

Nobody Is a Prophet in their Own Land? Evaluations of Pope Francis in Latin America

ASBEL BOHIGUES

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

JOSÉ MANUEL RIVAS

Universidad Sergio Arboleda, Bogotá, Colombia

Using data drawn from surveys of Latin American elites and citizens, this article aims to analyse the determinants of evaluations of Pope Francis, with a special focus on ideology and religious denomination, religiosity, and trustworthiness of the Catholic Church. Results show that the Pope remains linked to opinions on the Church, but not to religiosity, and that differences in personal religious affiliations (or lack thereof) among respondents are sharper among citizens than among elites. Furthermore, Pope Francis is found to be not closely associated to the left–right axis in Latin America, except in the case of Argentine MPs, where the right-leaning members express lower opinions of the Pope.

Keywords: elites, ideology, Latin America, Pope Francis, public opinion, religion.

In the Argentine primary elections held on 11 August 2019, the Peronist candidate Alberto Fernández managed to finish more than fifteen points ahead of President Mauricio Macri. Some ten weeks later, on 27 October, Fernández won the presidential election with 48 percent of the vote, signifying the return to power of Peronism after four years. According to *Financial Times* journalist Benedict Mander (2019), a particular public figure played an important role in the triumph of the Peronist coalition: Pope Francis. Alberto Fernández's meeting with the Supreme Pontiff in 2018 proved key to achieving unity in the coalition and, as a result, to ensuring its electoral victory.

The political influence of the Pope ranges far beyond Argentina. Thanks to his mediation, President Obama ended a longstanding US embargo on Cuba and re-established diplomatic relations with that country (Politi, 2015: 200). Pope Francis's performance in the international arena has consolidated his role as one of the main global political leaders (Larraquy, 2016). In fact, in 2013, *Time* magazine selected Francis as personality of the year, an acknowledgment that only Popes John XVIII and John Paul II had previously enjoyed (Chua-Eoan and Dias, 2013).

This Pope has repeatedly been called upon as a mediator in conflicts in the Latin American region. In Nicaragua, papal representative Stanislaw Waldemar Sommertag was part of the negotiating table formed in early 2019 between the government of Daniel Ortega and the opposition (Arcia, 2019). In Venezuela, the Holy See participated (albeit unsuccessfully) in the international mediation group that sought a way out of the serious political and economic crisis that the country continues to experience (EFE Agency, 2019).

For these and other reasons, there is a widespread perception that Pope Francis (due to his personality, leadership, and communication style) has been clearly differentiated from his predecessors, such as Benedict XVI or John Paul II. He remains a popular figure in sectors not necessarily close to Catholicism or the Catholic Church, including atheists and groups on the political left. He is after all a religious leader closely identified with the fights against poverty and climate change, and with mediation in international conflicts.

This article aims to measure and analyse the extent to which the image of Pope Francis overcomes religious and ideological barriers, or whether on the contrary the papal office is still essentially associated with a more traditional (religious, right-wing) profile linked to the Catholic Church. In either case, the singularity of Pope Francis as a leader cannot be ignored. He is an Argentine Jesuit who serves as Head of State of Vatican City, in Europe, and as leader of the Catholic Church. Through Francis, many elements come together in a single figure. Therefore, this paper explores whether, despite everything, the religious burdens attached to the papacy (conventional connections of the Catholic Church to the political right, and to factors such as religiosity or ideology) continue to be relevant when evaluating this Pope. It is argued that Francis, due to his prior career and leadership style, has succeeded in separating himself from positions traditionally linked to the Catholic Church and the right.

To empirically test this hypothesis, a special focus is here placed on four variables: one on ideology, and three on religion. The first concerns the linkage of opinions on the papal office to the left–right axis. The other three variables concern opinions on the Pope from practising Catholic sectors (and sectors close to the Church) in terms of religious ascription (group identity), religious devotion (individuality), and trust in the Church (organisation).

The emphasis on these two dimensions (ideology and religion) raises the following question: does Pope Francis attract left-wing, non-Catholic, less religious sectors and others ‘distrustful’ of the Church? If his image were found to be not linked to ideology, or to the three cited aspects of religion, then Pope Francis would represent a public figure with great potential for mediation in conflicts – far from the historical role of religion and the Catholic Church in the region.

To this end, our research focuses on Latin America, a region close to both Catholicism and to Francis himself, with a special emphasis on Argentina. For the sake of deeper and better understanding, our hypothesis is tested on two distinct populations: citizens and Members of Parliament. This will allow us, in the first place, to obtain a more complete picture of the current image of Pope Francis in Latin America. Secondly, it may be the case that the findings will be qualified, depending on the population surveyed. Political elites, whether leftist or rightist, religious or not, may show greater reluctance to express negative opinions about a figure who is popular throughout the continent (as data suggest). At the citizen level, there is presumably no such incentive or social desirability attached to a response. Thirdly, while the opinions of citizens may reveal much about the reach of the Pope’s political capital, an evaluation of MPs is also relevant, because these agents have the power to promote public policies based on papal orientations.

