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Healing the Nation: Portrayals of Democracy in Official Social Media Profiles of Igreja Universal during
the Election of Bolsonaro in 2018

By

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ABSTRACT

In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil with the decisive support of Pentecostal denominations, such as Igreja Universal. Bolsonaro became known in the international media as an example of the possible rise of what was then called global authoritarian populism.

Previously, debates in the sociological literature of Brazilian Pentecostalism emphasized the nature of its political participation either as an integral part of the re-democratization process (Campos 2005; Chesnut 1997; Freston 1993, 1995), or as an index of structural sociopolitical limitations (Baptista 2009; Souza 2012). The role of Pentecostalism in the 2018 elections provides valuable data to test some of the previous conclusions made in this discussion about the consequences of Pentecostal participation in politics. The data used was collected from the official social media profiles of Igreja Universal in 2018. It was then coded based on the theoretical alternatives established by the literature. Using this data, I clarified shifting understandings of Brazilian democracy in the church's online political rhetoric. Ultimately, I created the term "*status quo radicalism*", which allowed for a quick and smooth transition between moderate right to authoritarian right-wing endorsements.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, far-right candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected president of Brazil with 55,13% of the valid votes in the run-offs of the national elections. Only two years after the election of Donald Trump in the United States, Bolsonaro was cast by international media as yet another iteration of the global rise to power of authoritarian populism and the extreme-right wing.

Bolsonaro's presidential campaign included explicit nostalgic references to the 1964-1985 military regime and its torturers, advocated for police violence as the preferred method of public safety, proposed higher budget allocation for the military and the police forces, defended the economic exploitation of the Amazon's mineral reserves and offered steep opposition against left-wing politics, particularly the Workers Party (PT) and the LGBT movement. All under the guise of fighting systemic corruption within the established political order.

Bolsonaro was a former low-rank Army official during re-democratization, eventually rising to Congress with the help of his faithful Rio de Janeiro base of mostly lower-rank military and police forces personnel. He remained a mostly isolated, far-right congressman in various small center-right parties for 28 years starting in 1991, shortly after the end of the Brazilian military dictatorship, until becoming president in 2018. Among his most enthusiastic voters in 2018 were Brazilian Evangelicals, a religious group that helped to break Catholic religious monopoly by growing to a third of the Brazilian population, with proportional political representation in Congress. Polling data at the time showed Bolsonaro's support among Evangelicals to be proportionally higher than that among Catholics or non-religious people, in a tight race. This coalition between authoritarian right-wing politicians and Evangelicals formed in 2018 resonates with some aspects of the military regime of 1964-1985, when Evangelicals started to rise to prominence with military support in opposition to Catholic leadership.

To understand the influence of Pentecostal churches on Bolsonaro’s election in 2018, I decided to analyze shifts in the political rhetoric of Igreja Universal, the second biggest Pentecostal church in Brazil, on its official social media pages between the first and second rounds of the presidential election of that year. Polls taken during the 2018 campaign, exemplified by Table 1, consistently suggested widespread support for Bolsonaro, a militaristic figure who publicly celebrates the dictatorship era. I chose to look at Igreja Universal not only because of its numerical representation but also due to its large media representation—it owns, either de jure or de facto, various mass media channels, including the second biggest TV channel in the country, innumerable radio stations, and a publishing house. It is present all over the Brazilian territory, with a centralized organization, but has its historical roots in the major Southeastern cities Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Igreja Universal and its retired bishop Marcos Pereira also lead a political party, Partido Republicano Brasileiro (PRB), to which the mayor of Rio de Janeiro at the time of Bolsonaro’s election, another retired bishop of its ranks, belonged.

Table 1 – Voting intentions in 2018 by religious background		
Proportion (%)	Religion	
	Catholics	Protestants
Total Electorate	55	31
1st Round		
Jair Bolsonaro	29	40
Dilma Rousseff	25	15
Run-off		
Jair Bolsonaro	46	60
Dilma Rousseff	40	25
Datafolha (2018)		

Table 1

Demonstrations by the coalition between Evangelicals and Bolsonaro started in 2011, when Bolsonaro called a rally on Congress around what was known as the “Kit-Gay” controversy. At the time, activists in the LGBTQ+ movement were discussing educational materials about sexual orientation with the Ministry of Education. Bolsonaro, allied with the Evangelical Committee in Congress, framed the project as sexual indoctrination for children. Not surprisingly, the LGBTQ+ movement and the defense of children remained major talk points for Evangelical political candidates, especially those allied to Bolsonaro.

The far-right political movement organized around Bolsonaro’s 2018 election was characterized by more than just so-called moral issues. Domestically, Bolsonaro’s candidacy followed a long period of national political instability. With the fall of the international commodity prices that had fueled a decade-long decrease in economic inequality under the Workers Party (PT) government of President Luiz Inacio “Lula” da Silva, his political successor Dilma Rousseff (also PT) saw herself in troubled waters. In 2013, ignited by the rise of public transportation fees in numerous cities around the country, waves of mass protests (later named “June Journeys”) broke out, bringing millions of people to the streets. In 2014, while leading Operation Car Wash, former Federal Judge Sergio Moro uncovered a multi-billion embezzlement scheme involving the state-owned oil company Petrobras which incriminated multiple Workers’ Party officials. In 2016, after other mass protests asking for her removal from office, Dilma Rousseff was impeached and removed from office by Congress under the Fiscal Responsibility Law, accused of using state-owned banks to hide national debt. Former president Lula was arrested on April 7th, 2018 by Operation Car Wash, five months before the elections. Fighting against corruption, branded under the endorsement of Sergio Moro and Operation Car Wash, completes the picture of Bolsonaro’s 2018 coalition.

Some researchers of the Pentecostal growth in Latin America, including Andrew Chesnut (1997), Paul Freston (1993, 1995) and Leonildo Silveira Campos (2005), while acknowledging wide collaboration with authoritarian regimes during the 1970s and 1980s, understood the collaboration as efforts to maintain these religious institutions afloat amidst intense political conflicts. After analyzing Brazilian Pentecostal churches already immersed in the new democratic institutions, these authors understood their clientelist practices and involvement with secular institutions mechanistically. For them, Pentecostal clientelism was a new iteration of a widespread political culture, ultimately broadening Brazilian political participation. On the other hand, Saulo Baptista (2009) and Jesse Souza (2012) saw the growth of Pentecostal political participation as evidence of a distinctly post-colonial modernization with conservative tendencies, originating from deep social fissures inherited from a slave economy and extreme land ownership inequality.

Under the lens of new data available after 2018, I argue that Pentecostal churches adapted to and diversified the political and religious landscape of a re-democratized Brazil. At the same time, the data also support the thesis that chronic post-colonial social tensions offer challenges to Brazilian democratic projects, which often end up legitimating the intervention of the military, as shown by José Murilo de Carvalho (2012, 2019). In fact, I believe that Brazilian Pentecostalism is one of the most clearly distinguishable venues in which what I call a consciousness of “*status-quo radicalism*”, characteristic of conservative modernization, might be rhetorically articulated.

My objective in this research project is to understand the rhetorical changes between the first round of the 2018 national election and the run-offs, given that Igreja Universal switched their endorsement from a center-right candidate to the extreme right-wing candidate Bolsonaro during that period. By systematizing how Igreja Universal made sense of the elections, especially after

their endorsement, I hope to clarify how Brazilian Pentecostalism relates more broadly to the country's political institutions and to authoritarianism. Throughout this research project, I developed a set of keywords related to the phenomena at hand, then researched those keywords on the official Facebook and YouTube profiles of Igreja Universal. I then collected the media pieces that directly mentioned politics, coded the content collected according to the themes and theoretical alternatives being explored, and finally wrote and compared memos systematizing my findings from each piece.

The increased participation of Pentecostals in Brazilian society was reflected in the unabated nominal support for democracy and established political institutions on Igreja Universal's social media pages during the two rounds of the election. Yet Universal's self-understood privileged role in healing and liberating the people determined the character of their hopes for analogous importance in democratic representation, often in Evangelical triumphalist tones. This creates a conundrum, in which competing social movements, or even the protection of individual interests, are understood as threats to the health of the community. This position allows for the alternation between a stable but still idealistic center-right position, characteristic of governing coalitions as in 2014 and the first-round of 2018 elections, and authoritarianism, when the participation of a boiling civil society threatens their hopes of a conservative modernization.

