

A Pious Paradox: Analyzing the Contradictory Paths of Chile and Argentina in Legalizing Same-Sex Marriage Amidst Varying Levels of Religiosity

Jacob Wesoky, McGill University

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ABSTRACT

The divergent trajectories in the legalization of same-sex marriage amidst disparate levels of religiosity challenges conventional wisdom about the relationship between religion, state, and society. Contrary to the conventional belief that higher religiosity in countries fosters conservative views and resistance to progressive social reforms, Argentina and Chile present an intriguing anomaly. Utilizing data from the World Values Survey and examining the historical, political, and social contexts of each country, this paper seeks to understand why Argentina, with its higher religiosity and constitutional favoritism towards Catholicism, became the first Latin American country to legalize same-sex marriage in 2010, while Chile, less religious but more socially conservative, followed much later in 2021. The paper explores the divergent pre and post-dictatorship economic philosophies, governmental structures, sociopolitical landscapes and the distinct roles of the Catholic Church in 21st century Chilean and Argentine politics. It argues that in Argentina, individual political views and a vibrant civil society have developed independently of religious beliefs, fostering a political culture more open to progressive social reform. Conversely, Chile's entrenched neoliberal policies and the Catholic Church's sustained influence in Chilean civil society align with more conservative social values, impeding similar progress. These findings challenge the assumption that higher levels of religiosity necessarily correlate with social conservatism and underscore the complex interplay between religion, government, and social values. This research not only illuminates the nuanced dynamics at play in the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Latin America but also suggests broader implications for understanding the impact of religiosity on political and social attitudes globally.

Introduction

While there are many competing schools of thought surrounding the analysis of religion and politics—from functionalist and substantive debates about the units of analysis to debates about the role and trajectory of religious institutions and groups in society—there is a scholarly consensus that religious groups and traditional religious norms resist liberalization and progressive social reform. Gaskins, Golder, and Siegel assert that as societies ‘develop,’ or become more socially progressive, “religious individuals become more socially conservative relative to the population mean” (Gaskins et al. 2013). It is for these reasons that, when a clear outlier emerges, a more detailed analysis is needed. Consistent with this consensus that, as societies develop, there is bottleneck pressure towards social conservatism among religious groups, it is common knowledge that the Roman Catholic Church has been a vocal opponent of same-sex marriage equality. Therefore, it is logical to assume that predominantly Catholic countries with high levels of religious adherence would be more restrictive of LGBT rights. Curiously, Argentina directly contradicts this assumption—with deeply Catholic Argentina being the first country in Latin America and the one of the first in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in 2010 (BBC Mundo 2010). In this context, the case of Argentina becomes even more peculiar when compared with neighboring Chile (a country with similar ethnic and religious demographics, similar Spanish Colonial pasts, and seemingly parallel political histories of military dictatorship and democratization in the latter half of the 20th

century), which legalized gay marriage eleven years after Argentina (Bonney and Londoño 2021). Additionally, data from the World Values Survey indicates that, contrary to the aforementioned assumptions, Chileans are simultaneously less religious and more socially conservative than Argentines (Inglehart et al 2023). This leads to the central question: why has Argentina adopted progressive social reforms more quickly than Chile, despite Argentines’ higher religiosity and less secular institutional design? This paper explores the paradox of Chilean and Argentine institutions, religiosity, and social attitudes, suggesting that Argentines’ individual political views are distinct of religious belief, which challenges common assumptions about the impact of religion on social policy.

Identifying the Anomaly

Both Chile and Argentina have majority Catholic populations, with Catholics making up 60 and 62.9% of their respective populations (CIA 2023—ARGENTINA). However, the contemporary relationship between the Catholic Church and the Chilean and Argentine states, as well as the level of religious observance among Catholic populations in the two countries, have diverged under their respective post-dictatorship democratic regimes. For instance, Fox’s Religion and State Indexes identify Argentina as having “high” levels of “state funding of religion” as opposed to Chile’s designation of “low” state funding of religion (Fox 2023). While both Argentina and Chile provide constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, Argentina’s constitution officially designates Catholicism as the preferred religion of the state,

whereas Chile’s constitution does not mention a preferred state religion (Constitute Project 2023). Moreover, according to data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 74.1% of the Argentine population self-identifies as “a religious person, whereas only 49.9% of the Chilean population identifies as religious (Inglehart et al. 2023, 173). This stark difference in self-identified religiosity can also be seen within Argentina and Chile’s Catholic populations, with 82.4% of Argentines Catholics defining themselves as “a religious person” as opposed to 61.6% of Chilean Catholics (Inglehart et al. 2023, 173).⁹ Similarly, when asked in the WVS to describe how much confidence they have in churches, Argentines were 30.95% more likely than Chileans to indicate that they have either “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in churches (Inglehart et al. 2023, 64).

