



Reports

Jonathan Fox, Dennis P. Petri and Ariel Zellman

Government Religion Policy and Religious Freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1990 and 2023

2026/20

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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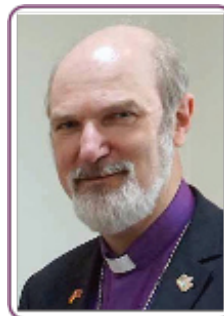
We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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This report is a reprint from: Jonathan Fox, Dennis P. Petri & Ariel Zellman (24 Jun 2026). Government Religion Policy and Religious Freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1990 and 2023. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*. DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2026.2667623

Jonathan Fox, Dennis P. Petri and Ariel Zellman

Government Religion Policy and Religious Freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1990 and 2023

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This research was supported by the Israel Science Foundation grant 828/23 and Templeton Religion Trust grant TRT-2022-31239.

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Abstract

The study of religion and politics in Latin America has traditionally emphasized the historical dominance of the Catholic Church and the region's reputation as one heavily shaped by religion, while popular and casual observers continue to assume that Western liberal democracies set the benchmark for religious tolerance. The cross-national literature on government religion policy in the region, however, remains fragmented, heavily case-based, and lacking systematic quantitative comparison. Using the Religion and State round 4 (RAS4) dataset, this study provides a longitudinal cross-national analysis of religion-state meta-policy, government religious support (GRS), government religious discrimination (GRD), government religious regulation (GRR), and societal religious discrimination (SRD) in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1990 and 2023. We find that GRS, GRD, and SRD are generally lower than in the RAS4 Western democracies comparison set analyzed in Fox and Zellman (2025), while GRR is considerably higher. These findings invite a reassessment of common assumptions about the Catholic Church's contemporary institutional grip on the state and suggest that leveling the religious playing field in a region with a historically fused Catholic-state inheritance has required more assertive state regulation of the majority religion than in Western contexts with greater institutional religious diversity.

Keywords: *Latin America, religious discrimination, religious minorities, religious regulation, religious support, religious violence, government religion policy*

This study examines freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) and government religion policy in Latin America and the Caribbean using the Religion and State round 4 (RAS4) dataset.¹ Many observers highlight the importance of the Catholic Church and religion in the region (De la Torre and Martín 2016; Levine 2012; Lynch 2012). However, when compared to patterns observed in the set of countries commonly referred to as Western democracies (or Global North democracies)—i.e. North America, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—government religious discrimination (GRD), government religious support (GRS), and societal religious discrimination (SRD) are lower in Latin America, while government religious regulation (GRR) is higher. (For detailed RAS4 findings on Western democracies see Fox and Zellman 2025.) Combined, these trends reveal a decreasing willingness by Latin American countries to support the Catholic Church and restrict religious minorities, as well as an increased willingness to limit and regulate the Church. It also indicates that religious minorities in Latin America likely enjoy reasonably higher degrees of FoRB than in Western democracies. Interestingly the regulation of majority religions is higher in Latin America than in the RAS4 Western democracies comparison set.

In this study, we explore this distinct disconnect between popular perceptions of the West as the world's most religiously free region and Latin America as one heavily influenced by religion and the Catholic Church in particular. While this Catholic influence may be historically accurate, it is not an accurate description of the current state of affairs. Our contribution is to document the patterns systematically and cross-nationally using RAS4. Accordingly, in this study, we ex-

¹ The previous round of RAS covered 1990–2014. RAS4 adds nine years of additional data. For a discussion of the RAS dataset and its data collection methodology see Fox (2011; 2019) and Fox, Finke, and Mataic (2018). For a discussion of RAS measures between 1990 and 2023 in Sub-Saharan Africa, Western democracies, and former communist states see Fox, Haynes, and Zellman (2026), Fox and Zellman (2025) and Fox, Vekovic, and Zellman (2026).

amine common assumptions of religion-state relations and FoRB in Latin America and discuss how this contrasts with the facts on the ground.

Religious Freedom and Government Religion Policy in Latin America

The study of religion and politics in Latin America has mainly been approached through four analytical lenses. First, historians of state formation examine how nineteenth-century liberal governments wrested institutional power from the Catholic Church to consolidate national sovereignty (Blancarte 2008; Gaytán Alcalá 2018). Second, political scientists and sociologists focus on interactions between Catholic hierarchies and both authoritarian and democratic regimes (Gill 1998; Levine 1981; Trejo 2012). Third, legal and sociological scholars examine laicidad and secularism and the autonomy of the political sphere from religious authority in constitutional arrangements (Blancarte 2008, 2023; Saldaña Serrano, Pérez Cuevas, and Patiño Reyes 2017). Most recently, scholars study the implications of religious pluralism as Catholic homogeneity is disrupted by the dramatic growth of Protestantism, indigenous spiritualities, and the religiously unaffiliated (De la Torre and Martín 2016; Steigenga and Cleary 2007).

Nevertheless, the study of government religion policy itself remains underdeveloped, mostly focusing on specific themes such as same-sex marriage and abortion politics (Dion and Díez 2017; Smith and Boas 2024), or specific countries (Saldaña Serrano 2017). Cross-national comparative studies are rare.

Secularism, Religion, State, and Politics

Many studies argue that secularism and secularization are important forces in Latin America. While cross-country studies exist, few are quantitative. Blancarte (2008, 2023) contrasts European-style secularism with Latin American laicidad as a mechanism to consolidate national sovereignty against corporate Catholic power. He also argues that contemporary populist leaders in the region instrumentalize religion for political ends, threatening historical secular arrangements. Gaytán Alcalá (2018) similarly demonstrates that political arrangements developed under Catholic hegemony have not kept pace with increasing religious pluralism.

These arguments are interdisciplinary. Saldaña Serrano (2017), a legal scholar, critically assesses how Mexican constitutional reforms since 1992 reshaped the legal architecture of religious freedom, revealing persistent tensions between the state's secular commitments and the effective protection of religious liberty as a fundamental right. Saldaña Serrano, Pérez Cuevas, and Patiño Reyes (2017) brought together historians, constitutional lawyers, and political scientists to evaluate the implementation of these reforms after 25 years, concluding that despite formal advances, the gap between legal guarantees and lived experience of religious freedom remains substantial.

Using a political economy approach, Gill (1998, 2001) and Trejo (2009, 2012) demonstrate that religious competition between Catholics and Protestants fundamentally reshaped both church behavior and ethnic mobilization across the region. Mantilla (2016, 2022) shows how shifting church-state relations drove the decline of Catholic parties and how political institutions structure religious mobilization in countries shaped by assertive secular regimes. Thus, while the study of religion-state relations in Latin America has been refracted through distinct

disciplinary traditions, each illuminating different facets of the phenomenon, none systematically address the full range of government religion policy.

Cross-Country Studies

Latin America's shared colonial history, religious trajectory, language, and political culture make it an ideal basis for comparative analysis. Yet dedicated cross-country quantitative studies of religious freedom and government religion policy are remarkably scarce. Single-country case studies based on comparative rather than quantitative methodology and thematic analyses are far more common.

Among these rare cross-country studies, the most significant is Gill's (1998) *Rendering unto Caesar*. Gill uses historical and statistical evidence from twelve authoritarian Latin American countries and finds that religious competition—the inroads made by evangelical Protestants among poor Catholic populations—drove Catholic bishops to champion the rights of the poor and oppose dictatorships to retain parishioners. Trejo (2009, 340) similarly found, based on original data, that “Protestant competition in traditional Roman Catholic strongholds in Mexico's indigenous regions provided Catholic bishops and priests with powerful incentives to become major providers of the social bases on which peasant indigenous protest mobilization was launched.”

More recently, Sánchez Sandoval (2025) operationalized what she calls the expansion of religious freedom through the frameworks of policy change and policy transfer in Mexico and Colombia. She classifies religious freedom into skeptical and conventional categories and proposes improvements to public policies that, as she argues, often present ambiguous problems and diffuse actions in promoting this right.

Comparative studies on Latin America have examined a wide variety of topics including the Catholic Church as a political institution (Levine 1981), religion and democratization (Mainwaring and Wilde 1989), and Evangelical political engagement (Freston 2001, 2008). Mantilla (2016), partly using quantitative tools, argues that changes in the structure of religious communities after Vatican II, rather than secularization alone, explain the decline of Catholic parties and Catholic political mobilization across Latin America. Mantilla (2022) demonstrates that religious parties in the assertive secular regimes of Mexico and Turkey are highly responsive to political institutions such as electoral laws and the structure of broader religious communities. Kloczek and Petri (2023) discuss how national-level indices of FoRB may mask significant subnational differences in religious freedom conditions that can emerge when taking a subnational approach, particularly in federally organized countries such as Brazil and Mexico.