This finding complicates the notion of a stable assimilation of Brazilian Pentecostalism to a liberal democratic consensus. In that sense, Igreja Universal would simply be a rational player instrumentally mobilizing institutional resources for money, power and influence for its individual goals and aims, that is still ultimately participating on a level playing field. Some perspectives would even interpret their inclusion in the political world as a sign of increased democratization, given the diversification of the religious market. Instead, I argue that, by

effectively sacralizing the democratic process on their own terms, Igreja Universal and other Pentecostal religious players might go so far as to frame their mobilization of resources as a special case, in what could effectively de-mobilize other political caucuses. Within this context, a thoroughly de-politicized Catholic leadership (Casanova 1994) represents almost no competition in comparison to other secular social movements, like feminist and LGBTQ+ groups.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

By examining shifting perspectives over historical data on Brazilian Pentecostalism, we get the opportunity to acquaint ourselves with existing theoretical frameworks while grasping the specificity of the 2018 presidential elections. The relationships among Latin American Pentecostalism, secularization and political authoritarianism have been extensively researched. For instance, Stoll (1990) and Martin (1990) document frequent instances of cooperation between Pentecostal denominations and military regimes throughout Latin American during the Cold War, Brazil being an important case-study.

The focus of my study, Igreja Universal, gained most of its notoriety in the 1990s and 2000s, after the re-democratization of Brazil, but it was founded in 1977 with the name Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD). The church was born in Rio, which was the former national capital of Brazil from colonial times to the first decades of the republic. Around the time of the creation of IURD, Rio was starting to drown in its longstanding fight with organized crime, in part due to the economic decline resulting from the shift of the republican capital to Brasilia. Simultaneously, a profound but increasingly fractured mass-scale modernization project was being carried over by the military dictatorship (1964-1985). However, we can predate the history of this religious institution even earlier, while historically situating the larger Pentecostal

movement in the country.

The foundation of Igreja Universal is considered by Paul Freston, in “Pentecostalism in Brazil: A Brief History” (1995), as the beginning of the third wave of Brazilian Pentecostalism. Paul Freston describes three different waves that characterize the Pentecostal movement in Brazil. The first wave happened shortly after the Azusa Street Revival, considered by him the birthplace of global Pentecostalism in Los Angeles, with the arrival of Swedish missionaries of the Assemblies of God denomination in 1911 to Para, a state in the Amazon region of Brazil. The Assemblies of God (AD) started with strong sectarian motives, continuing to this day to be fragmented and decentralized, with a patchwork of regional leaders. The second wave is characterized by the 1951 arrival of Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular, also a Californian innovation, now updated with mass entertainment strategies. It would be followed in 1955 by its successful nationalist adaptation, Brasil para Cristo (BPC). These two denominations were based in Sao Paulo, and were the first Pentecostal ones to deploy large temples; furthermore, BPC was the first denomination to elect congressional representatives and radically concentrate power in a single charismatic head, as would later become the norm in the third wave. Across all three Brazilian Pentecostal waves, there is a ritual and theological centrality to gifts of the Spirit. Spontaneous manifestations of the Spirit allow for prophecies, speaking in tongues, spiritual healing, exorcisms, among other gifts shared by pastors and laypeople alike.

Igreja Universal was founded in 1977, soon before the steep decline of the 1964-1985 Brazilian military regime. However, considering the institutional and rhetorical militarism of Bolsonaro today, it is worth considering the trajectory of Pentecostal political participation in Brazil starting from the dictatorship. Such analysis, in turn, allows us to overview the theoretical framing developed over previous historical moments of the relationship between Brazilian

Pentecostalism and political authoritarianism, both in terms of a secularizing force or an index of conservative modernization.

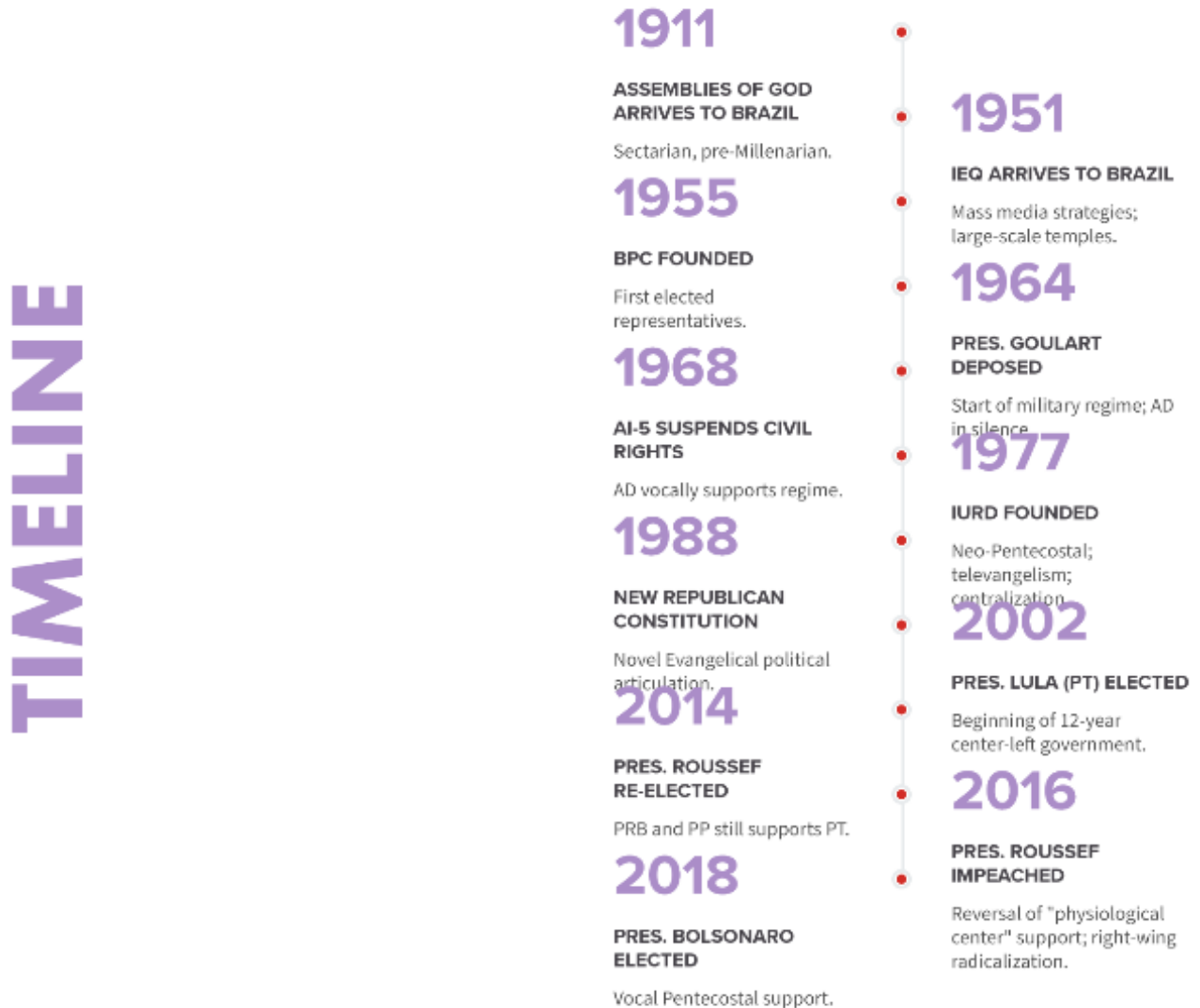


FIGURE 1

DICTATORSHIP ERA (1964 - 1985)

The accounts of the dictatorship era tend to focus on the assimilation of Pentecostalism to pre-existing local political cultures, particularly under the pressure of surrounding social conflict. This perspective, which fits under a secularization argument, positions the dictatorship-era, particularly the 1970s, as a transition from starker political asceticism within the Pentecostal movement to widespread political involvement. One explanation for this dynamic is the vacuum left by the Catholic church as it stood in opposition to the dictatorship regime (Chesnut 1997; Stoll 1990); another explanation is the sheer lack of political experience and novelty of the Pentecostal movement up to the dictatorship (Silva Almeida 2016; Chesnut 1997); and lastly we can mention the struggle for survival of Pentecostalism under the constant danger of political unrest and co-optation by other social movements, while offering a moral alternative to said frustrated socio-economic revolutions (Stoll 1990). Indeed, from an ideological perspective, in the 1970s Assemblies of God leaders espoused vocal opposition to leftist politics. In typical Cold War fashion, the dominant rhetoric revolved around religious freedom, and the danger of an anti-Christian Soviet revolution on Brazilian soil (Silva Almeida 2016; Chesnut 1997).