Despite Argentina’s higher religiosity and higher confidence in churches, Argentines are more accepting of homosexuality than Chileans—when asked to rank the “justifiability” of homosexuality on a 10 point scale with “never justifiable” at 1 and “always justifiable” at 10, 53.1% of Argentines answered 6 to 10 (indicating a more accepting attitude towards homosexuality), as opposed to only 39.6% of Chileans landing on the accepting side of the spectrum (Inglehart et al. 2023, 182). One potential limitation of these results is that these samples were taken in 2017 and 2018, 7 years after Argentina legalized same-sex marriage but before it was legalized in Chile, meaning the legal status at the time the sample was taken could be a confounding variable in public opinion. However, older WVS samples taken in 2006

in both countries (when neither country recognized same-sex marriages) show a smaller, but still noticeable, difference in public opinion towards same-sex marriage; in 2006, Argentines were 7.7% more likely than Chileans to answer on the accepting side of the scale and, more notably, were 88.7% more likely than Chileans to answer that homosexuality is “always justifiable” (Inglehart et al. 2023, 202). The data from the World Values Survey, therefore, peculiarly displays both higher religiosity and higher support for same-sex marriage in Argentina. In order to determine whether Argentina is abnormally progressive, whether Chile is abnormally conservative, or both, comprehensive analysis of the wide variety of factors that could contribute to this paradox is necessary.

Neoliberalism and Institutional Design in Post-Pinochet Chile

After Socialist Salvador Allende was democratically elected to the Chilean presidency in 1970, he was overthrown in a military coup in 1973 that installed Augusto Pinochet as a military dictator (Edwards 2023, xiv). Under the guidance of the “Chicago Boys,” a group of Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago, Pinochet enacted far-reaching neoliberal economic reforms, and his 1980 Constitution embedded these principles into Chile’s political and economic structure. For example, Article 19 Section 21 of Chile’s 1980 constitution states “The State and its bodies may develop entrepreneurial activities or participate in them only if a qualified quorum law authorizes it,” guaranteeing individuals the right to participate in the free market and limiting state in-

tervention in the economy (Chile 1980, art. 19 sec. 21). As was one of the original goals of the 1973 coup, the neoliberal market structures that were institutionalized by the 1980 constitution sent Chile on a distinct path of (what the conservative U.S.-based Heritage Foundation considers to be) “economic freedom,” with Chile consistently achieving significantly higher scores than its neighbors—especially Argentina—in measures concerning how “free” the market is in the country (Heritage 2023). While it may initially seem unrelated to the acceptance of homosexuality, it is possible that the diverging market structures of Chile and Argentina are a factor that contributes to the difference in acceptance of and support for same-sex marriage, regardless of the Catholic Church’s influence.

While there is little to no research on the impact of Chile’s neoliberal market structures on public opinion and support for same-sex marriage, some academic theories portray a strong connection between neoliberalism and traditional family values, which signifies that Chile’s neoliberal institutions may have reinforced opposition to progressive social movements. American progressive movements exemplified this, especially as the gay liberation movement “challenge[d] the sexual normativity of the family wage as the linchpin and foundation of welfare capitalism;” critiquing neoliberal structures as reinforcing conservative values (Cooper 2019, 21). This led to a reactionary “neoliberal–new social conservative alliance,” as free-market structures and conservative institutions worked to maintain traditional family values (Cooper 2019, 21). Similarly, Rao—in his analysis of homophobia

and LGBT activism in international financial institutions—writes that, in their imposition of neoliberal market structures/austerity measures on global south, these institutions hold “culpability in co-producing” sociopolitical environments that are hostile towards the LGBT community (Rao 2015, 38). While neither Cooper nor Rao analyze the Chilean case, their insights could transfer over to Chile, given that the neoliberal structures they mention were the same structures Pinochet and the ‘Chicago Boys’ built into Chile and its 1980 constitution. In the Chilean context, Díez writes that, in order to ensure the Chicago Boys’ neoliberal structures prevailed post-dictatorship, Pinochet’s 1980 constitution intentionally structured the legislature so the Senate of Chile would overrepresent the right wing and act as a buffer against any left-wing upheavals to the economic system that was put in place (Diez 2015, 68). In line with the patterns Cooper and Rao identify, the institutionally overrepresented right-wing parties in the Chilean senate vehemently opposed LGBT rights (Diez 2015, 200). The preserved role of neoliberalism and overrepresentation of right-wing interests in the 1980 Chilean constitution is inadvertently linked to an economic, political, and social environment that was relatively less accessible to progressive social movements.

The Legacy of Peronism and Argentine Institutional Design

Unlike in Chile, Argentina’s post-dictatorship institutional design was not crafted by the dictatorship itself. Instead, Argentina’s 1853 constitution was reinstated in 1983 following

the fall of the dictatorship and amended during the constitutional reforms of 1994 (Argentina 1994). Therefore, Argentina's revitalized constitution leaves significantly more room for state intervention in the economy, includes strong protections for social and workers' rights, and is more social justice-focused than Chile's. For example, Article 14bis includes several left-wing economic ideas, guaranteeing the right to paid vacation, adjustable minimum wage, "free and democratic organization of labor unions," social security, housing, and more (Argentina 1994, art. 14bis).

