readings of specific passages of the bible and on deep, personal conversions or rediscovery of one’s faith (born-again experience), with a heavy emphasis on the laity involved in converting others. The rise of these churches constitutes the most important demographic change in Latin America since the 1970s. Decades ago, these churches were marginal in Latin America. Today, they have become almost ubiquitous. They are more widespread, stronger, and more vocal in almost all Latin American countries. And they are forming alliances with traditional political actors, including the Catholic Church, which used to be antagonistic, as well as existing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties, which used to be indifferent. In doing so, they are transforming conservative politics in the region, giving homophobia a new momentum and posing new roadblocks to the expansion of LGBT rights.

Outside of Latin America, backlashes against LGBT progress are often led by the state, especially under rising authoritarianism (Geshen 2017; Bosia 2013). In Latin America, although state-led homophobia or homo-hesitancy persists, the backlash is mostly led by non-state actors, mostly churches. As a social movement, these churches exhibit political strengths and advantages that previous backlashes in the fight for LGBT rights in Latin America did not enjoy. I use theories of social movement and political institutions to make my point about the special political advantages enjoyed by this new backlash.
The Progress

Since the 1990s, the region has achieved impressive progress in the expansion of LGBT rights and policies (this section draws from Corrales 2017). One way to appreciate the magnitude of Latin America and the Caribbean’s LGBT transformation is to look at some of the standard legal benchmarks associated with LGBT rights. Table 12.1 compares the evolution of LGBT legal rights between 1999 and 2016, across a number of domains. The following trends stand out:

- Decriminalization of homosexuality, already a strong current in the region by 1999, has become even stronger. It is universal in all Spanish-speaking countries and Brazil.
- Next to decriminalization of homosexuality, the area of most improvement is anti-discrimination statutes and the right to serve in the military.
- Progress has been more modest on the question of protection for gender identity and rights and protections for civil unions and same-sex marriage. Currently, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Colombia, and parts of Mexico have legalized same-sex marriage.
- Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin American (SPLA) countries are unquestionably in the lead in the region. If one excludes non-SPLA countries, which are mostly small countries in the Caribbean, the record of progress is even more impressive. The gay rights revolution is clearly a Hispanic–Latin American phenomenon.
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## Table 12.1 LGBT Rights in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1999 versus 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Latin America and the Caribbean (n = 42)</th>
<th>Spanish- and Portuguese-Speaking Only (n = 20)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of Countries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent of Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decriminalization</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civil unions</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marriage</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adoptions</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military service</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anti-discrimination</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Expansion of LGBT Rights in Latin America and the Backlash

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hate crimes$^b$</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>23.8</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name changes in documents$^i$</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Same-sex sexual activity fully depenalized.

(b) Same-sex relationships legally recognized.

(c) Equal rights of marriage extended to same-sex couple as for heterosexual couples.

(d) Homosexuals enjoy same rights to adopt children as heterosexuals.

(e) Homosexuals allowed to serve in the military.

(f) Strong legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

(g) Strong legal protections against discrimination for gender identity.

(h) Laws exist to prosecute crimes targeting people for being LGBT or appearing to be LGBT.

(i) How easy it is to change national legal documents to confirm gender identity.

Note: Some countries have partial scores (0.5), meaning that they don’t have universal coverage. They are not included in this total.

NA, not available. Most countries at the time did not allow for easy changes in official documentation. A tiny minority of countries did allow name changes in official documents but did not specify whether gender change was a good enough reason to generate an automatic change in documents.
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**Source:** Calculated by author based on data from the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (n.d.) and LGBT Rights in the Americas Timeline (n.d.).
By the same token, progress in the region has been uneven. Some countries have made enormous strides (those that score 7 or higher in all nine categories), while others are barely starting (see Table 12.2). The region’s standard-bearers are Argentina, Uruguay, and, more recently, Colombia. By 2016, they achieved change in all nine legal scores. In Corrales (2017), I offer a summary of some of the variables that best explain this uneven variation, including public attitudes, party competition, the role of courts, the strength of social movements, and the degree of church attendance (see also Díez 2016; Encarnación 2016; Kollman and Sagarzazu 2017).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking (Number of Legal Achievements)</th>
<th>Countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High achievers(^a)</td>
<td>Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Uruguay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major improvements(^b)</td>
<td>Bolivia, Chile, Cuba, El Salvador, and Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modest improvements(^c)</td>
<td>Anguilla, Aruba, Bahamas, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Bermuda, Montserrat, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, St. Martin, Suriname, Turks and Caicos, and Venezuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barely starting</td>
<td>Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Granada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Gender identity, hate crimes, and name changes in documents.