Chesnut uses Belem do Para, one of the historically most powerful Assemblies of God centers since the movement's first arrival in Brazil in the 1910s, as a case study. He argues for a consolidation of documented exchange of favors towards the end of the 1960s, after a major schism between the Amazon Catholic church and the military regime. During ambitious large-scale development plans of the 1970s in the Amazon region, part of the touted "economic miracle", local Catholic bishops and priests publicly opposed the displacement of peasants and defended land reform. The military government, lacking its traditional religious client in the region, for the first time reached out to local Assemblies of God leaders in exchange for funding.

Patron-client relationships started to develop between major church leaders and representatives and senators of the Aliança Renovadora Nacional (ARENA), the official regimen party. Yet, Chesnut argued, official political discourse in major print AD publications continued to defend political asceticism.

Adroaldo José Silva Almeida (2016), analyzing the official print periodical of Assemblies of God “*Mensageiro da Paz*” between 1964 and 1985, elaborates on that rhetorical friction between political asceticism and political involvement. He points out a marked turn towards more explicit political discourse in “*Mensageiro da Paz*” during the 1970s, simultaneous to the increase of articles differentiating corrupt earthly professional politics from a spiritual political vocation. This friction is also perceived by Leonildo Silveira Campos in his work on “*políticos de Cristo*”, which I will return to later, and occupy an important role in my own analysis of 2018 data.

According to Silva Almeida, throughout the 1970s, the periodical simultaneously worked to establish spiritual distance to earthly politicians while publishing multiple news articles depicting the presence of government authorities, police and military bands at official events of the Assemblies of God, as well as other nationalistic imagery – such as marches with national flags. Corruption already starts to figure not as characteristic to political authority itself and the earthly world as such, but as a deviation or a defect in the smooth enchainment of divine authority. In the publication, this idea of secular authority as an extension of God’s plan, and thus sacred and unquestionable, accompanied praise for the ongoing developmental “miracle” that extinguished favelas and unified the national territory. Such documents corroborate Chesnut’s argument for a novel flow of funding from the military government to Pentecostal leadership in the 1970s, right at the peak of state-sponsored development programs.

In the early 1980s, by the end of the military regime, there was a new movement towards asceticism, now with a sterner non-involvement political attitude, according to Silva Almeida. The political column in *Mensageiro da Paz* was gone; themes of “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's” return; and official political positions were limited to issues considered strictly moral, such as homosexuality, abortion, and divorce. Chesnut also describes a decrease in government funding towards the end of the military dictatorship, during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

RE-DEMOCRATIZATION (1985 - 1990)

During the Constitutional Assembly of 1988, churches and their confessional politicians delineated the contours of post-democratization Pentecostal politics. In the re-democratization period more broadly, we see continuity of moral themes in Pentecostal political participation as evidenced by Silva Almeida at the end of the military regime (Freston 1993), while the movement transformed to ideological vagueness the renewed political asceticism caused by the downfall of the dictatorship regime (Chesnut 1997; Freston 1993). This dynamic seems to repeat the rhetorical strategies during the dictatorship described by Silva Almeida, but adapted for participation in the new democratic regime. The persistence of partisan instrumentality combined with a rhetoric of moral asceticism continued to support secularization accounts for Pentecostal politics in Brazil (Chesnut 1997; Freston 1993).

As the democratic transition gained steam, new strategies that would come to characterize Pentecostal politics arose. Religious leadership started to officially and systematically endorse Pentecostal candidates, who would be promoted in Pentecostal mass media channels. At this point, a narrative of the Pentecostal duty to vote in fellow religious members, in a supposed rejection of secular politics, became widespread (Chesnut 1997). Yet, the Evangelical

representatives elected to the Constitutional Assembly in 1988, for example, had considerable diversity in demographic and partisan terms (Freston 1993). The highly organized political fronts, in a democratic context, assumed the form of strong clientelist ties with the political center, surrounded by a rhetorical focus on asceticism and moral reform. The patchwork of center-right parties known as clientelist or “physiological center”, in turn, is largely derived from the old dictatorship-era ruling party ARENA. This, for Chesnut, was a sign of increasing participation in the political establishment in a center-right, rather than authoritarian, position.

Freston argues for the existence in the Constitutional Assembly of 1988 of an already self-conscious, rising “Evangelical front”, which faced initial articulation difficulties in a politically and geographically diverse body that included major national leftist figures. Once again, a major unifying agenda would be a moral one: reproductive rights and artistic censorship mobilized the representatives. Arguably, conditions for ecumenical alliances between Evangelical and Catholic politicians started to take shape. Evangelical politicians, mostly Pentecostal, fought against the inclusion of Catholic symbols in the re-democratizing republic official civic repertoire, but allied with them against bolder secular initiatives. In terms of complications to a cohesive narrative of militaristic tendencies, Freston signals that Evangelical politicians did not unify around militaristic tendencies, noting that Evangelicals (51%), and Pentecostals in particular (60%) opposed capital punishment more strongly than Catholic representatives (34%), given an Evangelical belief to an unquestionable divine right to life.

Giving sustenance to the moral themes espoused by Pentecostal politicians across the partisan spectrum, Freston emphasizes the persistence of some reactionary discourses of the Charismatic Revival occurring during the Cold War. He points to the Revival as a self-declared spiritual reaction against communism and broader secularizing tendencies. Charismatic

Christianity, meaning Christianity under the influence of Pentecostal theology of gifts of the Holy Spirit, would be an emotional refuge from moral and intellectual dissatisfactions as opposed to just explicitly economic ones. As further evidence, he mentions the emphasis on spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare was often promoted as a reaction against spiritual curses with racial and political consequences, using language similar to that of millenarian New Age religions like Spiritism and Vale do Amanhecer. Additionally, anti-communism, often represented in opposition to the Workers' Party and future president Lula, continued as a common theme.

POST-DEMOCRATIZATION (1990 - PRESENT DAY)

After the democratization process, the institutionalization and growth of Evangelicalism in Brazil, mainly in the form of Pentecostalism, continues. Conversely, the mediation between electoral politics and an ascetic theological tradition also continues with the framing of secular authority as an unquestionable divine mandate, now represented as a mirror to pastoral authority but still liable to external corruption. Additionally, Pentecostal participation was formalized by the creation of two political parties, Partido Social Cristao (PSC) and Partido Republicano Brasileiro (PRB, now renamed as Republicanos). Researchers in the 2000s either continued the secularization theories espoused by their predecessors, or introduced innovations in drawing more attention to the Brazilian political economy while reaching different conclusions. Jesse Souza (2010) still agreed with Chesnut and Freston, for instance, in terms of future modernizing and secularizing consequences of Pentecostal participation, although he highlighted different assumptions when it came to world-systemic rather than autochthonous explanations to Brazilian politics. Saulo Baptista (2009), on the other hand, maintained his theoretical focus on the contingency of modernization processes rather than their necessary convergence.

In “Políticos de Cristo” (2005), Leonildo Silveira Campos argues for the consolidation in the 1990s of the Pentecostal political rhetoric of opposition to professional, corrupt, secular, “temple door” politicians, counterposed to politicians of divine legitimacy intermediated by pastoral authority. Taking the logic to its final consequences, Campos predicts a desire for a messianic Evangelical president, which has some resonance with the figure of Bolsonaro. The consolidation of this new political rhetoric is not credited solely to the recent constitutional change, but also to the decisive national mass scale growth of Pentecostal identification (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Population, by religion			
Variable – Percentage of Total Population			
Brazil			
Religion	Year		
	1991	2000	2010
Total	100	100	100
Roman Catholic	82.97	73.57	64.63
Evangelical	N/A	15.41	22.16
Pentecostal Evangelical	5.57	10.58	13.3
Pentecostal Evangelical - Igreja Assembléia de Deus	N/A	4.96	6.46
Pentecostal Evangelical - Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus	N/A	1.24	0.98
No Religion	4.73	7.35	8.04
IBGE (1991, 2000, 2010)			

TABLE 2

Campos uses data from “Folha Universal”, the official publication of Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus. IURD, which, again, belongs to the Neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic wave of Pentecostalism, is the second biggest Protestant denomination in Brazil today after the Assemblies of God. It is also worth noting that “Folha Universal” was incorporated into Universal’s website in the present, and its posts are now frequently linked to the denomination’s

Facebook page, where I collected a big proportion of my data. Again, attached to the moral agenda, Campos observes the continuing Cold War-inspired “spiritual warfare” rhetoric, which includes anti-communism and, in the 1990s, opposition to the Workers’ Party.