Petri and Flores (2023) examine the impact of COVID-19 on religious regulation in Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua, adapting the religious regulation variables of the RAS Project. They found that pandemic-related restrictions on religious gatherings were applied unevenly, with authoritarian governments in Cuba and Nicaragua using public health measures as pretexts to intensify pre-existing patterns of religious control, while democratic governments in Colombia and Mexico adopted more proportionate and temporary measures.

A growing literature examines how religion shapes attitudes toward morally contentious policies, particularly abortion and same-sex marriage, and highlights the consequences of increased religious pluralism. When sexuality politics becomes salient, the impact of religiosity and evangelical affiliation on vote choice is magnified (Smith and Boas 2024). Similarly, democratic values, religiosity, and

education significantly predict support for same-sex marriage across the region (Dion and Díez 2017). González-Rostani and Morgenstern (2023), in turn, examine how the religiosity of legislators in eighteen countries correlates with their attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

Country-Specific Studies and Thematic Contributions

The bulk of scholarship on government religion policy in Latin America has been organized around specific countries or themes. Collectively, this body of work reveals several patterns. First, the historical dominance of the Catholic Church and its entanglement with colonial and post-colonial state structures has shaped the institutional framework within which religious freedom operates. Da Costa and Bidegain (2024) trace how the development of different approaches to religious pluralism has impacted religious freedom, secularization, and secularism. Petri (2022) examines the case of Costa Rica, one of the few remaining confessional states in the region, arguing that its constitutional framework for religion policy, while anomalous, has functioned without generating the conflicts that typically motivate reform.

Second, the literature on liberation theology illuminates the relationship between religious mobilization and state responses. Liberation theology's moral critique of socioeconomic structures, modernity, and capitalism and its effort to reconcile traditional Christian values with broader social science and political engagement shows how combined religious and political beliefs can influence politics (Pottenger 1989). Lynch (1991) contrasts this with Christian democracy. Berryman (1987) documents how progressive Catholic actors in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, and Nicaragua placed themselves in confrontation with state security forces, illustrating the interconnection between political freedoms and religious liberties.

Third, the growing body of scholarship on evangelical and Pentecostal political engagement reveals how religious pluralism is transforming politics in ways that bear on government religion policy (e.g. Anderson, Ramírez, and Smith 2018; Da Costa, Kerz, and Donatello 2021; Fonseca 2008; Freston 1993; Garrard-Burnett 1998). These studies collectively show that evangelical communities shape political behavior through congregational networks and moral discourses, while raising new demands for equal legal treatment from states historically structured around Catholic privilege.

Third, a distinct strand examines authoritarian contexts where religious freedom is most severely restricted, particularly in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela where governments have moved to targeted repression of religious actors perceived as independent sources of moral authority. Goldenziel (2009) applied Gill's (2008) framework to assert that there were opportunistic political reasons for the Cuban state to partially relax the regulation of religion in the 1990s. Petri (2021b) documents the subtle forms of repression experienced by Christians in Cuba, showing how the state employs administrative harassment, surveillance, and selective enforcement rather than outright prohibition. In Nicaragua, the Ortega government's confrontation with the Catholic Church, including the closure of religious institutions and the expulsion of clergy, represents an extreme case of state interference with religious institutions (Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America 2024).

Fourth, some studies expand beyond the traditional focus on church-state relations. Petri (2021a) and Petri and Glasius (2022) examine threats to religious freedom from non-state actors. In territories controlled by criminal organizations,

armed groups impose restrictions on religious practices, target religious leaders, and effectively govern religious life (Petri 2021a; Petri and Glasius 2022). Others focus on threats to religious freedom of indigenous peoples emerging from state neglect and intra-communal dynamics (Alves 2020; Petri 2023; Petri and Kloczek 2025; Reguart Segarra 2021).

Gaps and Emerging Directions

Several significant gaps emerge from this survey. First, and most conspicuously, there is no dedicated cross-country quantitative study of how governments regulate religion in Latin America. Second, there is a gap concerning religious minorities. The field's focus on the Catholic Church's relationship with the state makes declining analytical sense as the region's religious pluralism has increased. Yet the legal and social dimensions of religious freedom for religious minorities remain understudied.

A third gap lies at the intersection of constitutional law and lived experience. The constitutional dimensions of religious freedom have been addressed primarily by legal scholars and sociologists of religion rather than by political scientists engaged in comparative analysis, resulting in a fragmented literature. Also, constitutional promises of religious freedom are often not realized (Fox 2023; Petri and Fox 2025).

Fourth, there is significant disciplinary fragmentation. The insights of religious studies scholars, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and legal scholars have remained largely siloed (Da Costa and Bidegain 2024; Saldaña Serrano, Pérez Cuevas, and Patiño Reyes 2017) as have the laicidad literature (Blancarte 2008; Gaytán Alcalá 2018) and the religious competition literature (Gill 1998; Trejo 2009). Sánchez Sandoval (2025) has begun to bridge this divide by applying a public policy approach that connects legal frameworks with policy implementation, but much work remains to integrate these traditions into a coherent comparative framework for the study of government religion policy in Latin America.

Nevertheless, this literature generates a set of expectations against which our data can be evaluated. Popular and casual perceptions of the region, informed by Latin America's reputation as a bastion of Catholic culture, would lead one to expect high levels of government support for the Catholic Church, meaningful discrimination against religious minorities, and relatively limited state regulation of religious institutions, as well as FoRB conditions substantially worse than in Western democracies. Older historical scholarship on the fusion of Catholic ecclesial and state power at independence (Levine 1981; Lynch 2012) pointed in a similar direction. The contemporary scholarly literature, however, largely anticipates the opposite on several dimensions. Work on Evangelical political mobilization (Boas 2023; Da Costa, Kerz, and Donatello 2021; Freston 2008; Sánchez Sandoval 2025; Smith 2019) describes new demands for equal legal treatment from states historically structured around Catholic privilege, which in many countries have produced laws that limit Catholic privileges and institute rights for religious minorities. The laicidad literature (Blancarte 2008, 2023; Gaytán Alcalá 2018; Saldaña Serrano 2017) anticipates significant state regulation of the majority religion in several countries. And political economy accounts of religious liberty (Gill 1998, 2008) would lead us to expect that religious competition from Evangelicals has pushed states toward a more level religious playing field. A complementary institutional account further suggests that, because the Protestant Reformation bequeathed considerable institutional religious diversity to Western Europe before modern religion policies were established, while Latin

American states inherited a tightly fused Catholic-state settlement that retained significant privileges even after formal disestablishment, leveling the religious playing field in Latin America requires a more assertive state (cf. the framing in Gill 2008). A further consideration, flagged by Buckley and Mantilla (2013), is that Latin American states often have uneven capacity to regulate religion territorially and policy-wise, which may itself contribute to relatively high levels of FoRB for organized minority faiths. As the following analysis shows, several of these expectations are not borne out by the data, while others are confirmed in ways that add empirical weight to what has previously been argued only on qualitative or case-specific grounds.

Two caveats about the measurement framework are warranted before turning to the data. First, RAS4 codes legal provisions, public policy statements, and documented incidents reported in sources such as the U.S. State Department Reports on International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America, news sources, government documents, and advocacy groups focusing on religious freedom and human rights. Our reliance on them is factual rather than interpretive, and should be complemented by ethnographic and local work on lived religious freedom (cf. the critical-secular studies literature in the tradition of Asad 1993 and Mahmood 2016). Second, the categorical choices embedded in RAS4—for example, the coding of restrictions on homosexuality, abortion, and contraception as forms of government religious support, or the coding of some anticlerical policies as “hostility”—reflect a particular operationalization of religious freedom. From a laicidad perspective (Blancarte 2008, 2023), what RAS4 codes as hostility can in some cases be read as an expression of state neutrality or secular governance rather than as anti-religion per se. We retain the RAS4 coding for comparability across the sister regional studies in this series but flag this interpretive tension for readers. Third, the RAS4 inventory captures groups recognized as religious by its source documents; discrimination against secular populations, neopagan traditions, and devotees of contested figures such as Santa Muerte or Malverde are considered but may be underreported in the Societal Religious Discrimination component.

In the data analysis sections that follow, we examine five areas of analysis from the most general, government-religion meta-policy, to more detailed thematic approaches to governmental religious support (GRS), governmental religious discrimination against minorities (GRD), and governmental religious regulation (GRR).