(b) Adoptions, military service, and anti-discrimination.

(c) Decriminalization, civil unions, and marriage.

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Table 12.1 and LGBT Rights in the Americas Timeline (n.d.).

In addition to uneven legal progress, there is an important paradox: conditions on the ground do not always look promising. Despite impressive legal advances, the region continues to be the home to some startling homophobic conditions. The vast majority of the
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Public in the vast majority of countries is homophobic, as revealed by surveys asking people how tolerant they are of homosexuals or whether they support same-sex marriage (see Table 12.3). And comparatively speaking, few elected politicians are openly out, suggesting that there is enormous stigma still associated with being openly LGBT.
## Table 12.3 Percentage with Favorable Views on Gay Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Protestants</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>Difference between Catholics and Protestants (Percentage Points)</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Hispanics</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>Forthright</td>
<td>Backlash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Pew Research Center (2014).*
In addition, some countries experience chronic hate crimes. Latin America is internationally notorious for high murder rights (Clavel 2018) and for having the highest rates of violence and homicides of LGBT people. Hate crime incidents are recurrent not only in countries that have low legal and representation scores (as one would expect) but also in countries with higher scores. In Brazil, for instance, one LGBT person is killed every 25 hours (Beresford 2017), making it one of the least safe countries in the world for LGBT folks. The insecurity for transpeople is particularly alarming. Life expectancy for transwomen in the region is between 30 and 35 years of age (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015, 214).

Latin America thus stands in contrast to the experience of countries in the north Atlantic. In the latter, laws became less homophobic normally following public opinion: as the public became less homophobic, so did the laws. But in most Latin American countries, the sequence was reversed: laws became less homophobic prior to major changes in public attitudes.

The Current Backlash and Religion in Latin America

Despite this enormous legal progress, the movement in favor of LGBT rights in Latin America is now facing heightened resistance; in some countries, this resistance has achieved important successes.

For instance, in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Peru, homo- and transphobic groups have organized massive marches since 2015. In Brazil, they helped elect Jair Bolsonaro, perhaps the most openly homophobic politician in Latin America since the 1990s (Marquez 2018). They have also organized a legislative block of possibly 94 members cutting across a variety of political parties. This bloc has essentially blocked most LGBT-oriented legislative actions and played a role in impeaching the progressive presidency of Dilma Rousseff (Encarnación 2017). In the Dominican Republic, conservatives conducted a mostly successful effort to shame the US ambassador, an openly gay man who often attended public meetings accompanied by his husband. They protested continuously and openly asked Washington for his removal (Lizardo and Romo 2016). In Mexico, conservative forces have stalled the progress of LGBT rights in a number of states (García 2016). In 2016, President Peña Nieto introduced a bill in Congress to establish marriage equality, LGBT adoptions, and trans-friendly provisions for changing legal documents, prompting massive protests. In Peru 60,000 plus people marched against gay marriage (Cáceres 2017). In Colombia, conservative forces achieved two important initiatives in 2016: defeating an effort by the Ministry of Education to distribute pamphlets in schools discussing issues of bullying and tolerance for sexual diversity and mobilizing successfully to vote no on a referendum on whether to accept the peace accord between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the largest guerrilla group in the country (Marcos 2016). In Costa Rica, they helped propel an
until-then-obscure, unknown political newcomer, evangelical singer Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz, to second place in the country’s presidential election in 2018 (Pretel 2018).