Saulo Baptista, in his 2009 book “Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals in Brazilian Politics”, extends many of Campos’ insights to the 2000s. Furthermore, he noticed the continuing practice of establishing “official candidates” for both AD and IURD, now institutionalized after the creation of their own political parties – Partido Social Cristao e Partido Republicano Brasileiro, respectively. Pentecostal leaders, according to Campos, were coveted by secular candidates given the relatively low cost of their electoral strategies. Mega-events like the annual “Marcha para Jesus” could serve as rallies. Not surprisingly, Bolsonaro was presented at the 2018 Marcha para Jesus as the official Evangelical candidate.

The interpretation of this evidence is where Campos and Baptista disagree. Campos interprets the adoption of an imperative for Evangelical candidates as converting Pentecostalism from a sect into an institutionalized church. The sheer growth in Pentecostal numbers and the demise of a Catholic religious monopoly explained the more aggressive and Machiavellian strategies from Pentecostal leaders trying to mobilize financial and institutional resources. More evidence for Campos’ secularization argument would be the lack of ideological clarity in Pentecostal partisan politics, which Campos positions as characteristic of a mostly instrumental political approach.

Baptista takes on the present-day Pentecostal clientelist political strategies associated with Centrao, the “physiological” center-right heir to ARENA. He also notices the tension Campos identified between clientelist practices and Pentecostal rhetoric against professional politicians during elections. However, Baptista develops his own analysis of the phenomenon.

He uses the concepts of “conservative modernization” and “Brazilian historical patrimonialism” to understand Protestant politics in Brazil. He argues for a clientelist Pentecostalism, opposed to the classical liberalism of historical mainline Protestantism. His claims about historical Protestantism in Brazil, however, are also contradicted by Freston and Silva Almeida, who both describe broad support to the military regime by most mainline, non-Pentecostal leaders.

Baptista analyzes “baptism in the Holy Spirit” – definitional to Pentecostalism – as a spiritual instantiation of clientelism in which the believer promises total loyalty in exchange for protection. From data taken from ethnographic research with Pentecostal pastoral leadership in churches and political leadership in Congress, Baptista concluded a parallel clientelist relationship was established between client-believers and patron-pastors. As with Campos, these pastors participated in merely instrumental political action seeking to mobilize financial and institutional resources. However, while Campos saw that movement as the self-interested but ultimately normal expressions of a secularizing democracy, Baptista understood Pentecostal clientelism as the spiritual expression of postcolonial social relations.

In “Os Batalhadores Brasileiros”, or “The Brazilian Fighters” (2010), the Brazilian sociologist Jesse Souza resisted the concept of a “Brazilian historical patrimonialism”, used by Baptista, as underpinning Brazilian politics. Instead of assuming cultural deterministic origins autochthonous to Portuguese, indigenous or African cultures, he rather focused on the relational character of an international political economy in which Brazil was inserted. That interpretation, in turn, gives yet another approach to understand Brazilian Pentecostal politics. The book seeks to understand what was boasted as the new rising middle class that had recently come up from poverty in large numbers. In many ways writing from the perspective of the Workers’ Party – he was eventually appointed the head of the federal Instituto de Pesquisa Economica Aplicada

(Institute of Applied Economic Research) in 2015 under Dilma Rousseff's presidency – Souza touches on the new role of Pentecostalism from a stance critical compared to that of his predecessors. His project can be broadly defined as a shift from canonical Brazilian social theory, which understands its political history as explained by patrimonialism and a quasi-feudal pre-modern polity, to a postcolonial understanding based on the international slave economy. The religious movement is then portrayed as the religious expression of the Brazilian “fighter” par excellence.

Those who Souza called *batalhadores*, which can be translated both as “strugglers” and literal “fighters”, were poor informal workers left out of the formal economy. They survived off domestic work, street vending, and other menial gigs, in a labor market reminiscent of the social organization of slavery. During the 2000s, government and press alike were exhilarated by the suddenly much larger number of people who seemed to have either entered the formal workforce or formalized previously precarious small businesses. Understood as a developmental miracle, millions finally gained enough spare money to participate in the consumer economy. He chose to define his own analytic category precisely because the existence of a structural social trapdoor dividing free and enslaved work had confused existing choices such as the division of the working, and the lower- and upper-middle classes. In the end, Souza agreed with Baptista that Pentecostalism was a spiritual expression of postcolonial social relations; but similarly to Campos, he also concluded that Pentecostalism did not represent the previously feared danger to democracy. Pentecostal politics was merely part of a late modernizing process.

Pew Research Center's 2014 findings on the demographic profile of religious groups in Brazil – summarized in Table 3 – complicate Souza's analysis. Educational levels and self-reported financial difficulties are similar between Catholics and Protestants. One measure that

under a superficial examination does readily condone Souza’s analysis is immigration, since Protestants seem to be more represented by immigrants than other groups. Both Souza and the Pew Center offer similar explanations to the phenomenon: Protestantism, disproportionately composed by Pentecostals on a scale of 8 to 10, is a religious movement associated with urbanization and modernization. It is also difficult to input an interpretative framework like Souza’s to these three measures, which lack nuance in the socioeconomic background of the participants.

Table 3 – Demographic Profile of Religious Groups			
Brazil			
Proportion (%) of	Religion		
	Catholics	Protestants	Unaffiliated
Total population	61	26	8
Men	49	42	63
At least a secondary school education	36	39	40
Reporting that in the past year they have been unable to afford food, medical treatment or clothing their family needed	30	32	30
Say they relocated to their current residence from a different location in their country	38	46	43
Pew Research Center (2014)			

Table 3

When it comes to Souza’s optimism, Table 4 can be of explanatory value. In the 2014 presidential elections, the last before Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment and the Workers’ Party major downfall, a big swath of the patchwork of center-right clientelist parties popularly referenced “Centrao”, or “physiological center”, still supported the left-wing party. That list includes Partido Progressista, Bolsonaro’s party at the time and a direct heir to the dictatorship-era ARENA, and the PRB, the party controlled by IURD’s bishops.

Table 4 – Official Partisan Support				
Presidential Elections	Political Party			
	PP	PSL	PRB	PSC
1st round 2014	Dilma Rousseff (PT)	Marina Silva (PSB)	Dilma Rousseff (PT)	Pastor Everaldo (PSC)
Run-off 2014	Dilma Rousseff (PT)	Aécio Neves (PSDB)	Dilma Rousseff (PT)	Aécio Neves (PSDB)
1st round 2018	Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB)	Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)	Geraldo Alckmin (PSDB)	Álvaro Dias (PODEMOS)
Run-off 2018	Neutral	Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)	Neutral	Jair Bolsonaro (PSL)
Agencia Brasil (2018); Alvim (2018); do Carmo (2018); Fajardo (2014); G1 (2014); Garcia (2018); Néri (2014); R7 (2014, 2018)				

TABLE 4

SUMMARY

More than clear-cut authoritarian policies per se, this timeline suggests pro-establishment clientelist political strategies were favored by Pentecostal leadership. This tendency was clearly exhibited during the dictatorship era, and seemed to alternate with waves of asceticism, especially at times of profound shifts of the political establishment. Pentecostal political asceticism was often marked by a renewed focus on a moral agenda and a negation of secular politics. We have seen this pattern repeat, from celebratory support at the peak of the military regime in the 1970s, followed by Pentecostal retreat after the onset of the dictatorship crisis in the early 1980s, then unforeseen strategies at the Constitutional Assembly; again during Pentecostal re-branding in the 1990s in face of the new republican consensus, and their populist rhetoric in support of Bolsonaro in 2018. This last iteration could be associated with the 2010s economic recession caused by the devaluation of commodities in the international market,

combined with a power gap left by Rousseff's impeachment and the large-scale anti-corruption Lava Jato Operation.

Here we can define two mains, but not mutually exclusive, alternative accounts for the political participation of Pentecostals in Brazilian politics. The first sees the growth of Pentecostals in Brazil as a continuation of secularization and modernization processes in Brazil. This account is less interested in explaining motivations for a political phenomenon. Instead, this theoretical alternative focuses on the shifting incentive structures within an institutionalized political system, which is sufficient for an accurate description of its mechanics. Chesnut, Freston and Campos all espouse this approach to a significant level.

The second alternative, "conservative modernization", builds on Barrington Moore Jr.'s idea that capitalist modernization might neither come historically from a bourgeois revolution, nor be subsumed within a liberal teleology. An alliance between landed aristocracy and the bourgeoisie against an agitated peasantry can, on the contrary, result in a political model with authoritarian tendencies. Baptista and Souza align in varying degrees with this alternative, although with different conclusions. I hope to clarify with my data how these two theoretical alternatives might interact in a useful model to understand the 2018 elections through a narrative lens, given the important role Pentecostal religiosity played in the election of an openly authoritarian and militaristic presidential candidate like Bolsonaro.