This article relies on public opinion data from the Latinobarómetro (LB) survey (Latinobarómetro, 2017) and the Latin American Elites Database from the University of Salamanca (PELA-USAL) for the period 2014–2018 (Alcántara, 2018). In total, the study covers seventeen Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

The examination of opinions from citizens and from parliamentarians regarding Pope Francis is important because this helps to set the limits of his role as a conflict mediator. The mediation potential of the Pope will be greater if ideology and religion are not perceived as the main determinants in his evaluation. Our results show that the Pope is still linked to opinions vis-à-vis the Church, but not to the same levels of religiosity, and that religious differences are more sharply distinguished among citizens than among MPs. Furthermore, evaluations are not closely linked to the left–right axis, except in the case of Argentine deputies, where rightist MPs do indeed express lower opinions of the Pope.

The article proceeds as follows. After this introduction, the literature on religion and politics in the Latin American region is reviewed. Next, a brief biography of Pope Francis is given, followed by the databases and methodology employed. Subsequently, our empirical analysis is presented, divided into two sections: first, the determinants of positive evaluations of the Pope among regional citizens and elites are compared, through logistic regressions; and second, the comparative citizen/elite analysis is replicated for the particular case of Argentina. The final section presents our conclusions.

Religion and Politics in Latin America

Of the 425 million Catholics in the world, 40 percent live in Latin America (Malamud, 2018) and represent almost 60 percent of the regional population (Latinobarómetro, 2017). Religion and politics have been closely connected in this region since the era of Conquest; the Catholic Church and political elites have legitimated each other and provided reciprocal ideological and material support (Levine, 2014: 3). Following the independence of these countries in the nineteenth century, the religious cleavage played a key role in the political-electoral dispute between liberals and conservatives (Levine, 1986; Deas, 2016).

Later, in the second half of the twentieth century, the Second Vatican Council had an impact in Latin America through the emergence of the first Christian Democratic parties, inspired by their European peers (Mainwaring and Scully, 2003), and through Liberation Theology, the Catholic teaching that advocates for preferential defence of the poor and that influenced leftist Latin American movements, including those linked to armed insurgency (Berryman, 1987; Ellacuría and Sobrino, 1993).

In that sense, the influence of Catholic values in Latin America has been transversal to the left–right ideological axis, informing the low degree of state secularism in this region (Vaggione and Morán, 2017). This has been evidenced by such phenomena as the defence of the Church's moral postulates by Christian Democratic parties (Mainwaring and Scully, 2003), the presidency in Paraguay of former leftist bishop and senator Fernando Lugo, or the conservative moral positions taken on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, or drug legalisation by certain leftist parties and presidents that have governed countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (Heidrich and Tussie, 2013). Despite such ideological mainstreaming, the

religious cleavage around the Church-state relationship, prevalent since the nineteenth century, remains a common criterion for classifying Latin American political parties (Dix, 1989; Coppedge, 1997). Parties on the left argue for a clearer separation between the state and the Catholic Church, while those on the right prefer a closer relationship.

Perceptions of Francis's immediate predecessors (Benedict XVI and John Paul II) were associated with Catholic practice and right-wing social sectors. These popes, although of European origin, played an important role in the region. John Paul II held that communism and the secularism of Western societies were the Church's main enemies, and in Latin America this advanced two priorities: the condemnation of Liberation Theology – a task entrusted to Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Defence of the Faith, and the future Pope Benedict XVI – and the fight against communism (Houtart, 2005: 35–36).

Nevertheless, Benedict XVI proved to be a more an intellectual way pope than a political one. He took office in a context in which the Cold War had long since ended, where secularism was the only salient enemy. Instead of focusing on ideological issues, his strategy consisted of defending the doctrinal and moral issues of the Church, often to contain the advance of evangelical churches (Bardazzi, 2006).

Although Catholicism has for centuries been the hegemonic religion in Latin America, since the 1960s evangelical Christianity has emerged vigorously, especially its Pentecostal branch (Parker, 2005). Currently, almost 20 percent of Latin Americans declare themselves to be evangelicals (Latinobarómetro, 2017). Their churches create political parties with parliamentary representation and give electoral support to presidential candidates who profess to share their faith (Levine and Stoll, 2018). Likewise, they have managed to put issues related to religious morality on the political agenda, and their ability to mobilise voters has commanded a growing and decisive electoral weight (Stoll, 1990; Gill, 2008; Cleary, 2018).

Latin America has thus become a region with greater religious plurality (Parker, 2005), but the Catholic population remains the strong majority and, with exceptions including Uruguay and parts of Central America, the Roman Catholic Church continues to exert great influence on key social sectors such as education and social assistance, and it continues to receive privileged treatment in its relations with the states (Vaggione and Morán, 2017). According to Latinobarómetro (2017), the Church remains the institution most trusted by Latin Americans; however, while from 1995 to 2000 more than 70 percent of citizens proclaimed 'much' or 'some' confidence in the Church, that percentage in the twenty-first century has not exceeded 70 percent, with the exception of 2005, the year of the death of John Paul II (at 71.4 percent). The election of Argentine Jorge Bergoglio as the first American Pope was interpreted by some as a move by the Church to maintain its influence in the region that is home to the largest number of Catholics. As a counter to the purely conservative political vision of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, expressed in the doctrinal note *The Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (Ratzinger and Bertone, 2002), the Roman curia sought in Bergoglio a style different from that of his predecessors.