To be sure, homo-/transphobia has always existed (see Picq on colonial processes, this volume). But what is new about the post-2015 backlash is that it now has important political sponsors: evangliicals and Pentecostals.

It is hard to find a perfect definition of evangliicals and Pentecostals versus mainline Protestants. In Latin America, Protestants do not use the term “mainline Protestant” but use the term “evangelical” and/or “Pentecostal” to describe all Protestants. In general, evangliicals and Pentecostals are Christians who take a very literal meaning of selective passages in the Bible, place enormous value on conversions and missionary work, take a hard-line posture on issues of sexuality and family affairs, and are fairly lax about the ordination of pastors (Samén 2019; Reich and dos Santos 2013; Hallum 2003). Pentecostals in particular place emphasis on receiving spiritual gifts, such as healings, purifications, and transformations; their services are very lively (Smith 2019).

In Latin America, Christianity used to be associated with the Catholic Church, which held a near monopoly of religious control in the region until the 1980s (except in Cuba, where it was banned by the government, and in the Anglo-speaking Caribbean, where Protestantism was always dominant). In the 2000s, the real competition came from evangliicals.

Prior to the 1980s, evangliicals accounted for less than 4 percent of the population (Pew Research Center 2014). Today, they account for 20 percent and, in some countries, as much as 30 percent. They have expanded rapidly, faster than population growth, almost everywhere except perhaps Uruguay, Argentina, and Cuba (Somma, Bargsted, and Valenzuela 2017; Boas 2013). Most of these churches have become the new actors in the resistance against LGBT rights.

In the 2010s, the competition between the Catholic Church and evangliicals has subsided. Rather than fighting each other, both denominations are now joining forces against a common new threat: rising irreligiosity and secularism. Along with Protestantism, irreligious people are now the fastest growing group in the region’s religious demographics. The LGBT movement is seen by Catholics and evangliicals as one of the most important manifestations of irreligiosity and secularism, even though many faith-based communities do embrace LGBT rights, and many LGBT people are religious.

Before discussing this new alliance between Catholics and evangliicals, it is important to introduce some caveats. First, the positions on LGBT rights are not exactly identical between Catholics and evangliicals. While the clergy of both religious groups is overtly opposed to same-sex marriage and in recent years has adopted an equally combative anti-LGBT rights stance, the Catholic clergy tends to be less opposed to questions of anti-discrimination statutes than the evangelical clergy. Sometimes, the Catholic clergy has come out in favor of civil unions, while still opposing gay marriage. In Argentina, for instance, Jorge Bergoglio—today’s Pope Francis—led the fight against same-sex marriage but offered civil unions as a possible compromise. In Brazil, the Catholic clergy is fairly pro-
gressive on LGBT rights and generally avoids discussing sexuality (Smith 2019). The Catholic clergy’s more flexible stance toward issues of discrimination may be one reason that the rise of anti-discrimination laws has been less polemical in SPLA countries, especially those that are Catholic-dominant.

Furthermore, the laity (not just the clergy) seems to differ between the two denominations. In Latin America, the Catholic laity is usually twice as likely as the Protestant laity to favor same-sex marriage. Homophobic positions among the Catholic laity also seem to be less extreme, and the number of homophobes is smaller than with evangelical church-goers (Reich and dos Santos 2013; Pew Research Center 2014).

Finally, both denominations have important progressive forces within them. These are groups that are mostly committed to issues of human rights and social justice, welcome social welfare policies, and tend to downplay the conservative rhetoric coming from important parts of the clergy. However, individuals holding such views tend to be more common among Catholics than Protestants—the latter tend to view poverty as a result of individual failing rather than a system failing (Hughes and das Dores Campos Machado 2016)—and are less common now than in the 1960s (see Levine 2009).

Despite these caveats, on questions of LGBT rights, as we will see, differences between official Catholic and evangelical political stands have lessened. The clergies of both the Catholic Church and evangelical churches have joined forces now to fight LGBT rights.