DATA AND METHODS

DATA

I collected videos and texts, including blog posts, sermons, televangelism and public facing events, from Igreja Universal's official Facebook and YouTube profiles. Igreja Universal is the second biggest Pentecostals denomination in Brazil, representing the neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic strand. The church is known for using social media to communicate with their audiences and archive media materials. Facebook, in particular, has been the most popular social media platform in Brazil for quite some time, and YouTube is largely used by those actors for archival purposes. Universal also owns a major broadcast TV channel, with televangelism during the nights that is often published on their social media profiles. I collected data not only directly connected to the first round and run-offs of the 2018 national elections, but also those presenting any indication of discourse articulating religion and politics explicitly in that year. The intention was to understand broader political projects within the religious institutions at the time, and how that was expressed in terms of electoral action. To carry out that collection I researched a set of relevant keywords, like "politica", "candidato", "presidente", "eleicoes", "corrupcao" (politics, candidate, president, elections, corruption), with some variations. The political keywords used to search Igreja Universal's official Facebook and YouTube pages returned 27 entries in 2018. A table cataloguing the data collected is included at the end as Appendix A, including name of media pieces, sources, original links, and publication dates.

METHODS

To help understand why Brazilian Pentecostalism became the religious group most proportionally supportive of Bolsonaro, my strategy was researching the political rhetoric of the

nation-wide Pentecostal megachurch Igreja Universal. I coded social media political content posted by Universal in the presidential election year of 2018, using the QDA software MAXQDA. My first round of coding was focused on identifying the main arguments of each media piece, while summarizing and categorizing them in terms of genre, setting and actors. After that, my codes focused on three dimensions: a) religious conflicts with Catholicism, including related rhetorical indices like strategic breakage of religious monopoly or explicit rejection of Catholic political culture; b) a more mechanistic rational mobilization of opportunity structures in institutional politics; and c) theological overlap with Bolsonaro's militaristic rhetoric. Those three dimensions correspond to the main theoretical alternatives that explain my empirical question about electoral support. My strategy to test each rhetorical dimension was comparing the various texts collected on mentions of: a) competing actors; b) secular cooperation; and c) themes shared by both Pentecostalism and Bolsonaro, including corruption and doctrines of spiritual warfare. After the coding rounds, I wrote memos for each text articulating and contrasting their different codes in relation to their settings, and in relation to the broader project. At last, I categorized the memos by themes or findings.

RESULTS

Igreja Universal changed its focus from a rational participation in the electoral process to an emotional one depending on the context. It made a thorough defense of democracy when retaliating against Haddad's accusations of charlatanism against their leader Bishop Edir Macedo before the run-offs, in official announcements about party (Partido Republicano Brasileiro) support, and in televangelism shows dedicated to politics. We see over and over the plea for well-informed, rational voting detached from local clientelist practices. Repeatedly, Igreja

Universal makes the case for the separation between church and state, characterizing their political participation as merely representation of an increasingly large portion of the Brazilian population. They do not want privileges from the government as an institution, they just want their due respect given their large popular representation.

On the other hand, a more complicated picture arises when the church tries to differentiate themselves from the other secular actors. The involvement of Igreja Universal with social services and the political establishment may arise from what it sees as a religious duty to heal the social fabric. From this viewpoint, interpreting the church's involvement in politics as utilitarian in any dimension becomes an offense in itself: Igreja Universal heals the nation, a service that cannot be paid back. Undermining the legitimacy of their spiritual service is hateful and anti-democratic – here, anti-democratic in the sense of an attack on the people.

Appeals for departures from previous political cultures, like those pointing at clientelism, might be read as subtly oppositional to Catholic candidates. Igreja Universal and other preeminent Brazilian Pentecostal churches were, in fact, known in the 1980s and 1990s for their often-belligerent stance towards Catholicism in mass media and institutional politics. However, evidence gathered in this project also complicates that picture. In 2018, between the first round and the runoff elections, ecumenical rhetoric gains importance, which makes sense given both personal and big tent character of runoff elections. Either way, Bolsonaro seems to have acquired stronger contours of a broad Christian alliance defending the family unit at that point.

The party's announcements were initially positioned against extremism – advocating for a true democratic center by supporting PSDB (Brazilian Social Democrat Party) in first round elections. During runoffs, the party intentionally did not engage against a particular side – the PRB allowed its members to declare support to either PT or Bolsonaro given its various local

allegiances. Here, the communication is markedly secular, which probably has to do with it being an already politically institutionalized arm of the church. The announcements also did not make any references to spiritual warfare, healing, or militarism. Again, the rhetoric was liberal and rationalistic.

ALLIANCE AGAINST BOLSONARO – FIRST ROUND

PRB ANNOUNCEMENT

Following its decades old association with the parties of the “physiological center”, the PRB (Partido Republicano Brasileiro) endorsed, perhaps unsurprisingly, Geraldo Alckmin, the candidate of the PSDB (Partido Social-Democrata Brasileiro), in the first round of the 2018 presidential elections. The PSDB is historically a center-right party, which shared with the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, Workers’ Party) a de-facto bi-partisanship in the executive branch for twenty-two years. In 2014, along with most of the “physiological center”, the PRB endorsed the re-election of Dilma Rousseff, but jumped ship with her impeachment in 2016. When speaking to the press, Marcos Pereira, the PRB’s national party chair, expressed the rationale that “the country is not ready yet for a candidacy completely liberal in the economy and conservative in morals”, so they negotiated with the PSDB to “join forces with the ‘democratic center’”, given that “Alckmin represents the only serene and balanced voice in the national landscape running” for president at the time (do Carmo 2018). Here we see two forces at work that are present throughout my analysis: a certain conservative interpretation of liberalism that does not limit itself to economic policies— as Igreja Universal bishop Marcos Pereira claimed—, but rather extends to an understanding of the Brazilian national democracy as a whole. Igreja Universal’s party, the PRB, vocally expressed support to a moderate democratic center, identifying stability as a major motivation—as opposed to the extremism represented by both the PT and Bolsonaro.

The moral conservatism, I argue, is simply another dimension of the same desire for stability that, paradoxically, can assume revolutionary contours in certain contexts. Igreja Universal repeats the tendency shown in other sectors of Brazilian Pentecostalism to espouse a sense of *status quo radicalism*, a position Bolsonaro sought to represent in 2018.

TELEVANGELISM

Televangelism focused on LGBT activism, while still using rationalist language. Often, LGBT individuals were considered legitimate participants of society, but LGBT activists were endangering families, children and trying to bypass the democratic process. Ultimately, LGBT activism could destroy all parental authority, allow for pedophilia and zoophilia and hence also destroy any of the sexual boundaries of civilization, and finally result in the arrest of pastors who refuse to officialize gay marriages. The state would then finally start to arrest people for their Christian beliefs.

Another strong leitmotif in the data was the rejection of “old” politics. Televangelism criticized certain clientelist electoral practices – “do not sell your vote!” –, asking instead for well-studied, strategic decisions. It was constantly emphasized that politics is not inherently corrupt, but that church members must work to avoid corrupt people occupying political roles. In a certain way, televangelism programs were also arguing against a competing political theology of Pentecostalism. Pastors and pastor-politicians hammered down a critique of traditional pre-millennial sectarianism. The world, here and now, can and must be improved. Neo-Pentecostals like Igreja Universal gained notoriety for providing here and now solutions for poverty and disease. Taking it to its furthest consequences, Neo-Pentecostals argue that Evangelical spirituality has a unique potential to remove corruption out of politics. More practically, in a Brazilian context the proposed solution is to vote on PRB candidates.

On September 9th, 2018, Igreja Universal posted a recording of one of their regular televangelism programs, “Entrelinhas”, on YouTube and Facebook. The title of this episode was “Faith and Politics”, and included a roundtable of their bishops, including bishop Antonio Bulhoes -- who was a congressman for 12 years. The host, from the beginning, establishes their audience as “the Christian public, the public of faith, the public who is preoccupied with the family”, who unfortunately “for a long time, especially among Evangelicals, feels repulsed against politics, because it was common to think that politics pertains to the Devil”. The show centered on the upcoming election, the necessity of politics for their religious community, the difference between legitimate and illegitimate or corrupt political action, the importance of laicity, and the risks involved in political absence as exemplified by the attacks of LGBT activists against the family.