Meta-Policy

The RAS4 project’s government religion policy (GRP) variable has 13 categories of meta-policy, eight of which were present in Latin America between 1990 and 2023. This measure is inspired by Durham (1996), who argues that both states with an official religion and those without one have a wide spectrum of practices. States with official religions range from those that make their designated religion mandatory to those that designate and to some extent support an official religion, but do not heavily enforce or interfere with its institutions. The latter is the case for all Latin American countries that had an official religion at some point between 1990 and 2023. Durham (1996) posits that states at the ends of the spectrum are characterized by lower levels of FoRB while states in the center—the supportive and accommodationist categories—will tend to have the most FoRB.

Table 1 lists the meta-religion policy of all states in the region between 1990 and 2023. Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic had this type of policy throughout the study period while Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay all disestablished the Catholic Church. All other states, as well as Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay after disestablishment had no official religion. In Latin America, these types of policies range from states that prefer a single religion over all others without designating it as the official religion to states with policies hostile to religion.

Religion-State Relations	Majority religion	
	Catholic	Protestant Extended or General Christian
Official Religion		
Active State Religion: State actively supports religion but the religion is not mandatory and the state does not dominate the official religion's institutions.	Argentina (1990–1993), Bolivia (1990–2008), Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Paraguay (1990–1991)	
No Official Religion		
Preferred Religion: While the state does not officially endorse a religion, one religion serves unofficially as the state's religion, receiving unique recognition or benefits. Minority religions all receive similar treatment to each other.	Argentina (1994–2023), Belize, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras (1990–2009, 2012–2023), Nicaragua (1990–2008), Panama, Paraguay (1992–2023), Peru Venezuela (1990–2012)	Bahamas
Multi-Tiered Preferences 1: One religion is clearly preferred by state, receiving the most benefits; there exist one or more tiers of religions that receive less benefits than the preferred religion but more than some other religions.	Bolivia (2009–2023), Colombia, Honduras (2010–2011), Nicaragua (2009–2017)	
Supportive: The state supports all religions more or less equally.	Brazil	Jamaica, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago
Accommodation: Official separation of church and state and the state has a benevolent or neutral attitude toward religion in general.		Barbados, Guyana
Separationist: Official separation of Church and state and the state is slightly hostile toward religion.	Mexico, Uruguay	
Nonspecific Hostility: While the state is hostile to religion, this hostility is at about the same level as state hostility to other types of non-state organizations. Religion is not singled out.	Cuba (1992–2023), Nicaragua (2018–2023), Venezuela (2014–2023)	
Specific Hostility: Hostility and overt persecution of religion where state ideology specifically singles out religion in general or religion is in some other way uniquely singled out for persecution.	Cuba (1990–1991)	

Table 1: Religion-State Relations in Latin America, 1990–2023

Table 1, as do all the analyses throughout this study, distinguishes between Catholic-majority countries and non-Catholic countries, most of which are majority “Protestant-extended”² countries in the Caribbean. Some countries are generally Christian with no denomination in the majority. Catholic-majority countries cluster at the ends of the meta-religion policy spectrum with almost all states supporting Catholicism (either officially or unofficially) over all other religions or states which are more generally antireligious. Cuba, Mexico, and Uruguay were anticlerical for the entire period. Two additional states were reclassified as hostile during the study period: Nicaragua in 2018 and Venezuela in 2014. Among Catholic-majority states in the region, only Brazil maintained a policy of supporting all demographically significant religions in the country on a roughly equal level.

The non-Catholic-majority states are far fewer and cluster in the center of the scale under supportive, where all religions are supported roughly equally, or accommodation, where the government maintains a policy of separation of religion and state with a positive attitude toward religion. The only exception is the Bahamas, which shows a general preference for Protestant Christianity.

While this unofficial preference for Catholicism is consistent with predictions by historical scholarship on church-state entanglement (Levine 1981; Lynch 2012), the concentration of hostile meta-policies in Mexico, Cuba, and Uruguay (Venezuela and Nicaragua are a different story) reflects the strong *laicidad* tradition that Blancarte (2008) and Gaytán Alcalá (2018) document, a pattern that casual observers focused on Catholic cultural influence tend to overlook.

Government Religious Support

RAS4’s governmental religious support (GRS) variable includes 59 types of GRS, 28 of which were present in Latin America at some point between 1990 and 2023. This category differs from meta-policy because it examines the presence of multiple specific policies that support religion. As an additive measure, it ranges in theory from 0 to 59. During the study period, GRS was observed in all Latin American states, with scores ranging from 1 in Uruguay between 2013 and 2023 to 12 in Peru in 2012. The high end of this range is relatively low by world standards (Fox 2015, 2019; Fox and Zellman 2025; Fox, Haynes, and Zellman 2026; Fox, Vekovic, and Zellman 2026).

GRS is generally correlated with meta-religion policy but can vary significantly within categories. For example, in 2023 among the fourteen states that unofficially preferred a single religion, GRS ranged between 2 in Honduras to 11 in Peru. The two states with official religions in 2023 had GRS scores of 8 (Costa Rica) and 9 (the Dominican Republic). In contrast, states that maintained separation of religion and state (the supportive and accommodation categories) ranged from 4 in Barbados to 8 in Brazil.

Figure 1 shows mean levels of GRS over time between 1990 and 2023. This analysis, as is the case with all further analyses on the study, divides Catholic-majority states into two categories: those hostile to religion and those not hostile to religion, due to significantly different government-religion policies. Venezuela

² Protestant Extended is a descriptive category used by the Religious Characteristics of States project to include denominations that are universally recognized as Protestant, e.g. Lutherans and Baptists, versus those for whom there is some albeit marginal theological definitional debate, e.g. Anglicans and Pentecostals (Brown and James 2018).

and Nicaragua are considered hostile only for those years they were in this category.

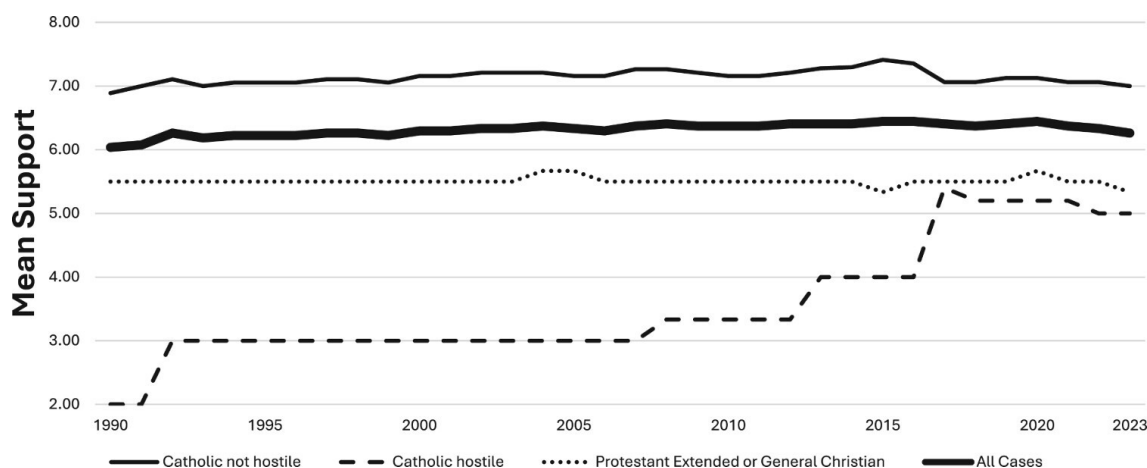


Figure 1: Governmental Religious Support in Latin America, 1990–2023

Overall, GRS rose slightly from a mean level of 6.04 in 1990 to 6.26 in 2023, considerably lower than Western Democracies where average levels were around 9.5 for the same period (Fox and Zellman 2025). GRS did increase significantly in the hostile Catholic-majority countries, but this was largely due to the addition of Nicaragua (in 2018) and Venezuela (in 2014) being added to this category. Yet, the tone of this support evolved in these two countries. Both countries began to use GRS as a form of political control, supporting only those religious actors that they considered loyal while repressing others, a tactic common in autocratic states (Fox 2015; Sarkissian 2015). For example, in 2007, Nicaraguan President Ortega set up local Citizen Power Councils (CPCs) to administer anti-poverty programs. These CPCs control or influence the ability to access government officials, receive government funds, and even hold religious services, privileges only granted to churches that do not criticize the government (USSDIRF 2007–2023).

The GRS score of 18 of the 27 countries in the region changed between 1990 and 2023, but overall remained level, showing both dynamism and stability.