The Pontificate of Francis

Jorge Mario Bergoglio (Francis) has served as Pope of the Catholic Church and Head of State of Vatican City since 2013. He was born on 17 December 1936, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At the age of 21 he joined the Metropolitan Seminary of Buenos Aires to

become a priest of the Society of Jesus, and he was ordained in December 1969. During Argentina's military dictatorship, Bergoglio devoted himself to academic and teaching activities. In 1992, he was appointed Bishop of the former diocese of Auca and auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires. Over time, he was promoted to coadjutor Archbishop of Buenos Aires (1997–98), Archbishop of Buenos Aires (1998–2013), and Cardinal (2002–2013) (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs – CIDOB, 2015).

Unlike other popes, Bergoglio has experienced social inequality in his own life. In the *villas miserias* of Buenos Aires near the city's skyscrapers, 'conoció de cerca el olor de la miseria junto al egoísmo brutal de las clases dominantes (he experienced first-hand the stink of poverty alongside the brutal selfishness of the ruling classes)' (Politi, 2015: 160).

Bergoglio was elected Pope of the Catholic Church on 13 March 2013, following the resignation of Benedict XVI, thereby becoming the first Jesuit to serve as Supreme Pontiff. Since the beginning of his term, his leadership style has been to maintain close connections with the faithful, but to regard traditions in sober and austere terms (Krames, 2014). He refused to move into the papal apartment, to sit on the golden throne, to use the Vatican's armoured Mercedes, or to don regal attire such as the crimson stole or imperial shoes (Navarro-Valls, 2014). Francis uses simple language to make himself understood, and he pursues a Church focused more on the poor and less on the issues of moral doctrine. In his public statements, he employs colloquial and popular language that generates sympathy not only among the Catholic faithful, but among the religious followers of other creeds and even non-believers (Politi, 2015).

As Head of State of Vatican City, Pope Francis has defended the excommunication of Mafia members, strongly condemned cases of paedophilia in the Church, and promoted reforms aimed at establishing collegiality within the curia, collaborating with other religions as well as cleaning up operations at the Vatican Bank (Escobar, 2013; Larraquy, 2016). He has been open to dialogue in renewing the structures of the Church, seeking consensus among all ideological currents (Politi, 2015).

Francis has further adopted the role of mediator in foreign policy, fostering the end of the US economic blockade of Cuba and resolving conflicts in Venezuela and Nicaragua between the government and the opposition (Larraquy, 2016). Previously, both John Paul II and Benedict XVI had likewise participated as mediators in international conflicts: the former intervened decisively in a border dispute between Argentina and Chile early in his papacy, helping the two countries to avoid war (Passarelli, 1998), while the latter mediated in a conflict between Hezbollah and the Israeli army in Lebanon the year after assuming the papacy (Priego and Corral, 2007).

Two issues have concerned Pope Francis most during his pontificate: social inequality and the environment. For Francis, the problem of poverty cannot be solved without renouncing financial speculation and the excessive autonomy that markets today command (Pope Francis, 2013).

His warnings around environmental deterioration are reflected in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, largely inspired by the concerns of his predecessor Benedict XVI regarding the effects of unfettered capitalism and planetary degradation (Somiedo, 2013). Francis criticises the powerful for insufficient environmental action; he decries the 'ecological debt' of countries of the global North to those of the South; and he blames the financialised economy and extreme consumerism as the main drivers of today's environmental crises (Francis, 2017: 56).

Pope Francis's anti-capitalist political positions in papal documents have brought him closer to Latin American Liberation Theology, although in the past he had always been

opposed to that theology (Larraquy, 2016). This is the image that Pope Francis projects from the Vatican; in Argentina, however, both citizens and elites have dealt with him for much longer as Jorge Bergoglio. During Argentina's military dictatorship, while in command of the Jesuits in Argentina and Paraguay, Bergoglio formally rejected the Liberation Theology of two priests who were later kidnapped by the military. Although his actions in that period received criticism (Verbitsky, 2005), one of those priests afterward defended Francis (the other having died).

Official documentation reveals that Bergoglio met with leaders of the dictatorship to win the freedom of these prisoners and that, once they were released, he helped them to leave the country (Politi, 2015: 171–174). As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he confronted the Kirchner governments on the legalisation of gay marriage, but Larraquy (2016: 285–289) argues that this conflict was undertaken to represent the voice of the Argentine people.