**The Strength of Evangelical Groups as Political Actors**

To understand the strength that evangelical groups bring into these battles, it helps to borrow some analytical elements from the literature on contentious politics. This literature offers insights into the factors that help determine whether social movements, in this case, evangelicals, will have “political consequence” (Amenta et al. 2010). Consequence need not mean achieving all goals; it simply means achieving influence both outside and inside the movement (Amenta et al. 2010). Here is a list of five prominent factors.

1. **Reach**: The more sectors a movement mobilizes, the greater its impact. Evangelical churches, more so than most NGOs in the region, are cross-sectional: they have enormous reach across different layers of society. They are present and active across class, race, and region (Smilde 2004b). In the 1960s, the Catholic Church was famous for creating Comunidades de Bases, which were common in rural and low-income areas. They have lost relevance since the 1980s. But evangelicals have now taken their place. Their churches are well integrated into very poor and rural neighborhoods (see Boas 2013). In addition, evangelical churches, as NGOs, demand frequent meetings: church attendance is expected sometimes more than once a week. During service, pluralism is low: the views of the clergy are presented almost always without discussion. Furthermore, there is high participation: churches are quite in-
novative in stimulating laity involvement in church activities with family parties, raffles, and dances. Finally evangelicals have also sided with conservative secular NGOs (Morán Faúndes and Peñas Defago 2016). The overall point is that evangelicals have a significant reach across society; they present arguments in a direct, frequent, and non-pluralistic fashion and manage to obtain very loyal followership. In addition, church members tend to socialize with each other or like-minded groups far more than with outsiders or outside groups, which (p. 193) contributes to groupthink (Smith 2019). And the results are clear: converted evangelicals display more “obedience” to authority figures while “persuadability” on secular issues declines—that is, the churches’ reach makes church-goers less willing to change their minds (high discipline) (see Rink 2018).

2. Unity: Social movement influence increases the more unity exists among the movement’s constituents (Tilly 2004). The issue of LGBT rights, together with abortion and reproductive rights, is uniting an otherwise fragmented religious scene. Historically, Catholics and evangelicals saw each other as competitors or even mutual threats. Catholic voters, in particular, tended to have negative attitudes toward evangelical pastors running for office (Boas 2014). But on the question of reproductive and LGBT rights, the clergies of both have established a united front in many countries (Jones, Azparren, and Polischuk 2009). With a few exceptions, rather than compete against each other, they have decided to join forces in lieu of fighting each other. Their target is now lax Catholics, secularists, and irreligious people. They see those groups as more of a threat than they see each other as threats. They have reached a sort of truce. Evangelicals have been willing to embrace the Catholic Church’s strong stand against abortion, and the Catholic clergy has embraced the evangelicals’ strong stand against LGBT themes. This truce may very well represent the true end of the counterreformation in Latin America.