The first distinction they make in the show is between “politics” (politica) and “politicking” (politicagem). “Politics” is described as “the art of governing --managing kingdoms, countries and nations”, while “politicking” is “seeking your own self-interest”. Therefore, “when people talk about faith and politics, many don’t understand that you can’t mix the two (politics and politicking). Politics is very welcome, necessary and important, but very different from politicking”. Furthermore, negotiation might still be central to legitimate politics, given that “every time there is more than one person together, you have to learn the art of negotiating, giving way, respecting, making concessions and defending your own rights”, including in “a marriage, parents and children, neighbors, school, work, everywhere”. Politics, by allowing social life to happen, is “good, *when practiced by good people.*” Additionally, “politics is an authority, and the Bible says there is no authority that wasn’t granted by God, so politics was granted by God”. Again, “the problem is that the wrong people have that authority” (Igreja

Universal 2018). In other words, politics, including its negotiations, is necessary and good, given that it is practiced by “good people” with the interests of the community in mind.

Later, the bishops provide a clue of how exactly Christians are different from bad people, and what they can do in relation to them. Corruption is a disease and Christians, as represented by Igreja Universal, have the healing powers to create change through electoral means. There is a wholehearted celebration of the status quo, including the nation-state, representative democracy, and a market economy, combined with the diagnosis of a widespread disease, whose sources are knowable and must be removed. The status quo, “*what we do have*”, must be purified and reinforced, but not changed:

There is that thought that says: there is no way to change things anymore, it is rotten.

When, actually, corruption is a cancer, and we have the power to extirpate that cancer so the country can move on. The power to make that change happen is in the head and on the fingers. On October 7th, people, Christians especially, should have that in mind. (...)

God uses what we do have, not what we do not have. (Igreja Universal 2018)

A clear target of the spiritual mission of the show was the LGBTQ+ movement, which takes up about a third of the show. They started by acknowledging the freedom of LGBTQ+ people to exist. “I want to make very clear here that we are not against the LGBT. You can be LGBTVXYZ, it doesn't matter. We don't discriminate against you. Everybody has the right to be and believe whatever they want, given that they respect the freedom of others”. However, “the activists within this minority want to destroy the church, religion, and the family”. That is because “they want to use bills to impose a freedom (liberdade), a profligacy (libertinagem), we can call it an *excess of freedom*” (Igreja Universal 2018).

“Excess of freedom” arguably suggests that LGBTQ+ activists might not only curtail some freedoms in favor of their own, but perhaps also institute *too much* freedom. LGBTQ+ people thus have the right to freedom, but only to a given amount, both in relative terms to others but also to an absolute degree. If organized and heard in the public sphere, LGBTQ+ people might endanger the order of things. This rhetoric completes the previous sense of a legitimate, negotiated democracy, *given* that it follows a degree of spiritual good. Democratic legitimacy flows from the Spirit of health, and not the other way around, as democratic liberalism might suggest.

As a take-away, the televangelism program makes a call to action. Widespread debate is highly desirable, but as a weapon for spiritual warfare:

Hence, don't be either shy or afraid of speaking about this at the dinner table, while having coffee with your children, your friends, and relatives. That idea that politics and religion shouldn't be discussed is a lie. Yes, it should be discussed with respect, and intelligence. But you should discuss it because the *Devil does not want* people discussing politics and religion. (Igreja Universal 2018)

ALLIANCE WITH BOLSONARO – RUN-OFFS

PRB ANNOUNCEMENT

PRB continued to proceed with caution before the run-offs, choosing to remain neutral between Haddad (PT) and Bolsonaro. Marcos Pereira, the national chair, announced the party's official position to the press and mentioned that “Brazil is a continental country with its peculiarities and, in states with a run-off, our party is supporting governor candidates”. He reinforced that “there was no disagreement” about the decision internally, and that “local chairs and affiliates will be

able to deliberate according to what's best for their local projects" (Agencia Brasil 2018). Pereira thus cautiously defended the legitimacy of the party in not following a particular ideological metric in its national electoral endorsement, rather than risking its local machinery.

PRB as a party, although intimately connected to Igreja Universal, has communication strategies that differ from those of the church. Its messages regarding electoral endorsement seem less immediately directed at the church's members and more to other politicians, whether local allied governor candidates or Alckmin and PSDB with whom they postured a joint "democratic center". There is less of a translational effort for a larger audience, or a clearer need of formulating a worldview that encompasses both specific political decisions and a cohesive moral view of past and future. Accordingly, bishop Marcos Pereira's rhetoric sought legitimacy for their practical political negotiations, in a liberal centrist language, given that the country is not yet ready for active moral conservatism politics, which had to take a step back at those moments. We already see here a sense in which church leadership must join and defend the political status quo, in order to later improve or purify it.

CONTROVERSY WITH FERNANDO HADDAD

When accused by the Workers' Party candidate Haddad before the runoff elections for anti-democratic influence, Igreja Universal reacted through Evangelical religious alliances, its media reach, and legal attacks. Their claim in this context was largely based on framing Haddad as anti-democratic himself, for offending a figure of religious authority like Edir Macedo, and consequently rendering illegitimate the political participation of his numerous followers. More specifically, before the run-offs, the Workers' Party (PT) presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad, declared that bishop Macedo was a "Fundamentalist charlatan hungry for money" to the

press. The declaration was given on the national holiday of the Brazilian Catholic patroness, Our Lady of Aparecida, in a mass held at a church in the outskirts of Sao Paulo.

That started a sequence of public exchanges between Igreja Universal and Fernando Haddad that was reflected in their Facebook and blog posts. The first answer I collected from Igreja Universal was published only a few hours after the incident. Until the run-offs, I collected other three responses published by Igreja Universal on their Facebook page and official website. One reported a fine applied by a local judge to Haddad for libel, another reported a petition signed by 147 Evangelical leaders of multiple denominations in protest to Haddad's declaration, and a third recorded the audio of a nationally broadcasted radio program hosted by the church counting with the participation of a protesting audience.

Igreja Universal's first announcement points out to the fact that Haddad made the declaration strategically aligning himself with Catholicism. They deemed his choice of time and place as "trying to incite a religious war" by "attacking one of the biggest Evangelical leaders of the country". To Haddad's dismay, however, he did not only disrespect the "more than 7 million Brazilian members of Universal, but all Evangelicals and Catholics who do not want the return of a political party whose project is destroying Christian values, like family, honor and decency" (UNIcon 2018b). An immediate sense of heightened stakes arose after the first-round elections and before the run-offs, along with increasingly broad coalitions. In this spirit, an ecumenical alliance with Catholics, rather than open competition in the political sphere as it was once common in the 1990s, is clearly articulated: the enemy is not Catholicism anymore, but those who do not espouse Christian values in politics.

This hints at a shift in rhetoric from virtuous political negotiation to more explicit conflict, which again can be explained by the course of the electoral calendar. Still, denying the responsibility

for that shift, Igreja Universal reclaimed the previous conciliatory position. “When bishop Edir Macedo endorsed PT and former president Lula, his support was welcomed. Now, when the spiritual leader announces his endorsement to the candidate Jair Bolsonaro, bishop Macedo is liable for reckless offenses?” Besides acting as an insurance against competing narratives of their recent histories, deliberately recounting their dealings also suggests an acknowledged contingency to the current political arrangement. It positions Haddad and the Workers’ Party as the ones truly lacking sportsmanship and democratic transparency. At the end of this first pronouncement, Igreja Universal brings up Workers’ Party corruption charges as evidence of true “money hunger”. Conversely, “Universal’s social programs reached 9 million Brazilian invisibles to the government (...), with no cost to the Treasury” (UNIcon 2018b).

While attacking PT, Universal is also restating their skepticism of governmental social welfare programs in comparison to their own social assistance. That legitimizes the church’s political participation as true support for the populace rather than transactional interest, either positioning them as better contenders for political authority or moving the locus of welfare out of politics to private initiative and philanthropy altogether. Either way, there is an underlying duality between welfare as bribing in itself, and a legitimacy dispute for the welfare system that will truly heal and reconstitute the social fabric rather than disturb it.

EDIR MACEDO’S COLUMN

Interestingly, there is a shift in tone in written pieces explicitly about their leader Bishop Macedo or signed by the bishop himself. The rational pleas gain more messianic contours embedded in a message of spiritual warfare. Suddenly, Universal’s political legitimacy emanates less from the rational, well-informed strategies of their individual members, and more from a spiritual mandate of healing that is continuous with the interest of the people. Their institutional social services in

health and criminal justice, but also literally the spiritual healing they provide that public health cannot, attain special importance.