As shown in Table 2, the RAS4 project divides the specific types of GRS into five categories: legislating religious precepts, institutions and laws that enforce religion, funding religion, entanglement of government and religious institutions, and other types of GRS that do not fit into the first four categories. The distribution of these types of RAS shows a considerable amount of change over time in the specific types of GRS present in the region. Legislating religious precepts is, compared to other world regions, uncommon with only five of 28 types present in the region and has been declining over time. Of the five types present in the region, three are less common in 2023 than in 1990. For example, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay all dropped restrictions on abortions. Similarly, Barbados, Belize, Chile, and Panama decriminalized homosexuality. Trinidad and Tobago decriminalized blasphemy.

Percentage of cases where this restriction is present								
	1990 or earliest post-1990				2023			
	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
<i>Legislating Religious Precepts</i>	100	100	66.7	96.3	100	93.7	40	85.2
Marriages performed by clergy have automatic civil recognition	16.7	38.9	0	29.6	16.7	43.8	0	29.6
Laws that specifically make it illegal to be a homosexual or engage in homosexual sex	50	16.7	0	22.2	33.3	0	0	7.4
Prohibitive restrictions on abortion	100	100	66.7	96.3	100	87.5	40	81.5
Restrictions on access to birth control					0	6.3	0	3.7
Blasphemy laws or any other restriction on speech about maj. rel. or rel. figures	50	11.1	0	18.5	33.3	12.5	0	14.8
<i>Institutions or Laws that Enforce Religion</i>	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Other types of government institutions or policies that enforce religion	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
<i>Funding Religion</i>	50	94.4	33.3	77.8	83.3	93.7	80	88.9
Govt. funding of rel. primary/secondary schools or rel. education in non-public schools	33.3	77.8	0	59.3	50	75	40	63
Government funding of seminary schools	0	22.2	0	14.8	0	25	0	14.8
Government funding of religious education in colleges or universities	16.7	16.7	0	14.8	16.7	18.8	20	18.5
Government funding of religious charitable organizations including hospitals	0	27.8	0	18.5	0	25	40	22.2
Official govt. positions/salaries/other funding for clergy excluding salaries of teachers	16.7	22.2	0	18.5	16.7	31.3	20	25.9
Direct general grants to religious organizations	33.3	38.9	0	33.3	33.3	31.3	20	29.6
Funding for building, maintaining, or repairing religious sites	0	61.1	33.3	44.4	0	50	60	40.7
Free air time on television/radio provided to rel. orgs.	16.7	0	0	3.7	16.7	6.3	20	11.1
Funding for religious organizations or activities other than those listed above	16.7	0	0	3.7	16.7	6.3	0	7.4
<i>Entanglement of Government and Religious Institutions</i>	0	50	33.3	37	16.7	68.7	60	55.6
Some rel. leaders given diplomatic status/passports, or immunity from prosecution	0	16.7	0	11.1	0	12.5	0	7.4
Presence of an official govt. ministry or department dealing with religious affairs	0	44.4	33.3	33.3	16.7	56.3	60	48.1
Certain govt. officials are given official positions in the state church by virtue of their office	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	6.3	0	3.7
Some or all govt. officials must meet certain rel. requirements to hold office	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	6.3	0	3.7
Other forms of entanglement between government and religious institutions					0	6.3	0	3.7
<i>Other Types of Support</i>	100	94.4	66.7	92.6	83.3	93.7	100	92.6
Religious education is present in public schools	83.3	50	0	51.9	66.7	43.8	80	48.1
Presence of official prayer sessions in public schools	50	16.7	0	22.2	50	18.8	20	25.9
Public schools segregated by rel. or separate public schools exist for members of some rel.	33.3	0	0	7.4	33.3	0	0	7.4
The presence of religious symbols on the state's flag	0	11.1	0	7.4	0	12.5	0	7.4
Religion listed on state identity cards or other govt. documents citizens must possess or fill out	0	5.6	0	3.7				
A registration process for rel. orgs. exists that is different from other nonprofits	33.3	55.6	66.7	51.9	33.3	68.8	100	66.7
Other religious prohibitions or practices that are mandatory	0	33.3	0	22.2	0	31.3	20	22.2
At least one type	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2: Governmental Religious Support in Latin America, 1990–2023

In contrast, policies that fund religion increased. Of the eleven types measured by RAS4, all but funding religious pilgrimages and governments collecting a specific religion tax were observed in the region. Six were more common in 2023 than 1990, two decreased, and one remained at the same level. Barbados, Cuba, and Guyana did not fund religion in any way in 1990 but began funding by 2023. This new funding tended to be minor. For example, Barbados began funding private religious schools to cover the costs of students who could not find placements in public schools (USSDIRF 2023).

Other common forms of GRS include the presence of a government religion department, ministry, or office (48.1 %), funding to religious private schools (63.0 %), religious education in public schools (48.1 %), and a registration process specific to religious organizations (66.7 %). All other types of GRS were less common, so the prevalence of GRS in the region is due to a wide variety of policies.

The finding that GRS is considerably lower than in Western democracies runs counter to casual assumptions that Latin American states are unusually entangled with the Catholic Church but confirms some recent scholarship arguing that the Church's institutional influence has been progressively curtailed (Blancarte 2008; Mantilla 2016). The shift toward funding religion, often multiple religions, rather than legislating religious precepts reflects the transition from confessional to pluralist governance arrangements (De la Torre and Martín 2016).

GRS is related to some conceptions of FoRB. For example, Finke (2013; Stark and Finke 2000) argues that supporting a majority religion in a manner not provided to other religions has the same result as discrimination because it makes the funded religions less expensive than others which must be funded by their congregants. This will theoretically encourage at least some people to choose the supported religion over non-supported religions.

Governmental Religious Discrimination

The RAS4 project defines governmental religious discrimination (GRD) as “restrictions placed by governments or their agents on the religious practices or institutions of religious minorities which are not placed on the majority religion” (Fox 2020, 20). Thus, GRD involved minorities being treated differently.³ More general restrictions of FoRB that include restrictions on the majority group are discussed in the GRR category. While FoRB is a contested topic, nearly all conceptions of FoRB include GRD as a violation of FoRB (Fox 2021, 2025).

RAS4 includes 59 distinct types of GRD, all coded on a scale of 0–3 based on the severity of the restrictions and to how many minorities it applies,⁴ which combine to create an additive index from 0 to 177. In practice, levels in Latin America and the Caribbean range from 0 in the Bahamas (1990–2004), Belize (1990–1996), and Suriname (1990–2022), to 60 in Cuba (2018–2020). They are

³ For a discussion of the consequences of discrimination see, Zellman and Malji (2023), and Basedau, Fox, and Zellman (2023).

⁴ (0) No restrictions. (1) Slightly restricted or the government engages in a mild form of this practice for some minorities. (2) Slightly restricted for most or all minorities, the government engages in a mild form of this practice or the activity sharply restricted for some of them or the government engages in a severe form of this activity for some of them. (3) Prohibited or sharply restricted or the government engages in a severe form of this activity for most or all minorities.

divided into restrictions on (1) religious practices, (2) religious institutions and clergy, (3) proselytizing and conversion, and (4) other restrictions.

As shown in Figure 2, GRD rose almost 17 % over time in Latin America from a mean-level of 7.44 in 1990 to 8.70 in 2023. In contrast, in Western Democracies levels rose from about 8.5 to 14.2 during the same period (Fox and Zellman 2025). Patterns differ based on the three analytical categories used in this study. Among the non-hostile states, non-Catholic-majority states engage in low and decreasing levels of GRD from a mean of 3.50 in 1990 to a mean of 3.00 in 2023. This decrease was mostly driven by policy change in Barbados. Barbados banned the practice of Obeah, an Afro-Caribbean folk religion that was considered witchcraft, from colonial days until 1998, when these laws were replaced by a new Minor Offenses Act, which does not mention Obeah (Bilby and Handler 2004).