The Pope's ideological pragmatism fits well with the social vision of Argentine Peronism (Politi, 2015). During an interview for *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Francis clarified:

Tuve un momento de gran crisis interior estando en Córdoba. No habré sido ciertamente como la beata Imelda, pero jamás he sido de derechas (I had a moment of great internal crisis while in Córdoba. I certainly wasn't like blessed Imelda, but I have never been right-wing). (Spadaro, 2013).

Such diffuse ideology from the Pope has symbolically placed him in a less right-wing position than his immediate predecessors. At the same time, it has taken him further away from the traditionally conservative image projected by the Catholic Church, allowing him to emerge as a public figure with the capacity to mediate in international conflicts, especially in Latin America.

However, Argentina presents a special case when studying the image of Francis in public opinion. Before becoming Pope, Francis was accused of collaborating with the dictatorship, he confronted the leftist government of the Kirchners, and in more recent years he has come closer to the country's Peronist positions (Zuleta, 2019).

Methodological Design: Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL

In order to analyse the evaluation of Pope Francis, this article relies on data from the 2017 Latinobarómetro (LB) survey for citizens, and from the Latin American Elites Database from the University of Salamanca (PELA-USAL) for elites. Both surveys include a question on evaluation of the Pope (Table 1). It is important to note here that the two databases use different scales: in the LB, assessment ranges from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good), while in the PELA-USAL the scale is from 1 (very bad) to 10 (very good).

Other surveys focusing on religious aspects have asked about the figure of the Pope both in Latin America and in Argentina (Univision, 8 February 2014; Pew Research Center, 13 November 2014; Mallimaci et al., 2019). However, the advantage of the LB and PELA-USAL databases is that they have surveyed citizens and MPs, respectively on a regular basis since the mid-1990s, and with the same questionnaires in each subsequent round. PELA-USAL presents a few peculiarities, since its universe of study is distinct: fieldwork is conducted following legislative elections, when a newly elected chamber assumes office. The interviews with MPs are personal, and the questions are not open-ended; answers are anonymous and weighted according to the percentage of seats held by the political party to which the MP belongs (Alcántara, 2018).

Table 1. Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL databases

	LB 2017	PELA-USAL		
	N	N (% of Chamber)	Fieldworkyear	Legislature
Argentina	1.200	59 (22.9)	2017	2015–2019
Bolivia	1.200	93 (71.5)	2015	2015–2020
Chile	1.200	68 (56.7)	2014	2014–2018
Colombia	1.200	84 (50.6)	2014	2014–2018
Costa Rica	1.000	44 (77.2)	2018	2018–2022
Dominican Rep.	1.000	61 (32.1)	2017	2016–2020
Ecuador	1.200	88 (64.2)	2017	2017–2021
El Salvador	1.000	79 (94.0)	2018	2018–2021
Guatemala	1.000	78 (49.4)	2016	2016–2020
Honduras	1.000	92 (71.9)	2018	2018–2022
Mexico	1.200	100 (20.0)	2016	2015–2018
Nicaragua	1.000	59 (64.1)	2017	2017–2022
Panama	1.000	47 (66.2)	2014	2014–2019
Paraguay	1.200	55 (68.7)	2013	2013–2018
Peru	1.200	73 (56.2)	2018	2016–2021
Uruguay	1.200	69 (69.7)	2015	2015–2020
Venezuela	1.200	67 (40.1)	2016	2016–2021

Source: Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL.

Notes: Unweighted data. In bicameral parliaments, the surveys are conducted in the lower chamber.

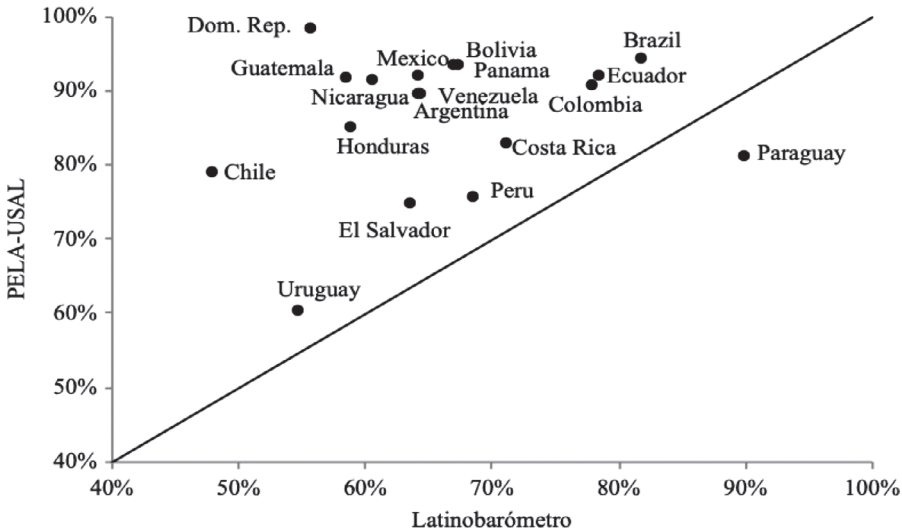
Thus, given the nature of the PELA-USAL studies, fieldwork depends on the duration of legislative terms, and this may imply some discrepancy in the years reported on by the two sources. Being known in advance, this does not present an *a priori* obstacle for the comparison of public opinion data from citizens and from MPs.