Between the first round and the run-offs of the 2018 elections, the head of Igreja Universal, bishop Edir Macedo, posted on his column in the denomination's official web page a written piece titled "Why politics if the kingdom belongs to God?" He begins the text by stating that the reason that the church was so engaged in current politics is the same reason that "God asked Moses to elect officials and judges, at the time of the entrance of Israel to the Promised Land". Continuing to explicitly adjudicate against earlier Pentecostal political asceticism, the biblical excerpt is interpreted to mean in current contexts that the work of God "doesn't happen on Heaven, but on Earth".

Yet, there is something getting in the way of the work of God on Earth, where "politicians create laws, many of which having the clear objective of oppressing even more the poor, and of halting those who work hard to set them free". "Justice", he adds setting the stage for the subsequent discussion of welfare policies, "becomes the product of an auction" (Macedo 2018).

Unfortunately, even among Christians the problem continues.

The reasons why all those things happen, however, are neither political nor economic, but "completely spiritual". When the Holy Spirit touches someone, "the first thing that happens is a change of mentality and heightened discernment of spirit, which prevents the person from taking bribes, even when legalized in the shape of some social benefit" (Macedo 2018). Corruption is at the center of the stage, but the main actor becomes the elector, who might be using their vote illegitimately for personal gains rather than for prioritizing the needs of the spiritual community.

In this sense, Igreja Universal at times espouses a seemingly anti-utilitarian stance, which can be deemed ascetic: one should not act inspired by their own interests. On the other hand, involvement with politics is essential, because the Earth is not intrinsically doomed or outside of the bounds of the work of God and of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Earth is a battleground between good spirits and bad spirits, and a Christian needs to discern between them to take part in the battle. This insight also highlights a translation of the Pentecostal doctrine of Gifts of the Holy Spirit to politics. Again, divinely inspired healing and revelation should operate to cleanse spiritual disturbances to the polity, which is just another dimension of the kingdom of God. “If the same Spirit inhabits a community, they all share a single Party, which is the Kingdom of God”. Macedo brings to the forefront a language of Dominion theology, one of the Evangelical doctrines that around the 1980s wholesale substituted previously widespread pre-millenarian political asceticism (Stoll 1990). Dominion theology preaches the rule of the kingdom of God over the Earth after the triumph of the Church over Evil, rather than non-participation on earthly matters with the sole focus on salvation and evangelizing in preparation of the return of the Messiah.

Spiritual and political corruption are again conflated, denounced as the reason for extreme poverty. Christian political involvement is essential for the improvement of earthly life, given the connection between poverty and moral corruption. Although voting is presented as a source of Christian dignity, ultimately Macedo argues that the one true “party” a Christian may be aligned with is Heaven, thus limiting the legitimate electoral choices a confessional Christian can have. Hence, voting is necessary but must be motivated morally or spiritually alone, since any material or economic rationalization for voting is portrayed as an indirect way of selling one’s vote.

SOCIAL PROGRAMS

Social assistance programs are mentioned as both arbiters of corruption and social healing.

Positive, seemingly spontaneous portrayals of such programs on social media, in the sense of not directly associated with the elections, are a third silo to be analyzed. In those, the state is sometimes criticized for underfunding social programs, like public health. Additionally, other major Igreja Universal's social service loci are jails and penitentiaries, where they have been developing large-scale projects for three decades.

For instance, a post portrayed a public ceremony shortly before the run-offs for Doctors' Day, October 18th. The event was organized by Igreja Universal's "Grupo da Saúde", which provides emotional support to healthcare professionals in Brazil. The first two lines of the body of the text say how, "in 2017, it was invested in the Brazilian public healthcare only 3,6% of the federal budget". The percentage, the post emphasizes, is "too low in comparison with the global average, 11,7%" (UNIcon 2018a). The church's participation seems not to be positioned as a valid civil society alternative to government, in a fiscal conservatism argument, but either as a spontaneous necessity given the incompetence of the state, or as an unrewarded alternative. In other words, their civil participation does not seem to ask for less government, but for legitimacy of their participation in the government itself. Another April 25th post commenting on the silence of mainstream media towards a recently released biopic about Edir Macedo, "people being healed of chronic diseases after watching a simple movie theater session" is juxtaposed to the fact that "it is common in Brazil for people to die on public hospital corridors waiting for treatment, and for a simple doctor's appointment to take months" (Vidal 2018). For its healing properties, Igreja Universal's media thus deserve recognition for its public health role, reaching spiritually where secular institutions cannot.

The presentation of their social programs encapsulates Igreja Universal's layered approach to political power well. On one hand, they express support and cooperation with secular, democratic institutions and authorities. Their political role is purely representative, indirect, and the true source of their political power are rational, well-informed, committed voting citizens who happen to agree with Igreja Universal. Their social programs have attested socially positive benefits, hence it is rationally legitimate to support them. On the other hand, attacks on Igreja Universal are innately undemocratic. Undemocratic here means the attacks go against the populace, given that the church possesses a spiritual mandate to heal and protect the Brazilian people. That mandate pertains to the domain of the spontaneous, charismatic, direct experience with the spirit, and it is an offense to taint it with worldly cynicism.

DISCUSSION

Pentecostal denominations in Brazil disproportionately supported Bolsonaro's authoritarian populist platform in the 2018 presidential elections, but doubts persist over the broader meaning of Pentecostal political expansion over the years. Analyzing the texts produced by Igreja Universal, one of these denominations, provides rhetorical insights to the entire coalition, given its large numbers and its representation in media. I try to clarify the role of Pentecostal political involvement as an iteration of a conservative environment or as an active democratizing force. By analyzing Igreja Universal's political communications, I had the opportunity to observe variation in how they interpret current events under the light of their theology under different circumstances. Democracy, in particular, was understood in different ways, enabling the leadership of Igreja Universal to justify shifting between moderate right to extreme right-wing endorsements in short periods of time.

The view of Igreja Universal as just one of many secularized political contenders, espoused by Chesnut (1997), Freston (1993, 1995), and Campos (2005), was supported by some of the church's actions and public statements. This view finds support in the church's message of conscious voting espoused in its television programming, and the professed neutrality of PRB during the run-off elections under the guise of "centrality". On the other hand, we see ideas that are out of place in a multi-denominational liberal democracy, such as the notion of "*too much freedom*", which social movements like the LGBTQ+ might bring about, or the constant brandishing of an anti-utilitarian ethics to voting, which broadens the scope of bribery to include any welfare program not in the interest of the community as understood by church officials. These seem more related to the ideas of conservative modernization of Baptista (2009), Souza (2012) and Carvalho (2012, 2019).

Throughout the elections, there is a mixture of democratic, liberal, and secular rhetoric, on the one hand, and authoritarian language on the other, under the guise of healing and defending the power of the people. I call that duality, present in Pentecostal political rhetoric, *status-quo radicalism*. Explicit references to spiritual healing in the political process are present, for instance, in the televangelism show, which interprets corruption as a cancer, or in the reporting of Igreja Universal's social programs, which denounce the lack of governmental recognition of their spiritual healing services. Support for democracy and rationality have their meaning shifted – "rationality" can mean a dedication to spontaneous direct experience, and "democracy" can lose some of its procedural definitions in favor of a populist tinge. Moreover, the power of the direct, and thus verified and rational, experience of Igreja Universal's social and personal benefits renders attacks against it undemocratic and irrational.

These findings highlight difficult discussions over the participation of religious actors in politics, free speech, and the future of democracy. As Casanova (1994) eloquently makes the case for, religion can enrich and revitalize liberal democracies. They bring in different perspectives and, even when intensely sectarian and ideologically anti-democratic, religious groups are still forced to submit their opinions to debate on public arenas in ways that ultimately reinforce democratic values. On the other hand, rules and procedures might be governed by “unspoken rules” dictated by a political culture, and thus their letters cannot be taken for granted (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Unabated support for the fundamental tenets of liberalism might bring up completely different understandings of it. Such conflicting narratives of the Brazilian republic are also present in Carvalho’s (2012, 2019) accounts. Imported republican ideologies, such French Jacobinism and Positivism or American liberalism, clashed and transformed, punctuated by cycles of militarism, all while preserving post-colonial oligarchical interests. Pentecostalism, when added to the political vocabulary, seems to present a new iteration of the same process.