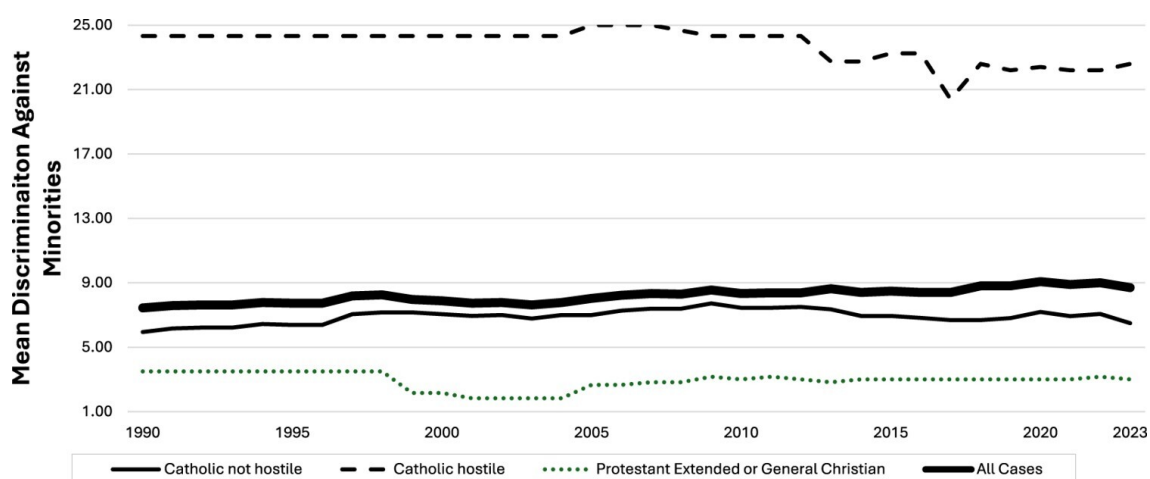


Figure 2: Governmental Religious Discrimination in Latin America, 1990–2023

Non-hostile Catholic-majority states saw a 9.4 % increase in mean-GRD from a mean-level of 5.94 to 6.50. This increase covers considerable dynamism in GRD among these countries as GRD increased in Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, and Peru yet decreased in Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay. Scores for Panama fluctuated but began and ended the study period with the same score.

Among hostile Catholic-majority states, GRD technically dropped over the study period, but this was largely driven by Nicaragua and Venezuela being added to this category in 2018 and 2014, respectively. When looking only at those three states, which were in the category for the entire study period, GRD rose slightly from a mean of 24.3 in 1990 to 24.7 in 2023.

Cuba, a communist state, stands out as engaging in the highest regional level, with GRD scores ranging from 57 to 60 during the period. Mexico ranged from 10 to 11, Nicaragua from 19 to 21, Uruguay from 3 to 5, and Venezuela scored 18 from 2014 onward.⁵ While Cuba regulates all religions, including Catholicism, its repression of non-Catholic religions, including Protestant churches, is extreme. Cuba uses a common tactic employed by authoritarian governments (Finke, Mataic, and Fox 2017; Fox 2020; Sarkissian 2015) of denying registration to many religious groups and repressing non-registered groups. The govern-

⁵ For Nicaragua and Venezuela these scores apply only to the years when they were in this category.

ment controls all printing in the country and confiscates religious publications on a regular basis. It commonly harasses and arrests religious leaders, breaks up religious services, and closes non-registered places of worship, particularly when these groups or individuals collaborate with human rights organizations. While the government monitors all religious services, this monitoring is more severe for non-Catholic and unregistered groups. Government informants are placed inside places of worship to ensure “anti-revolutionary” ideas are not preached (Cuban Pastor 2021; Cuban Student 2017; USSDIRF 2000–2023).

This raises the question of why countries generally hostile to religion would engage in GRD? One would expect them to restrict all religions rather than single out minority religions. Fox (2020) argues this dynamic is due to several causes. In ideologically anti-religious states, when these other motivations are present, this antireligious sentiment can act as an accelerant that exacerbates poor treatment of minorities. The majority religion also tends to be better established, more acceptable to the regime, and often more willing and able to cooperate with it. This argument fits well with the case of Cuba.

As shown in Table 3, 39 of the 59 specific types of GRD monitored by RAS4 were present in the region during the study period. Twenty-one of them were more common in 2023 than in 1990 and four were less common. None of them were present in a majority of Latin American countries. Thus, the ubiquitous and increasing levels of GRD in Latin America are based on a wide array of types of GRD rather than driven by a few common types.

Restrictions on religious practices were present in 18 countries in both 1990 and 2023. The highest scoring countries in 2023 in this category were all from the hostile category: Nicaragua (4), Uruguay (4), Mexico (5), and Cuba (12). In Uruguay, restrictions included multiple raids on Afro-Umbandist services in 2023 because they involved animal sacrifice, and loud drumming which led to noise complaints. Seventh Day Adventists and Jews are often required to take exams on the Sabbath. Until 2018, there were no spaces for Muslim cemeteries and Muslims had to bury their dead in coffins, which violates Islamic practices. Finally, Muslim women working in state jobs may not wear hijabs at work, even though wearing religious attire and symbols is not prohibited by law (Denuncian 2017; USSDIRF 2015–2023).

Restrictions on religious institutions and clergy were present in 17 countries in 1990 and 18 in 2023. Colombia, for example, provides tax exempt status to Catholic schools but not to other private religious schools. It requires all religious entities to register other than the Catholic Church, which is automatically recognized by law. Groups that do not accede to the 1997 Internal Public Law Agreement between the state and non-Catholic religious entities may not provide chaplains in the military, prisons, and hospitals (Prieto 2011; USSDIRF 2009–2023).

Restrictions on conversion and proselytizing were present in 13 Latin American countries in 1990 and 17 in 2023. For example, Honduran law prohibits the propagation of witchcraft or Satanism. Foreign missionaries representing such beliefs may be denied entry or deported (USSDIRF 2014). In Panama, foreign religious workers from registered non-Catholic religions can apply for visas but the requirements are substantial. They include a copy of the organization’s bylaws and hierarchy, a criminal background check, a registration certificate from the Ministry of Government, and a letter from the organization’s leader in Panama certifying that the religious worker will be employed at its place of worship (USSDIRF 2009–2023).

Percentage of cases where this restriction is present								
	1990 or earliest post-1990				2023			
	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
<i>Restrictions on Religious Practices</i>	66.7	44.4	100	55.6	66.7	62.5	80	66.7
Restrictions on public observance of rel. services, festivals/holidays/Sabbath	33.3	11.1	33.3	18.5	16.7	6.2	60	18.5
Restrictions on private observance of rel. services, festivals/holidays/Sabbath	16.7	0	33.3	7.4	16.7	0	20	7.4
Min. required to engage in secular activities (e.g. school or tests) on rel. holidays/Sabbath	0	11.1	33.3	11.1	0	12.5	20	11.1
Minorities in the military/police/schools must participate in ceremonies/prayers of another rel.	16.7	11.1	0	11.1	33.3	12.5	0	14.8
Forced observance of rel. laws of another group in matters other than those listed above	0	5.4	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	20	7.4
Other restrictions dietary laws or access to food meeting dietary requirements	0	11.1	0	7.4	0	12.5	0	7.4
Restrictions on the ability to write, publish, or disseminate religious publications	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	40	11.1
Restrictions on the ability to import religious publications	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on access to religious publications for personal use					0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on rel. radio or TV broadcasts or on establishing rel. radio or TV stations	0	5.6	66.7	11.1	0	0	40	7.4
Restrictions on observance of rel. laws concerning marriage and divorce	0	5.6	0	3.7				
Restrictions on the observance of rel. laws concerning burial	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Other restrictions on wearing rel. symbols/clothing by public employees or in schools	16.7	5.6	33.3	11.1	33.3	0	20	11.1
Restrictions on wearing rel. symbols/clothing other than by public employees or in schools	16.7	5.6	0	7.4	16.7	12.5	0	11.1
Other restrictions on religious practices	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	18.7	0	11.1
<i>Restrictions on Religious Institutions and Clergy</i>	33.3	77.8	33.3	63	33.3	75	80	66.7
Restrictions on building, repairing and/or maintaining places of worship	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	40	7.4
Restrictions on renting or leasing spaces for worship or other religious purposes	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on access to existing places of worship	0	17.7	0	11.1	0	18.7	60	22.2
Restrictions on formal religious organizations	16.7	0	33.3	7.4	16.7	12.5	60	22.2
Minority rel. orgs. are taxed in a manner not applied to the majority religion	0	16.7	0	11.1	0	31.2	0	18.5
Restrictions on foreign funding for minority rel. orgs. not placed on the majority	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on the ordination of and/or access to clergy					0	0	40	7.4
Minority rel. but not maj. rel. must register in order to be legal or receive special tax status	0	72.2	33.3	48.1	0	68.7	40	48.1
Restricted access of min. clergy to jails compared to the maj. rel.	16.7	33.3	33.3	29.6	16.7	18.7	30	22.2
Restricted access of min. clergy to military bases compared to maj. rel.	0	22.2	0	14.8	0	12.5	20	11.1
Restricted access of min. clergy to hospitals/public facilities compared to maj. rel.	0	11.1	0	7.4	0	12.5	0	7.4
Restrictions on rel. orgs. engaging in charitable, medical, or humanitarian activities					0	0	20	3.7
Other restrictions on religious institutions or clergy	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
<i>Restrictions on Conversion and Proselytizing</i>	33.3	38.9	66.7	49.7	33.3	68.7	80	63
Forced conversions of people who were never members of the majority religion	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Efforts/campaigns to convert members of min. rel. to maj. rel. that do not use force	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	12.5	20	11.1
Restrictions on proselytizing by permanent residents of state to maj. religions.	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.3	20	7.4
Restrictions on proselytizing by permanent residents of state min. rel.	16.7	11.1	33.3	14.8	16.7	12.5	20	14.8