For analysis of the determinants of assessment of the Pope, the response scales have been dichotomised: in the LB, 0–5 for 0 and 6–10 for 1, and in the PELA-USAL, 1–5 for 0 and 6–10 for 1. The purpose is to be able to compare the two models (citizens and elites) in logistic regressions. While it is true that an evaluation of 5 does not mean precisely the same in the two databases (representing the mathematical centre in the LB but not in the PELA-USAL), better comparability of the coefficients is achieved by dichotomising the scale.

Linear or logistic regressions were ruled out, because the data do not follow a normal distribution, and the assumption of parallel regression is violated in multiple variables. Figure 1 shows the positive evaluations of Pope Francis by elites and by citizens in Latin America. With the exception of Paraguay, parliamentary elites evaluate him much more highly than do citizens. That said, he enjoys wide support from both groups surveyed, except by Chileans and Uruguayans. His positive projection gives some insights and helps to better understand why governments and opposition groups both turn to him as a mediator. It should also be noted that Pope Francis does not receive an especially high or low evaluation from the MPs and population of Argentina.

All models include variables related to religion and ideology, available in both databases, which allows for comparison. Table 2 summarises the formulation of the questions and answers in both Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL. Should the mentioned variables not present explanatory power on the levels of evaluation of Pope

Figure 1. Positive Evaluations of Pope Francis among Elites and Citizens in Comparative Perspective



Source: own elaboration from Latinobarómetro (2017) and PELA-USAL.

Note: Percentage of positive evaluations with questions dichotomised.

Francis among Latin Americans, this would mean that his leadership goes beyond the left–right distinction, religious denomination, religiosity, or the Church itself.

Firstly, for ideology, the model resorts to the self-placement of interviewees on the 1 (left) to 10 (right) axis. Here special mention should be made of the values of the scale. Again, and as with the evaluation of political leaders, the LB uses a 0–10 scale and the PELA-USAL a 1–10 scale in order to measure ideology. It was decided that this variable not be recoded, but kept continuous. Due to the traditional link between the Latin American right and the Catholic Church (Hagopian, 2009; Luna and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2014; Luna and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2014: 347), right-wing respondents (whether citizens or elites) would be expected to express higher evaluations of a pope. However, it is argued that Pope Francis has succeeded in moving away from this traditional dynamic, and it is expected that no significance will be found for this variable in either population (Hypothesis 1).

Secondly, three questions that measure different dimensions of religion are included: trustworthiness of the Church (organisation), religiosity (individuality) and religious ascription or denomination (group identity). Even though religiosity is measured in the Latinobarómetro by the level of religious devotion, and in the PELA-USAL by attendance of religious services, it was decided to include each of these comparable questions in their respective model, in order to compare effects of religiosity. Moreover, religious service attendance is an indicator frequently used to measure religiosity (Gerber et al., 2016).

As with ideology, it is expected that non-significant or weak effects will be found for these three variables (Hypothesis 2). However, also to be expected is a particular religious category that the Pope fails to penetrate: evangelicals (Hypothesis 3). This is

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Table 2. Questions in Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL

Variable	Latinobarómetro	PELA-USAL
Age	Continuous 16–95	22–79
Gender	Female (1), Male (0)	
Studies	Interviewee's studies Illiterate (1) to completed higher degree (7)	<i>What are the highest official studies you have taken?</i> None (1) to Postgraduate (6)
Socioeconomic status	Assessment of the Interviewee's Socioeconomic Level [coded by interviewer]. Very bad (1) to Very good (5)	<i>Can you tell me in which of the following categories your current total monthly income would fit?</i> 1000–4000 USD (1) to More than 10,000 USD (4)
Religion	<i>What is your religion?</i> [Recoded] Catholic, Evangelical, Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Jew, Protestant, Afro/American cults, believer (does not belong to Church), Agnostic, Atheist, None, Others	Catholic, atheist, evangelical, protestant, none, others
Religiosity (a)	<i>How would you describe yourself?</i> Without religion (0) to Very devout (4)	<i>How often do you attend religious services?</i> Non-believer (0) to More than once a week (5)
Trustworthiness of the (Catholic) Church	Trustworthiness of the Church None (1) to A lot (4)	Trustworthiness of the Catholic Church Left (1) to Right (10)
Ideology	Left (0) to Right (10)	Left (1) to Right (10)
Evaluation of Pope Francis	<i>Now I will name some leaders and presidents. on a scale from 1 to 10 where one is 'very bad' and 10 is 'very good' please tell me where would you place them, or you do not know enough to say?</i> Binary: 0 (0–5) and 1 (6–10)	<i>For each of the following political leaders or international personalities that I mention, please tell me how would you rate them, in general terms, on a scale of 1 to 10, where '1' means you evaluate them as very bad and '10' means very good.</i> Binary: (1–5) and 1 (6–10)

Source: Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL.