Additionally, Argentina's post-dictatorship political climate was shaped by the legacy of Peronism. Starting in the 1940s, Juan Perón, an Argentine military officer and later secretary of labor amassed support from the working class and quickly became Argentina's most popular politician. His left-wing populist, nationalist, and corporatist ideology, known as Peronism, continued to shape Argentine politics, before and after the 1976-1983 military dictatorship (Diez 2015, 51-52). Diez states that Argentina's return to democracy combined with its rich history of social mobilization driven by Peronism and the unified consensus of its people, created an environment conducive to the flourishing of civil society organizations and social movements (Diez 2015, 53).

Consequently, the post-dictatorship reconciliation and social justice-oriented Argentine political landscape was dominated by two major parties: the Justicialist Party (a working class-oriented Peronist party) and the Radical Civic Union (a liberal center-left party drawing support from the urban middle class). "Neither

party...served as an exclusive mechanism of representation for social conservative forces" (Diez 2015, 128-129). While Chile's post-dictatorship political landscape was shaped by neoliberal institutions which corresponded with social conservatism, social conservatives in Argentina were overshadowed by activists and reformers. These diverging landscapes were partially rooted in the varying influences of the Catholic Church and have shaped the contemporary religion-state relations in the two countries.

The Catholic Church in Post-Dictatorship Chile and Argentina

Following the return to democracy in Chile, the Catholic Church had a significant influence in Chilean politics. According to Haas, the Church played a leading role in calling out Pinochet's human rights abuses and fighting for democracy, thus renewing the Catholic Church's status as a key player in Chilean politics post-dictatorship (Haas 1999, 42). The Catholic Church fostered close relationships across the political spectrum in Chile, ultra-conservative and powerful catholic groups like the Opus Dei bolster social-conservatism in Chile, and the Catholic Church maintains influence over Chilean politics through its education—with most Chilean elites being educated at private catholic universities (Diez 2015, 73). Therefore, although religiosity has declined in Chile (much more than in Argentina), the Catholic Church and the Opus Dei maintain a strong influence over Chilean political and social values.

The opposite can be said about Argentina.

As previously mentioned, Argentina's post-dictatorship political landscape was dominated by the legacy of Peronism and the uplifting of secular civil society, leaving little to no room for the Church in the political sphere. Notably, Díez points out, Argentina lacks a confessional Catholic party, and organizations like the Argentine Opus Dei have largely failed to gain footing in the Argentine national discourse (Diez 2015, 55). With all of this in mind, it makes sense that Argentina's openness to progressive social movements and limited political influence of the Catholic Church would foster a political culture more open to same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. However, the question still remains; if Argentine politics is minimally influenced by Catholic groups, why do Argentines display higher levels of religiosity as mentioned in the previous analysis of World Values Survey Data?

De Facto, not De Jure, Separation of Church and State in Argentina

As mentioned earlier, the Argentine constitution includes an official endorsement of the Catholic faith, and Fox's RAS index considers Argentina to have "high" levels of "state funding of religion" (Fox 2023). While the Catholic Church receives significant financial support from Argentine government funding, the Catholic Church wields minimal influence over Argentine policy. Especially compared to Chile, the Catholic Church is practically absent from the Argentine political sphere. The combination of the World Values Survey Data and the Fox RAS data therefore implies significant dissonance between personal religiosity and the in-

fluence of that religiosity on political participation, with an apparently depoliticized Catholic Church in Argentina.

A possible explanation for this is that the Catholic Church held an "ambiguous position in terms of human rights violations [during the dictatorship years]," which caused "significant damage" to the Church's public image post-dictatorship, which Díez claims led to "lower levels of religiosity" (Diez 2015, 54). Although Díez is correct that the Catholic Church had less influence over Argentine politics, the WVS data unilaterally opposes his claim of decreased religiosity in Argentina. Instead of decreasing religiosity, the decreased influence of the Catholic Church in Argentine politics post-dictatorship did not diminish its influence over the Argentine people; instead, the Catholic Church in Argentina was arguably depoliticized. In other words, while the Catholic Church was removed from the political sphere in Argentina, the political sphere was simultaneously removed from the Catholic Church—having no impact on religiosity. While more research is needed to prove this claim, this implies that Argentine individual political views are independent of religious belief, which would account for the anomaly addressed by this paper.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the paradoxical relationship between Chilean and Argentine religiosity and stances on same-sex marriage. Though both states have similar historical and cultural backgrounds, the varying influence of the Catholic Church, Chile's neoliberal institutions, and the legacy of Peronism in Argentina

contribute to their differences today. Despite Argentina's stronger Catholic identity and constitutional favoritism towards the Catholic Church, Peronism and secular civil society have contributed to a more favorable environment for progressive social movements to thrive. In contrast, Chile's entrenched neoliberal policies align with more conservative social values. This paper challenges the assumption that higher religiosity correlates with social conservatism, highlighting the complex interplay between religion, government, and social values. However, the lack of empirical research limits definitive conclusions, so more in-depth studies are necessary to explore not only the impact of religiosity on political and social attitudes, but also other possible disconnects between religious observance and political engagement in the 21st century.

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