Percentage of cases where this restriction is present								
	1990 or earliest post-1990				2023			
	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All	Prot. / Christ.	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
Restrictions on proselytizing by foreign clergy or missionaries	16.7	33.3	33.3	29.6	16.7	56.2	60	48.1
Other restrictions on conversion and proselytizing					0	6.3	0	3.7
<i>Other Restrictions</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>22.2</i>	<i>66.7</i>	<i>33.3</i>	<i>66.7</i>	<i>31.2</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>48.1</i>
Restrictions on the running of religious schools and/or religious education in general	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	6.2	20	7.4
Mandatory education in the majority religion	0	11.1	0	7.4	0	12.5	20	11.1
Arrest/detention/harassment of rel. figures for activities other than proselytizing	16.7	0	66.7	11.1	0	0	80	14.8
Severe and willful failure to protect rel. min. against violence or to punish the perpetrators	0	0	66.7	7.4	0	6.2	60	14.8
State surveillance of min. rel. activities not placed on the activities of the majority	33.3	0	33.3	11.1	33.3	0	40	14.8
Declaration of some minority religions dangerous or extremist sects	0	11.1	0	7.4	16.7	12.5	0	11.1
Anti-minority rel. propaganda in govt. publications or govt. officials	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	6.2	60	14.8
Anti-minority incitement/activities by/in public school teachers/administrators/textbooks	16.7	0	0	3.7	16.7	0	0	3.7
Other types of restrictions on religious institutions, activities or beliefs not listed above	16.7	0	33.3	7.4	16.7	6.2	20	11.1
At least one type	66.7	94.4	100	88.9	100	100	100	100

Table 3: Specific Types of Governmental Religious Discrimination Latin America, 1990–2023

Nicaragua, particularly since 2018, engages in several of the other types of GRD covered by RAS4. The government arrests and harasses evangelical Church members perceived as being anti-government. This includes abductions, church closures, and heightened surveillance. Since 2018, around 60 evangelical pastors either self-exiled due to threats or were directly forced into exile. The government monitors sermons and attendees of all religions but particularly non-Catholics. Also, anti-religious minority rhetoric has been prominently propagated by the ruling party (Dell’orto 2025; Latin America News 2024; USSDIRF 2018–2023).

The field has largely focused on the Catholic Church as the central actor in religion-state relations, leaving the treatment of religious minorities understudied. Yet RAS4 data make clear that GRD is not a marginal phenomenon: it is present in nearly all countries and is increasing in many of them.

Regulation of the Majority Religion or All Religions

RAS4’s governmental religious regulation (GRR) indicator focuses on government regulations, restrictions, and control measures targeting the majority religion and often all religions in a country. Potential motives for GRR include restricting religions’ political power, preventing disorder and violence, anti-religious secular ideologies, and enforcing the majority religions’ doctrinal orthodoxy (Fox 2015, 105–107; Grim and Finke 2011, 207–212; Sarkissian 2015). Thus, GRR is usually present in both governments that support and loathe reli-

gion. RAS4 divides the 52 specific types of GRR it measures into four categories: restrictions on (1) religion's political role, (2) religious institutions, (3) religious practices, and (4) other types of restrictions or regulation. These are all coded on a scale of 0–3 based on severity.⁶ While in theory aggregate levels can range between 0 and 156, in Latin America and the Caribbean between 1990 and 2023, levels ranged from 0 in Argentina (1990–2018) and the Dominican Republic (1990–2021) to 52 in Cuba (2020–2021).

Not all conceptions of FoRB include GRR as a violation of FoRB. Some conceptions mandate government neutrality which allows restricting all religions in the same way. However, most argue that any restrictions on religious practices or institutions, regardless of whether they are applied equally, violate FoRB (Fox 2021).

As shown in Figure 3, mean GRR rose about 16.1 % during the study from 7.59 in 1990 to 8.81 in 2023. Latin American GRR was considerably higher than that of Western democracies, where GRR rose from 4.9 to 5.9 during the study period (Fox and Zellman 2025). Non-Catholic majority states had the lowest levels of GRR, and Catholic-majority states hostile to religion had the highest. GRR increased between 1990 and 2023 in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Paraguay, Suriname, and Venezuela. It decreased only in Haiti and Mexico, though the drop in Mexico was substantial.

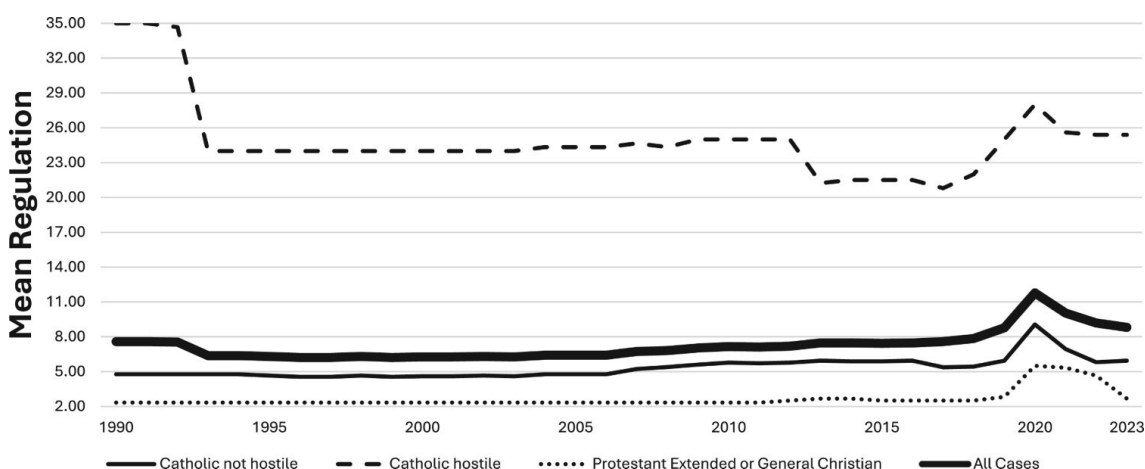


Figure 3: Governmental Religious Regulation in Latin America, 1990–2023

The period saw two major shifts. The first was a drop from a score of 50–18 in Mexico due to a 1992 revision of Mexico's heavily anti-clerical 1917 constitutional regime. In 1992, it became possible for religious organizations to obtain legal status and own limited property, though the government still owns and pays for the maintenance of all pre-1992 religious property. The government lifted caps on the number of foreign priests allowed in the country. Priests were granted the right to vote but still cannot be elected to office. The government also allowed private religious education. The government also lifted a formal ban on the public display of faith, though this provision was rarely enforced before 1992. Many restrictions still remain in place. For example, religious meetings

⁶ (0) No restrictions. (1) Slight restrictions including practical restrictions or the government engages in this activity rarely and on a small scale. (2) Significant restrictions including practical restrictions or the government engages in this activity occasionally and on a moderate. (3) The activity is illegal or the government engages in this activity often and on a large scale.

outside of licensed places of worship require a permit and religious organizations may not become involved in political activities nor own or operate a television or radio station (Golden 1991; USSDIRF 2009–2023).

This finding is perhaps the most striking divergence from what popular perceptions of the region would lead one to expect. Older scholarship on Latin America emphasized the Catholic Church’s historic institutional power and its ongoing cultural influence (Levine 2012; Lynch 2012), although, as we note in the theory section, more recent work already anticipates assertive state regulation of the majority religion. Data from RAS4 show that governments in Latin America regulate the majority religion more heavily than their counterparts in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand, and that this regulation has increased over the study period. The second major development was a spike in GRR due to COVID between 2019 and 2022, mostly involving temporary closures of places of worship and restrictions on public gatherings including worship and other religious ceremonies. This is similar to patterns of a “COVID spike” in GRR observed elsewhere across the world (Fox and Haynes 2025; Fox and Zellman 2025; Fox, Haynes, and Zellman 2026; Fox, Veković, and Zellman 2026).

As shown in Table 4, 42 of the 52 types of GRR were observed in the region at some point between 1990 and 2023. Of these, 23 became more common and seven less common during this period. Restrictions on religion in politics were common in Catholic-majority states, whether or not they were hostile to religion. For example, Costa Rica’s constitution prohibits Catholic clergy, but not non-Catholic clergy, from serving as president, vice president, cabinet members, and supreme court justices. It also bans all clergy from engaging in political propaganda. El Salvador’s constitution similarly prohibits clergy of all religions from serving in political office, belonging to political parties, or engaging in political propaganda.