Notes: New categories created (0) for interviewees who declare themselves to be non-believers and therefore are not asked about devotion or religious services.

expected because Catholicism and evangelicalism, with their numerous denominations, each struggle for similar social and power spaces within Latin America (Semán, 2019).

All models include country dummies as fixed-effects, as well as socio-demographic control variables including age, gender, extent of studies, and income and/or socioeconomic status. Additionally, a binary variable is included in the PELA-USAL models to distinguish whether a given MP belongs to the government or the opposition, so as to control for effects related to political parties. It was considered whether questions around climate change and moral values should also be included, due to the importance

of these issues in Francis's discourse, and his sensitivity to them (see Di Lorenzo, 2017). However, the LB and PELA-USAL contain no questions about these issues in common, so it was decided to prioritise the focus on ideology and the religion dimensions, as well as the comparison of citizen/elite responses.

Finally, the general models on Latin America are replicated for the case of citizens and MPs from Argentina. In view of the trajectory of Pope Francis in his country of origin, where he developed his ecclesiastical career and (as mentioned above) became involved in the country's political life, different behaviour is expected in some variables. The purpose of this analysis is to contrast the findings for Latin America with those for Argentina; in other words, to check whether the general findings are sustained in the Pope's country of origin, or whether Argentine citizens and MPs present a divergent response from that of the wider region.

At the end of the day, when people in Mexico, Panama, or Bolivia are asked about Pope Francis, they will likely consider his actions and statements made since 2013. When people in Argentina are asked the same questions, they will probably further recall his actions and declarations before 2013, made within Argentina, and especially the perception (widespread in recent years) that he is a Peronist pope (Zuleta, 2019).

Therefore, only in ideology are nuances expected, and the presumed effect is not positive but negative. That is to say, it is expected that the left would have a better opinion of Pope Francis than the right (Hypothesis 4). If this hypothesis is confirmed, then a strategy deemed successful in Latin America as a whole would not extend to Argentina, where ideology would have a distinct effect when compared to the rest of the region.

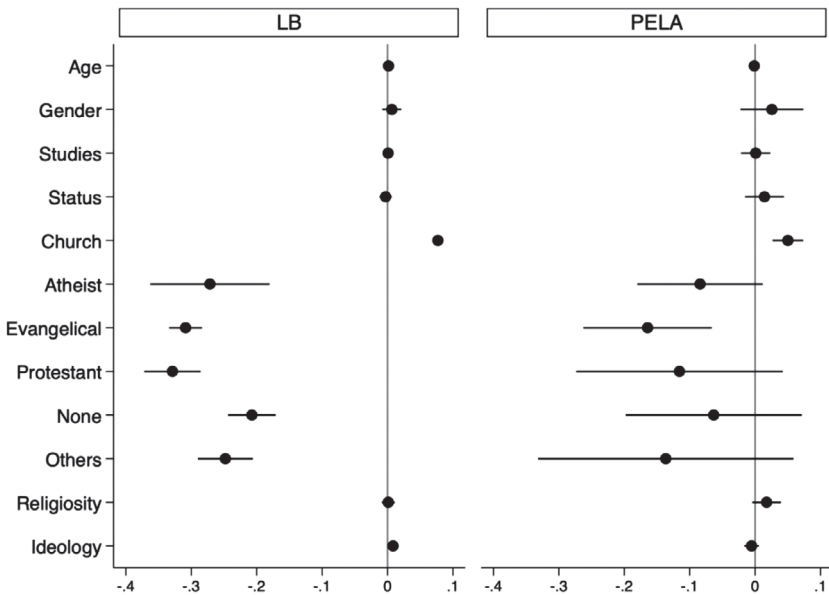
Results

Figure 2 displays the determinants of the evaluations of the Pope among citizens and parliamentary elites in each logistic regression, with the average marginal effects. The absence of statistical significance for socio-demographic factors needs be mentioned first. Regardless of whether a respondent is a citizen or an MP, the overall evaluation of Pope Francis does not vary between the young and the elderly, males and females, rich and poor, or those without studies and those with postgraduate experience.

In terms of religion, the results are divergent. Citizens and MPs who trust the Catholic Church tend to evaluate Francis better. The Pope is after all the head of the Catholic Church, and Latin Americans perceive him that way. However, the level of religiosity is not a significant variable in either population; greater devotion or attendance at religious services is not related to a good or bad image of the Pope. In these terms, it can be affirmed that the image of the Pope is more closely linked to Catholicism in its organisational aspect (the Church) than to an individualised aspect such as religiosity. The consistency of the findings is worth highlighting for the two types of populations considered here. And yet, in relation to religious ascription, the results among citizens and elites prove to be different.

Latin Americans who declare themselves to be atheist, without religion, or aligned with a faith other than Catholicism evaluate the Pope less highly than do Catholics. Interestingly, this effect is not replicated by parliamentarians: MPs from minority religions, or who are atheists or without religion, evaluate Francis in a way similar to Catholics (less significant coefficients), with the notable exception of evangelical MPs. This shows that the figure of Francis has been more successful in obtaining support from non-Catholic sectors (such as Protestants or atheists) among the elites, but not among the general

Figure 2. Determinants of Evaluations of Pope Francis among Citizens and Parliamentary Elites in Latin America: Average Marginal Effects Represented with Confidence Intervals (95%)



Source: own elaboration from Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL.