LIMITATIONS

Coding Igreja Universal’s social media content gave me an opportunity to look closely at how Brazilian Pentecostal institutions present themselves to the public. However, it is important to note some of the limitations of this method. The sampling of the data is not representative, even though Igreja Universal represents an important piece of the broader ecosystem of Pentecostal, and Evangelical at large, denominations in Brazil. Despite its size, media representation and historical importance, there might be significant differences from its political practices to those of other Pentecostal denominations, like the Assemblies of God. The churches’ narrative-making process itself cannot be taken completely for granted because each institution has its own internal

conflicts and dynamics, out of which internal actors may mobilize various forms of media to their favor. It is unclear how viewers interpret those narratives, which might be very different from how researchers interpret them. The mechanics of pastoral authority might hide behind the veil of those images. Hermeneutical practices trained through local church attendance might have significant explanatory impact. Probably believers do not take those narratives for granted either.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One could perform open-ended interviews or focus groups with Igreja Universal's members. That way, it may be possible to more closely probe individual and group interpretations of some of the concepts introduced by the church's social media profiles, which may not be received identically by all congregants. Additionally, some of these research participants could possibly consent for their social media feed data from 2018 to be downloaded, as a way to check documentation of the other end of these interactions with religious rhetoric on social media about the elections. Another approach could be participant observation in physical congregations, which could give a deeper insight into the real-time dynamics of political organization and denominational media consumption. Other valuable insights could be drawn by applying the methodology of my study to other important Pentecostal denominations from different historical waves, like Assembleia de Deus, or by taking a closer look at the other side of the equation, namely the evolution on the usage of religious language by Bolsonaro in his own social media profiles throughout 2018.

APPENDIX A – DATA COLLECTION TABLE

Title	Source	Link	Publication Date (DD/MM/YYYY)
PRB se declara neutro no segundo turno - ISTOÉ DINHEIRO	News	https://www.istoedinheiro.com.br/prb-se-declara-neutro-no-segundo-turno/	9/10/2018
PRB anuncia apoio à candidatura de Geraldo Alckmin	News	https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/radioagencia-nacional/politica/audio/2018-08/prb-anuncia-apoio-candidatura-de-geraldo-alckmin	1/8/2018
Alerta de Fake News	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/videos/2144644238912984/	15/10/2018
Pela fé o justo se revolta..	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/bispo-macedo/post/pela-fe-o-justo-se-revolta/?fbclid=IwAR05S4XZMZ8YCIjkRHfoEEINUF7-Eta0m0rDn1_Gh6ul7XEF6Uu4SfZpIT8	12/10/2018

Nota de repúdio: Haddad faz declarações caluniosas contra o líder da Universal	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/nota-de-repudio-haddad-faz-declaracoes-caluniosas-contra-o-lider-da-universal/?fbclid=IwAR2r_-S75SSBGq1TFvfsmwDLF4N9ljsaqqTfuNPQ9V_NmVnXYAijt13Xjt4	12/10/2018
Fernando Haddad continua a atacar cristãos	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/fernando-haddad-continua-a-atacar-cristaos/?fbclid=IwAR2RSoKAtGjxZL0EXAfisNCKKIetasbgHPjmbQoAD-hP7deWw-GvO_fyd5U	24/10/2018
Presidente eleito: Jair Bolsonaro agradece a Deus pela vitória	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/presidente-eleito-jair-bolsonaro-agradece-a-deus-pela-vitoria/?fbclid=IwAR163v-0loldkASmI1XXHLLxmn2kh4EGhyaeples-OTTSUBxcDKjPZcQ2j0	28/10/2018
Ataque de Fernando	Facebook, Institucional	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/ataque-de-fernando-haddad-ao-bispo-macedo-provoca-indignacao-em-mais-de-140-lideres-	14/10/2018

Haddad ao Bispo Macedo provoca indignação em mais de 140 líderes religiosos	Webpage	religiosos/?fbclid=IwAR2AxwBBdc0cR678RjY318WXUaQXH4nBy4Pd9BIwpuEv_UCRQDpV63UYmCk	
Universal do Chile é pichada por militantes de esquerda contra Bolsonaro	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/universal-do-chile-e-pichada-por-militantes-de-esquerda-contra-bolsonaro/?fbclid=IwAR2RBvrvImwiNY9YctsZuI5fquotMkY_83QInuJywUy3QpvBf_bQE7geA-o	26/10/2018
Haddad perde na justiça e é condenado a pagar indenização ao Bispo Macedo	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/haddad-perde-na-justica-e-e-condenado-a-pagar-indenizacao-ao-bispo-macedo/?fbclid=IwAR14T6I4DFR2YdgqBAT9S-wfAo8OOWJHPSO_jmOjc5yGBKWmZuyOvc335nA	13/12/2018

Por que política se o Reino é de Deus?	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/bispo-macedo/post/por-que-politica-se-o-reino-e-de-deus/?fbclid=IwAR1UKbAB0aSP1bHfRZ22iQc_qm_fqePDYiALQ71BDop8Z1-sYSGWw9nG14Q	15/10/2018
"Precisamos cuidar e zelar pela inocência de nossas crianças"	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/precisamos-cuidar-e-zelar-pela-inocencia-de-nossas-criancas/?fbclid=IwAR0_W2qGQNS87CI-al-oXRajoV0VeNwnqD1iDs70aqMHBzaj_sMHTCkT7M	
Evento homenagem médicos que lutam contra falta de estrutura no trabalho	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/evento-homenageia-medicos-que-lutam-contr-falta-de-estrutura-no-trabalho/?fbclid=IwAR2UDEc0OYuNwyRVdvM7g2YZE1oWU99FPEsfAw2drC_MZzTEyajeJ86ZgyI	24/10/2018
Nova fake news falsifica carta da Universal a	Facebook, Instituto Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/nova-fake-news-falsifica-carta-da-universal-a-bispos-e-pastores/?fbclid=IwAR3AoNdpob9yXJsopo3bDw5tvILk5f6QqL1ZrZLf7OoeKAgyuwLrhjm76A	22/10/2018

bispos e pastores			
Prefeitura de São Paulo desment e fake news contra a Universal	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/prefeitura-de-sao-paulo-desmente-fake-news-contra-a-universal/?fbclid=IwAR0dv_hZQDNLtXvfkGDUljJxNZQ8J8CePgftJLhBNWwKrqq4BdC2Yp2Sjw	4/5/2018
Governo cria lei que permite a doação de quase 800 mil reais para uma igreja na Palestina	Facebook, Institucional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/governo-cria-lei-que-permite-a-doacao-de-quase-800-mil-reais-para-uma-igreja-na-palestina/?fbclid=IwAR3CRJJA1xNYA3pAUDi9nq1RFgC6ydDHKdFfUCiHTqU6XZKhf8nGbRg9N0	18/06/2018
A notícia que a mídia se	Facebook, Institucional	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/a-noticia-que-a-midia-se-recusa-a-dar/?fbclid=IwAR3z_TGK5G0XItpy19qhOkeQQpKUfI3x3P_9ef5QISIg9dfS8i5lcPW2_cM	25/04/2018

recusa a dar	Webpage		
Vereadores do Rio Negro abertura de impeachment de Crivella	Facebook, Instituto Nacional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/vereadores-do-rio-negam-abertura-de-impeachment-de-crivella/?fbclid=IwAR1QH0qojjikZZdh3BIyq5p6atBIZmKSHfnxYs1w2_x-bZ1Ba94CtbnjcB0	12/7/2018
Governadores de Goiás e Distrito Federal conhecem trabalho que auxilia encarcerados e seus familiares	Facebook, Instituto Nacional Webpage	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/governadores-de-goias-e-distrito-federal-conhecem-trabalho-que-auxilia-encarcerados-e-seus-familiares/?fbclid=IwAR0CIId1j8ZvonUbmCL5kJMlxIEgtjVYuPrrkBsWFhNNfm4Rzo6lTmmnKn5s	25/04/2018
5 dicas para não ser vítima	Facebook, Instituto Nacional	https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/5-dicas-para-nao-ser-vitima-de-fake-news/	

de fake news	Webpage		
Governador do RS agradece IURD por trabalhos nos presídios.	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/videos/2140905269253996/	8/6/2018
Público reclama de Haddad por ofender cristãos	Facebook, YouTube	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/videos/297208001100079/	18/10/2018
New Fundação o CASA under Igreja Universal's management in Vale do Paraiba	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/videos/1955873901090468/	4/1/2018
Parabola do	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/videos/468568606995714/	24/09/2018

Espinheiro			
Bolsonaro Presidente: 3 coisas que precisamos fazer agora	Facebook, YouTube	https://www.facebook.com/igrejauniversal/posts/2361754577169063	29/10/2018
Entrelinhas: O PODER DE UM	Facebook, Televangelism, YouTube	https://youtu.be/E794zL2h2zY	29/09/2018
Entrelinhas: FÉ e POLÍTICA se mistura m? (na íntegra)	Facebook, Televangelism, YouTube	https://youtu.be/Pv55DwjJlaM	9/9/2018

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