3. Political organizing/links with parties: Social movement influence also increases if movements develop an electoral strategy (Amenta et al. 2010; Boas 2013) to support their candidates and views. A successful electoral strategy might be to establish links with powerful, national parties. This in turn requires movements to show political parties that it is in their electoral interest to court them, the so-called political mediation model (see Amenta et al. 2010). Evangelical groups are making huge strides in this dimension. When they form their own parties, Evangelicals don’t do well electorally (see Semán 2019), but when they form strong ties with existing parties, they tend to become highly influential. The most notable case is Brazil (Boas 2013), but other cases have become significant as well. Parties of both the left and the right are no longer able to ignore lobbying pressure from evangelicals. Pastors can deliver the vote, and they often do so physically by providing transportation to polling stations. In response, formerly secular parties have begun to openly cultivate the religious vote, much like the US Republican Party has been doing since the 1980s. In Mexico 2018, bishops and pastors are lobbied equally by all major parties—the historically anti-clerical ruling party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party), conservative parties (e.g., the National Action Party), and even the populist-leftist parties that brought Andrés Manuel López Obrador to office (MORENA) (López Pacheco 2018). Conserva-
tive parties used to have strong links to the Catholic Church and disdain Protestantism (Middlebrook 2000). Parties on the right especially are attracted to evangelical groups because it solves a historical problem for them: lack of ties with popular sectors. Historically, their base of support tended to be the upper strata of society (Gibson 2001), and this made them electorally weak. Evangelicalism is solving this historic electoral handicap. They are now finally able to mobilize, with enthusiasm, from the broad spectrum of society. In Colombia, the large party Centro Democrático, led by the ultra-Catholic conservative former president Álvaro Uribe, campaigned heavily among evangelical churches in his efforts to reboot support and oppose the more progressive government of Juan Manuel Santos (Semana 2016). In Peru, five parties each placed at least one evangelical pastor on their candidate lists for the 2016 elections (Alva Olivera 2016). When the notoriously hard-line evangelical pastor Julio Rosas abandoned Fuerza Popular over Keiko Fujimori’s support for civil unions, the party found another evangelical pastor with a congregation of over 60,000 to replace him (Alva Olivera 2016). As a result, the region is seeing not only religious migration (Catholics turning Protestants) but also the birth of new forms of party-church alliances. Where these alliances are strong, parties are reluctant to offend the churches, and the consequence is that they become allies of very conservative forces. In Venezuela, even the socialist Chavista ruling party made huge efforts to court evangelicals (Smilde 2004a). We used to think that the most important defense of LGBT issues consisted of maintaining separation of church and state, but it seems that the real threat is coming with the lack of separation between church and parties.

4. Framing: Movements that manage to frame their cause in a way that “resonates” (i.e., that attracts support from groups outside their constituency) are more likely to be influential (Benford and Snow 2000). The new backlash against LGBT rights also scores favorably on framing issues. The new backlash is stronger because its promoters, including both Catholic and evangelical clergies, have come up with an effective frame for their position: opposition to what they have baptized an “ideology of gender.” Ideology of gender is a term designed to label any effort to promote acceptance of sexual and gender fluidity, which, by extension, includes all LGBT issues. The idea behind ideology of gender is that sexual diversity and gender fluidity are beliefs, rather than inherent, immutable feelings that humans have. Because they are beliefs, they don’t have to be taught or accepted. Another idea behind the ideology of gender label is that a pro-LGBT agenda is an anti-biblical rejection of the fact that all are born with a basic binary anatomical distinction, namely, male and female; that gender identity must always conform to that anatomy; and that sexual relationship can only exist between the sexes/genders and not within the same sex/gender (for the Catholic position, see USCCB 2017; for Baptists, see CBMW 2017; for Latin American sources, see Vela Barba 2017; Aguiar 2017). These statements are keen on placing emphasis on the word “ideology.” It is a way of stressing that a pro-LGBT agenda is a dogma, rather than a scientific position, and for that reason, dissenting adults have the right to protect themselves and, more important, to protect their children from exposure to it. Ideology of gender thus reinvokes theories of
“child protectionism” that have always been used to support homo-/transphobic stands in the past. In Latin America, the preferred slogan has been Con mis hijos no te metas (“Don’t mess with my kids”) (La República 2017; Alayo Orbegozo 2017). Of course, most homophobic positions have always been dressed up with child-protection arguments. But when the debates in the 2010s focused so much on marriage equality, invoking child protection did not help the homophobic cause all that much because no one could argue that marital rights affected children. More recently, as the politics of LGBT rights expansion started to move away from partnership discussions and more toward themes affecting children such as gay parenting, multi-parenting, teacher training, anti-bullying campaigns, etc., homophobic groups can once again invoke the child-protection argument and the right to family autonomy to claim their opposition to these policies. The invention of the label “ideology of gender” has thus given homophobes a way to reframe their position—they can claim (groundlessly) that they are not exactly opposing what free adults may want to do in their life, but rather, defending the right of the family to control the ideology children are exposed to. It allows them to offer an argument that is cast in secular terms: parents have the right to determine what their children learn. Opposition to ideology of gender is thus a very effective frame to deal with debates in the post-marriage era; it unites conservative Christians across denominations, across countries, and even across continents.