Percentage of cases where this restriction is present

	1990 or earliest post-1990				2023			
	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
<i>Restrictions on Religion’s Political Role</i>	16.7	61.1	66.7	51.9	16.7	50	80	48.1
Restrictions on religious political parties	0	11.1	66.7	14.8	0	12.5	60	18.5
Restrictions on trade associations or other civil associations being affiliated with a religion	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	0	3.7
Restrictions on clergy holding political office	16.7	50	66.7	44.4	16.7	43.7	60	40.7
Restrictions or monitoring of sermons by clergy for political content	0	0	66.7	7.4	0	6.2	60	14.8
Restrictions on clergy/rel. orgs. engaging in political speech/propaganda/activity	0	16.7	66.7	18.5	0	25	60	25.9
Restrictions on rel. orgs. clearly due to their political activities, speech or affiliations	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	0	80	14.8
Restrictions on religious political advocacy or lobby groups	0	0	66.7	7.4	0	0	40	7.4
<i>Regulation of Religious Institutions</i>	16.7	33.3	66.7	33.3	16.7	43.7	80	44.4
Restrict/harass maj. rel. members/orgs. not part of the state recognized framework	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	6.2	60	14.8
Restrictions on establishing rel. orgs. whose primary purpose is providing rel. services	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on establishing special rel. communities such as monasteries/rel. orders	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on establishing rel. NGOs other than those listed above					0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on building, leasing, repairing, and/or maintaining places of worship	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	20	7.4

Percentage of cases where this restriction is present								
	1990 or earliest post-1990				2023			
	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All	Prot. / Christ	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
Restrictions on access to places of worship	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	40	7.4
Foreign religious organizations are required to have a local sponsor or affiliation	16.7	11.1	0	11.1	16.7	12.5	0	11.1
Restrictions on the foreign funding of religious organizations	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	40	7.4
Heads of religious organizations (e.g. Bishops) must be citizens of the state	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	12.5	0	7.4
Practicing clergy other than heads of rel. orgs. must be citizens of the state	0	11.1	33.3	11.1	0	12.5	0	7.4
The government appoints/approves/takes part in clerical appointments	0	11	0	7.4	0	6.7	20	7.4
Govt. legislates/influences the internal workings/organization of rel. institutions/organizations	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	6.2	40	11.1
Laws governing the state rel. are passed by the govt. or require the govt. approval					0	0	20	3.7
Govt. actively monitors rel. orgs. and/or requires periodic reports on their activities	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	6.7	20	7.4
Other restrictions on religious institutions	0	0	33.3	3.7				
Regulation of Religious Practices	0	33.3	100	33.3	0	25	100	33.3
Restrictions on the public observance of rel. practices, including rel. holidays/Sabbath	0	5.6	0	3.7	0	6.2	20	7.4
Restrictions on children participating in religious activities	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on religious activities outside of recognized religious facilities	0	0	66.7	7.4	0	0	40	7.4
Restrictions on the publication or dissemination of written religious material	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
Restrictions on rel. radio or TV broadcasts or on establishing rel. radio or TV stations	0	5.6	66.7	11.1	0	0	80	11.1
People are arrested for religious activities	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	40	7.4
Restrictions on rel. public gatherings that are not placed on other types of public gatherings	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	40	7.4
Restrictions on public display of religious symbols	0	0	33.3	3.7				
Conscientious objectors to military service are not allowed alternative service and are prosecuted	0	22.2	0	14.8	0	12.5	0	7.4
Other restrictions on religious practices					0	6.2	0	7.4
<i>Other Regulation of Religion</i>	<i>83.3</i>	<i>61.1</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>70.4</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>75</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>85.2</i>
Arrest/detention/ harassment of rel. figures/officials/members of religious parties	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	80	18.5
Restrictions on public religious speech	0	0	33.3	3.7	16.7	0	20	7.4
Restrictions on religious-based hate speech	33.3	16.7	0	18.5	33.3	43.7	0	33.3
Restrictions on rel. orgs. engaging in charitable, medical, or humanitarian activities					0	6.2	20	7.4
Govt. controls/influences the instructors or content of rel. education in public schools	0	5.6	33.3	7.4	0	6.2	20	7.4
Govt. controls/influences the instructors/content of rel. education outside public schools	16.7	5.6	0	7.4	16.7	6.2	20	11.1
Govt. restricts/controls/influences the instructors or content of education of clergy					16.7	0	0	3.7
Govt. regulates/restricts traveling outside of the country for rel. ed., clergy training	0	0	33.3	3.7	0	0	20	3.7
State ownership of some religious property or buildings	16.7	27.7	33.3	25.9	16.7	25	0	18.5
Other	16.7	22.2	33.3	22.2	16.7	25	60	29.6
At least one type	84.3	88.9	100	88.9	100	100	100	100

Table 4: Specific Types of Governmental Religious Regulation in Latin America, 1990–2023

Regulation of political institutions and clergy is less common and was present in nine Latin American countries in 1990 and 12 in 2023. For example, Haiti requires heads of religious organizations to be citizens in order to register (Pendergrass 2013). Similarly, Peru's 1980 Concordat with the Catholic Church requires that resident Bishops and Archbishops be Peruvian citizens (Concordat Watch 1980).

Regulations on the religious practices of the majority religion were also uncommon and were present in nine countries in the region in both 1990 and 2023. Nicaragua provides an extreme example. Following the violently suppressed protests in 2018 in Nicaragua, the government began denying permits for public religious acts such as Stations of the Cross, local patron saint processions, and vigils. In 2023, the government banned all independent outdoor worship and religious processions (USSDIRF 2018–2023).

Societal Discrimination

RAS4 defines societal religious discrimination (SRD) as “societal actions taken against religious minorities by members of a country’s religious majority who do not represent the government” (Fox 2020, 26). FoRB is not determined only by government policy. Members of society can significantly impinge on the religious freedoms of members of religious minorities as well as members of the majority, though this analysis focuses on restrictions placed on minorities.

Unlike GRS, GRD, and GRR, which, as government policies, tend to be stable from year to year with only periodic shifts, SRD is often volatile and sporadic and can occur in some years and not others. Accordingly, in this study, we focus mostly on whether a specific type of SRD occurred at any time between 1990 and 2023 in a country. The SRD measure includes 34 specific types, with each individual type measured on a scale of 0–3, creating a score that ranges from 0 to 102, but in practice ranges from 0 in 14 countries (the Bahamas, Belize, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela) for most, but not all, years to 22 in Mexico in 2003.

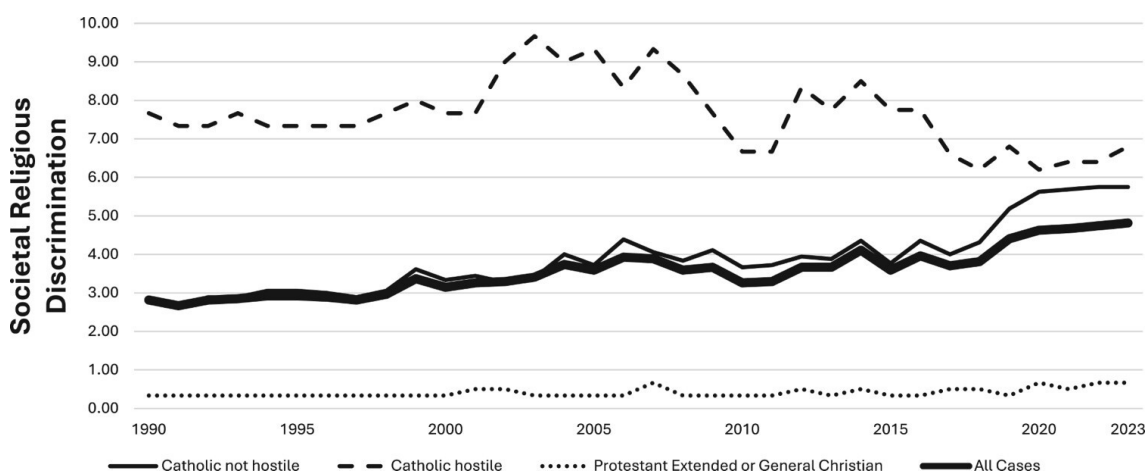


Figure 4: Societal Religious Discrimination in Latin America, 1990–2023

As presented in Figure 4, mean SRD increased by about 71.2 percent, rising from 2.81 in 1990 to 4.81 in 2023. This was much lower than Western democracies where SRD rose from 5.5 to 12.5 during the same period (Fox and Zellman 2025). There was very little SRD in non-Catholic-majority states. Among Catholic-majority states, SRD was much higher in those countries hostile to religion. All countries experienced some SRD at some point between 1990 and 2023.