Notes:

(i) LB: $R^2 = 0.14$, $N = 14,694$. PELA: $R^2 = 0.18$, $N = 1012$.

(ii) Country dummies (and government/opposition in PELA-USAL) are included but not shown.

(iii) For religion, the reference category is Catholics.

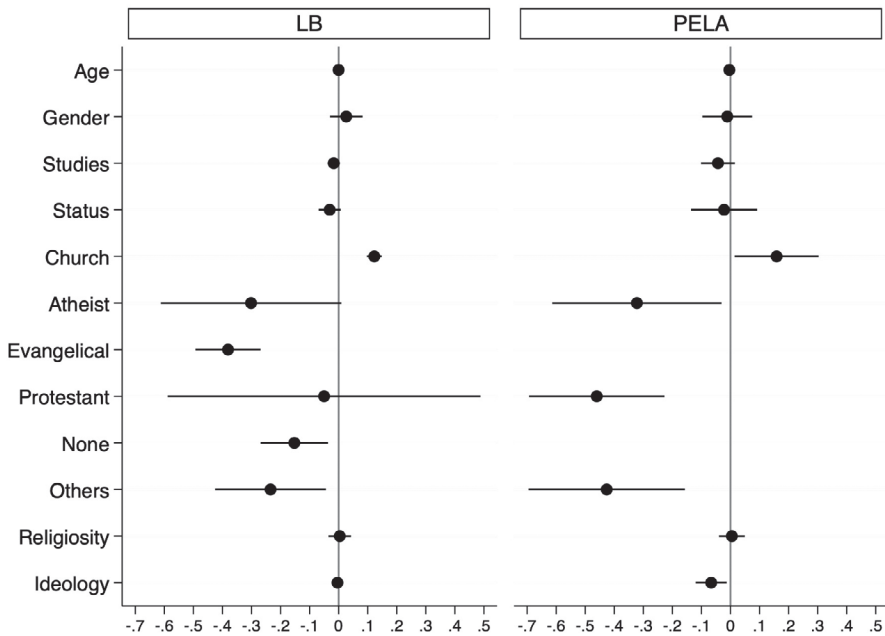
(iv) It was not possible to include Brazil in the analysis, since some of the variables of interest were absent for that country.

population, where all those who do not identify as Catholics consistently give him lower scores.

Thus, the second hypothesis is only partially confirmed: although trust in the Catholic Church positively affects the evaluation of the Pope, the same does not apply to the level of religiosity, while religious ascription shows disparate results. On the other hand, results confirm the third hypothesis: evangelicals, both citizens and elites, present a clear rejection of the papal figure. Again, evangelicals and Catholics in the region are currently competing for spaces of power, both symbolic and institutional. It is therefore not surprising that one of these groups should manifest stronger rejection of the leader of the opposing group.

Finally, the results for ideology are in line with expectations (Hypothesis 1). There are no significant effects among MPs, so it is possible to say that Francis has managed to disassociate himself from left–right dynamics within the region’s legislative chambers. However, there is a statistically significant but weak effect (0.01): the Pope is indeed linked to the left–right axis among citizens; Latin Americans on the right have a better image of the Pope than those on the left. Still, the weakness of this association needs to be highlighted – added to the absence of effects among MPs, this would allow us to corroborate the first hypothesis.

Figure 3. Determinants of Evaluations of Pope Francis among Citizens and Parliamentary Elites in Argentina: Average Marginal Effects Represented with Confidence Intervals (95%)



Source: own elaboration from Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL.

Notes:

- (i) LB: $R^2 = 0.15$, $N = 998$. PELA: $R^2 = 0.62$, $N = 46$.
- (ii) Government/opposition dummies included in PELA-USAL, but not shown.
- (iii) For religion, the reference category is Catholics.
- (iv) In the general model, interactions with Argentina were included for the variables of interest. Coefficients for LB are: Ideology -0.07 (p-value 0.025), Church 0.29 (p-value 0.00). In PELA-USAL: Church 1.99 (p-value 0.01). The rest of interactions have no significance. However, it was decided to run a separate model, as the sample design for country levels allows this.

The Pope in Argentina

The results for the case of Argentina are displayed in Figure 3. Once more, socio-demographic differences are not significant, while trust in the Catholic Church (organised religion) is significant in the absence of effects of religiosity (individual religion). So far, these results show no differences from previous findings.

The models do display distinct results in religions and ideology. First, atheist and Protestant Argentine citizens have a similar image of the Pope to that of Catholics (less significant coefficients), while MPs who are atheist, Protestant, or aligned with other religions have a worse image of the Pope than do Catholics. These findings are almost opposite to those found for Latin America as a whole, which reinforces the idea of Argentina's singularity in the case of Pope Francis: at the regional level, there were almost no differences in the area of religion among MPs, while among citizens there were; conversely, in Argentina, different religious identities (including atheists) in citizens are tempered, while they are accentuated in the case of deputies.