5. Transnationalism: Another factor enhancing local influence of social movements is to count on the support of transnational actors/activists (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Both the Catholic Church and evangelical churches are quintessential transnational actors operating in local settings. Their involvement in homo- and transphobic campaigns thus means that they are effectively internationalizing homophobia. Paradoxically, many conservative groups argue that the LGBT agenda is condemnable because it is an international campaign conspiring against national customs. They fail to acknowledge that homophobia is in part a transnational and cultural import because it is being channeled by transnational religions. Evangelical groups in the United States in particular place enormous emphasis on conversions and, especially, international missions and training workshops for pastors. They also send funds. Overall, the international dimensions of US evangelicalism represent the new form of US cultural imperialism. Having said that, it is important not to overstate the transnational dimensions. Most evangelical churches generate most of their resources and influence from local sources or networks (Deiros 2015).

Are Pro-LGBT Forces Equipped to Respond?

The larger question is whether Latin America’s pro-LGBT forces have the capacity to resist this backlash. Undoubtedly, LGBT movements in Latin America today are stronger than ever. Scholars have argued that they too score high on many of the variables discussed in this chapter (e.g., Diez 2016; Encarnación 2016). It is worth highlighting three
additional strengths that help LGBT movements: generational change, education, and secularism.

All surveys indicate that homo-/transphobic attitudes are more widespread in older populations than the younger generations (although, of course, it is still not clear whether this trend is true for religious young people) (Lodola 2010). Today, one-quarter of Latin America’s population is in the 15–29 age group—the largest proportion of young people relative to total population. This is good news for pro-LGBT forces.

Homo-/transphobic attitude declines with education (Díez and Dion 2018). Latin America has made enormous strides in education since the late 1990s. Enrollment in primary education is nearly universal, and in secondary and tertiary education it has expanded rapidly. This too is good news for the LGBT movement.

Finally, data suggest that in some countries irreligious groups are rising (Somma, Bargsted, and Valenzuela 2017). Combined with groups that are either light churchgoers or even anticlerical (which is a strong tradition in Latin American countries dating back to the nineteenth century), there is a growing mass of Latin Americans who are perfectly ready to serve as “queer allies” and help contain religious conservatism.

**Conclusion**

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the Americas have experienced an impressive expansion of LGBT rights. No other region outside the north Atlantic has seen an equal improvement in the legal environment for LGBT folks.

This progress has generated a new backlash. In Latin America, what is new about this backlash is the important role played by evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Analyzed from the point of view of social movement theory, evangelical groups come to the table with enormous political advantages, allowing them to influence the political setting outside and within their movements. They have enormous reach, with cross-class appeal. To fight LGBT rights, they have begun to promote unity within Christian denominations, bringing together an otherwise fragmented religious landscape, especially among themselves and between evangelical and Catholic clergies. Evangelical groups are also becoming more politically engaged, not just more vocal, designing new electoral strategies and cultivating ties with political parties, especially right-wing parties, most of which gravitate easily toward them, even if they used to be linked to Catholics, because they are desperate for deeper ties with popular sectors. They have also come up with a new framing strategy (opposition to ideology of gender) in a way that allows them to cast their homo- and transphobic positions in more liberal/secular terms (family autonomy, defense of children) and, thus, expand their appeal beyond their traditional constituency (churchgoers). And finally, they benefit enormously from the support of important transnational actors. In short, as social movements, they are formidable, perhaps even unrivaled actors.
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While pro-LGBT forces are not defenseless, it is important not to underestimate the current backlash against LGBT rights. The current backlash has renewed vigor, and the actors and institutions propelling it enjoy new advantages that did not exist during previous backlashes. While it is not obvious that this backlash will necessarily prevail against pro-LGBT movements in the region, it is clear that, except perhaps in a few countries, the struggle for the expansion of LGBT rights in the region is likely to face new and perhaps more complicated political obstacles than it did in the first 15 years of the 21st century.

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