Table 5 shows the prevalence of the 33 types of SRD, out of a possible 34, that are present in the region. Economic discrimination was present in 14 Latin American countries at some point during the study period. The most common form was discrimination in the workplace. This type of SRD was present in Haiti against three different minorities: voodoo practitioners claim that societal attitudes against them disadvantage their opportunities for advancement; Seventh-day Adventists report difficulties securing employment because they cannot work on Saturdays; Muslims also report discrimination when seeking jobs (USS-IRF 2002, 2018).

Any time between 1990 and 2023				
	Prot. / Chris	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
<i>Economic Discrimination</i>	50	50	60	51.9
Instances of societal economic discrimination against min. rel. in the workplace	50	25	60	37
Organized boycotts of min. businesses /denial of min. access to businesses, etc.	0	18.7	20	14.8
Discrimination in housing	0	12.5	0	7.4
Other forms of economic discrimination	0	18.7	0	11.1
<i>Speech Acts</i>	33.3	75	80	66.7
Anti-rel. min. propaganda, articles, or shows in mainstream private media	16.7	62.5	60	51.9
Overt anti-rel. min. rhetoric from members of the maj. rel. clergy	0	18.8	60	22.2
Presence of anti-religious rhetoric in political campaigns or political party propaganda	16.7	37.5	20	29.6
Dissemination of publications against religious minorities	0	31.2	49	25.9
Other types of speech acts against minorities	0	6.2	0	3.7
<i>Property Crimes</i>	33.3	81.2	100	74.1
Vandalism against rel. property, e.g. places of worship, community centers, schools and cemeteries	33.3	56.2	100	59.3
Vandalism against other minority-owned property, e.g. businesses or homes	0	31.2	60	29.6
Anti-religious graffiti	0	62.5	60	48.1
Other types of nonviolent property crimes				
<i>Non-Violent Harassment (Including "Verbal Attacks" directly to the Victim)</i>	16.7	75	80	63
Harassment of clergy, which does not reach the level of violence	0	31.2	0	18.5
Harassment of proselytizers that does not reach the level of violence	0	12.5	49	14.8
Harassment of converts away from the maj. rel. which does not reach the level of violence	0	7.2	20	7.4
Harassment of other members of rel. min. which does not reach the level of violence	16.7	62.5	80	55.6
Organized demonstrations and public protests against religious minorities	0	18.7	40	18.5
Other types of nonviolent harassment	0	6.1	0	3.7

Any time between 1990 and 2023				
	Prot. / Chris	Catholic not Hostile	Catholic Hostile	All
<i>Violence</i>	50	75	80	70.4
Bomb threats	16.7	12.5	20	14.8
Other threats of violence	0	56.2	60	44.4
Physical violence targeted specifically at clergy	0	43.7	20	29.6
Physical violence targeted specifically against proselytizers	0	12.5	20	11.1
Physical violence targeted specifically against those who converted away from maj. rel.	0	0	20	3.7
Physical violence against other individual members of a religious minority	0	43.7	60	37
Large-scale violence against the rel. min. e.g. rioting, clashes, targeting entire communities	0	25	20	18.5
Lethal violence against any member of minority religions due to their religious affiliation	16.7	56.2	40	44.4
Arson, bombing, or concerted attacks against religious property	16.7	56.2	60	48.1
Arson, bombing, or attacks against min. owned property, e.g. businesses or homes	0	31.2	60	29.6
Other types of violence	0	6.2	0	3.7
<i>Other</i>	33.3	56.2	20	44.4
Efforts to deny access to / close religious sites including places of worship	0	25	20	18.5
Efforts to prevent places of worship or other rel. sites from being built/opened/rented	0	7.2	20	7.4
Expulsion or harassment so severe that it leads to significant exodus from a town, region	0	18.3	20	14.8
Other relevant acts against minority religions	33.3	37.5	20	33.3
At least one type	100	100	100	100

Table 5: Specific Types of Societal Religious Discrimination in Latin America, 1990–2023

RAS4 defines *speech acts* as “public anti-minority speech by prominent individuals in society. They do not include speech in private or social media statements, except those by extremely prominent figures which are clearly intended for public consumption” (Fox and Zellman 2025, 129). Many speech acts are against Jews. For example, in Argentina television journalists such as Santiago Cuneo promoted conspiracy theories regarding Jews (Times of Israel 2018). In 2020, television journalist Tomás Méndez associated the origin of the COVID-19 virus with “the world’s wealthiest people born in the United States and Israel” during his program *Federal Journalism* (USSDIRF 2020). After a Jewish prosecutor who was investigating the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center was murdered in 2015, posters in the Villa Crespo neighborhood of Buenos Aires appeared saying “The only good Jew is a dead Jew. [Special Prosecutor] Nisman is a good Jew” (Times of Israel 2015). In 2023, police raided and closed a makeshift bookstore in Buenos Aires that published and sold Nazi, anti-Semitic material and Holocaust denial materials (Reuters 2023).

Property crimes against religious minorities occurred in 20 Latin American countries. In Brazil, Afro-Brazilian Spiritists experienced several incidents of vandalism against their places of worship as well as targeting religious objects such as statues (Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America 2023). In Chile, there were multiple incidents against Jews including vandalism and graffiti on Jewish

places of worship, cemeteries, community centers, and private homes (USS-DIRF 2015–2023).⁷

Nonviolent harassment of religious minorities occurred in 17 countries in the region. In Ecuador in 2023, Evangelical leaders reported that a dozen churches closed in Guayaquil due to extortion from criminal gangs. They said gangs demanded payments from pastors for permission to hold religious services (USS-DIRF 2023).

Violence was common and present during the study period in 19 countries. In Guatemala, there have been multiple incidents of violence against Mayan Animagists, including lethal incidents. For example, in 2020, Domingo Choc Che was accused of “witchcraft,” then tortured, burned, and murdered (Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America 2023). In 2022, a Mayan spiritual guide and her daughter were accused of witchcraft and kidnapped by community leaders in El Estor, Izabal who then set their home on fire (Hasegan 2022).

The SRD findings point to a significant gap in the existing literature, which focuses overwhelmingly on state actors. While forms of SRD such as property crimes and anti-minority violence are less common than in the West, they are present, rising, and understudied.

Conclusions

While religion remains prominent in Latin America and increasing on all four measures—GRS, GRD, GRR, and SRD—levels of all of these measures other than GRR are lower than found in the Western democracies comparison set of Fox and Zellman (2025). Thus, this is a region where treatment of religious minorities is better than the West, a region often perceived as more ideologically liberal, secular, and religiously tolerant than Latin America. Similarly, anticlerical measures to regulate the majority religion are more common in Latin America than in the West, in contrast to common perceptions of the Church’s influence in the region.

Some important patterns include the distinctions between the anticlerical policies in states such as Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Nicaragua and the other Catholic-majority states as well as the fact that non-Catholic-majority states were generally less entangled with religion. Also, despite being lower than in other world regions, particularly Western democracies, GRD is increasing in the region, raising concerns for FoRB.

Finally, despite assumptions in the literature that the Catholic Church is particularly influential in Latin America, our findings show that governments in Latin America regulate majority religions far more than those in the West and this regulation has increased over the study period. This empirical finding both increases concerns over FoRB in the region and suggests that a reevaluation of stereotypes of the relationship between the Catholic Church and government in the region.

Taken together, these findings invite a reassessment of several assumptions that have shaped the study of religion and politics in Latin America. The literature has rightly emphasized the Catholic Church’s historical role in shaping institutional arrangements across the region, and our findings confirm that government support for Catholicism and discrimination against religious minorities remain present and are in fact increasing. However, as we note, comparisons with West-

⁷ For a broader discussion of discrimination against Jews see Fox and Topor (2021).

ern democracies demonstrate that the region is less dominated by its Churches than the West. Our findings reveal a region where the legacy of church-state conflict has left states more willing to regulate the majority religion than to privilege it, and where FoRB conditions for minorities, while a genuine and growing concern, compare more favorably to the West than is commonly assumed.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the role of non-state actors in shaping religious freedom conditions in the region has been understudied. The present data suggest it deserves considerably more attention. Future research would benefit from examining not only the political determinants of the rising GRD trend in non-hostile states, but also the intersection of non-state actors, criminal governance, and FoRB that the field has only begun to address.

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Imprint

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