However, the most striking findings relate to ideology. If in Latin America as a whole the Pope's association with ideology among citizens is weak (nearly non-existent), in Argentina there is no such relationship. Precisely the opposite occurs among the parliamentary elite in that country: here the Pope is unable to dissociate himself from the left-right dynamic. Moreover, ideology matters in line with the theoretical expectations: Argentine MPs on the right give Francis lower evaluations. For the Argentine elite, Francis is a leftist Pope, and MPs of the left evaluate him more highly than do those on the right. It is worth mentioning that this same model was repeated in all countries, and it was not found that ideology among elites was significant in any but this case, thereby confirming the uniqueness of Argentina.

Altogether, the Pope has succeeded in moving away from ideology for the whole of Latin America's political elite and citizens, and especially for the citizens of his own country of origin. But he has not had the same success among Argentina's political elite, among whom his image is associated with ideology in a way running counter to the traditional link between the Catholic Church and the right.

Conclusions

Pope Francis's popularity among citizens and elites in Latin America is evident, with approval percentages above 60 percent among citizens, and above 80 percent among political elites. This popularity goes beyond the traditional profile of the practising right-wing Catholic individual, overcoming socio-demographic, religious, and especially ideological barriers.

However, the Pope is still a Catholic leader. In all models, the results show that trust in the Church is an important predictor, but not religiosity. It is certainly more difficult, and rather unlikely, for any pope to be able to dissociate himself from opinions relating to the Church overall; but the findings that levels of religious devotion and practice do not determine opinions of a specifically religious leader can be said to denote success in terms of the Pope's breadth of appeal.

While these two variables show no differences between citizens and MPs, the factor of religious denomination does. Without exception, all non-Catholic citizens have a less positive image of the Pope. In contrast, these differences are attenuated among MPs, where only evangelicals express sharp (negative) differences. Even atheist MPs do not hold a very different image of Francis from that of Catholic MPs.

As for ideology, the results are also divergent. While right-wing Latin American citizens evaluate Francis as slightly better than those on the left, the same does not apply within the legislative chambers, where ideology is not determinant to evaluations. These results are in sharp contrast with the Argentine case, where ideology is not a good predictor of evaluation of the Pope among citizens, while it certainly is among elites. As expected in the theoretical and methodological sections, Argentine MPs on the right evaluate the Pope in worse terms because they consider him a Peronist and/or leftist leader (Zuleta, 2019).

With these results, it is possible to state that Pope Francis is indeed regarded as a prophet in his own land, especially among the political elite. The percentages of favourable opinions are systematically higher for MPs than for citizens, except in Paraguay. The differences in distinct religious affiliations among MPs are smaller than among citizens; and more notably, deputies on both the left and right evaluate the Pope equally. Within this dimension, one finding that may prove decisive to understanding the role of the Pope in Argentina is that an ideological difference emerges: the right-wing

MPs show greater rejection of the former Archbishop of Buenos Aires, while those on the left have a better image of him.

Given the divergent findings for elites and citizens in this regard, some indications are found of the causes and consequences of why the Pope's image is better, and with different determinants, among elites. This may be due to a social desirability bias, although it should be recalled that the PELA-USAL responses are anonymous. Additionally, because Francis is also a political leader (Head of State of the Vatican), the Pope probably has closer relations with this parliamentary population as a result of official visits and receptions, etc.

What is beyond doubt is the empirical support for the Pope's considerable mediation potential in the region. It would therefore make sense, as this article empirically demonstrates, to turn to Pope Francis for mediation in any conflicts, given that he enjoys broad support, even among atheists, and at both ends of the political spectrum.

In light of these findings, the election of Pope Francis in 2013 can be described as successful, although it is impossible to compare the current situation with that of Popes Benedict XVI or John Paul II, due to a lack of data. Even so, this article has allowed measurement and identification of some of the causes behind the popularity of Pope Francis through a comparative strategy of countries and populations. The mere inclusion of questions on Pope Francis in databases such as Latinobarómetro and PELA-USAL already accounts for his projection.

This is a first step in understanding the causes of Francis's success, corroborated by compared survey data, as well as in understanding the current role of religion in Latin America. The organisational component (Church) is more relevant than the individual aspect (religiosity), and evangelicals are the religious group most reluctant to support the Pope – even more than atheists. The data indicate that, in order for the Catholic Church to recover part of the influence lost to other religions or to secularisation, and to remain a social actor of reference in line with the historical role that it has played in the region, a leadership style like that of Pope Francis appears to represent a winning strategy in Latin America.

Certainly, the figure of Pope Francis adds another dimension to the already complex relationship between religion and politics in the region, breaking through ideological, religious and socio-demographic barriers, which are assumed *a priori* fundamental to understanding why a citizen or Member of Parliament would express a positive opinion of someone who is, after all, the leader of the Catholic Church.

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