

## The Grassroots Right in Latin America: Patterns, Causes, and Consequences

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After a decade of leftist governments, the Latin American right is resurgent. While rightist and center-rightist politicians and parties have come to power in a number of countries, the shift is most significant at the grassroots. This special section of *Latin American Politics and Society* is dedicated to understanding the “grassroots right”: the diverse citizens, civil society associations, and religious groups engaged in activism to support right-wing issues. Their causes range from restricting abortion, affirmative action, and LGBTQ+ rights; to expanding gun rights and violently repressing crime; to supporting free markets and opposing redistribution.

We know too little about the grassroots right in contemporary Latin America. Recent work on civil society in the region has mostly focused on left-leaning groups that mobilize for social and economic rights. For instance, a rich literature has developed to study feminist movements (Baldez 2002; Blofield 2008; Daby and Moseley Forthcoming; Htun 2003; Thayer 2009), LGBTQ+ rights movements (Díez 2015; Encarnación 2016), environmentalists (Herrera and Mayka 2020; Hochstetler and Keck 2007), Black and indigenous rights movements (Lucero 2008; Paschel 2016; Yashar 2005), and rights-based health movements (C. Gibson 2019; Mayka 2019; Niedzwiecki and Anria 2019; Rich 2019). Meanwhile, most existing studies of the right have focused on electoral participation and party organizations. These studies have analyzed the

public-opinion foundations behind voters' support of right-wing parties and candidates (Samuels and Zucco 2018; Wiesehomeier and Doyle 2014; Layton et al. 2021); changes in the linkage strategies and targeted appeals used by parties on the right to woo voters (Holland 2013; Luna 2014); strategies to build right-wing parties (Loxton 2016; Vommaro, Morresi, and Bellotti 2015); and the relationship between right-wing parties and democracy (E. Gibson 1996; Middlebrook 2000; Roberts 2014). Yet, right-wing mobilization happens through both electoral *and* non-electoral channels (Bowen 2014; Eaton 2014; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 13-14).

This essay poses four sets of questions on the nature, origins, and impacts of the grassroots right in Latin America. First, what is the grassroots right? We identify the range of issues, identities, and claims embraced by the grassroots right in contemporary Latin America. What unites them, we argue, is an affirmation of traditional social hierarchies, whether patriarchal, heteronormative, cisgender, economic, religious, or ethnic/racial, often defined in reaction against progressive social actors seeking to level those hierarchies. After conceptualizing and providing a brief overview of the grassroots right, we proceed to several subsequent questions. Second, how does the grassroots right mobilize? What organizational forms, repertoires, and frames does it employ? We show that the grassroots right adopts a range of mobilizing structures, ranging from formal organizations to loose networks. Furthermore, it has adapted and repurposed many of the strategies, tactics, and frames historically used by left-wing movements to new aims. Third, what has caused the recent rise in grassroots right mobilization? We sketch out several sets of hypotheses explaining the recent growth of the grassroots right: secular societal change and democratization; new grievances and perceived threats, especially in countries governed by the left during the pink tide; an expanded

infrastructure for mobilizing via evangelical churches and social media; and international diffusion. Fourth, what is the impact of the grassroots right on policy and democracy? We highlight the mixed record of the grassroots right in achieving its objectives, and develop hypotheses to explain variation in its impacts.

In addressing these questions, we toggle between two bodies of literature. First, we draw on a growing body of existing scholarship on rightist mobilization in Latin America and globally. Second, we reflect on the four excellent essays in this special section, which represent cutting-edge perspectives on the grassroots right in the region. Together, these articles shine new light on key questions about the roots of right-wing mobilization, policy change, and the relationship between the right and democracy in Latin America.

### **What Is the Grassroots Right?**

First, what is the grassroots right? Scholars generally take one of two approaches to defining this object of study: either emphasizing the actors (the *who*), or their issues (the *what*). In the former category, for instance, is Timothy Power's (2000) volume on *The Political Right in Postauthoritarian Brazil*, which defines the right as an "exceedingly large and diverse" set of actors, including "the armed forces, large- and medium-sized landowners, and elements of the industrial bourgeoisie, as well as smaller segments of the Catholic hierarchy, the middle classes, and the media," plus Brazil's authoritarian successor parties (36-37). Following Power as well as Gibson (1996) and Middlebrook (2000), Bowen (2011) identifies the right by its "core constituencies": "the upper economic and social strata of society," termed "elites" (105-6). Yet in a study of the *grassroots*, such a definition is unsatisfying, suggesting that non-elites cannot mobilize behind rightist politics. To be sure, Bowen (2011, 5-6) acknowledges that populist

politicians can mobilize ordinary citizens to support the right, yet this approach implies an assumption of false consciousness within the “grassroots right” that we do not believe is justified *ex ante*.

Instead, we focus on the *what*: the issues and ideologies that rightists champion. This approach avoids oversimplifying the interests of entire social groups or classes, instead inquiring into what political actors themselves want. However, it poses a different challenge: to find the thread tying together the extraordinarily diverse issues that rightists champion, which include everything from opposing citizen access to abortion to supporting citizen access to guns. What principle unifies those demands?

In one attempt to answer that question, Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014, 4) put forth a clear, flexible, and expansive definition of the right as “a political position distinguished by the belief that the main inequalities between people are natural and outside the purview of the state”. The strength of this definition is its capacity to describe neatly the right’s stances on wide-ranging economic and racial issues—areas where the left historically has championed governmental action to redress inequalities. Nonetheless, this definition is less apt in describing rightist versus leftist stances on issues such as gay rights and abortion, for which contemporary rightists may actually advocate government policy to *enforce* inequality, or to prevent access to services that could be provided via markets, such as abortion or prostitution. Given the centrality of sexuality politics for Latin America’s “neoconservatives” or “New Right,” we need a definition that adequately incorporates such stances (S. Côrrea, Petchesky, and Parker 2008; Cowan 2014; Lacerda 2019; Vaggione and Machado 2020).

Thus, we define the right as a diverse set of individuals and organizations aiming to maintain societal hierarchies that are perceived as traditional or natural. This definition differs

from that of Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) in centering rightists' proactive defense of hierarchies, rather than their opposition to government action. Such hierarchies might include, for instance, patriarchy, the economic dominance of large businesses or landowners, or the subordination of LGBTQ+ individuals or Black and indigenous Latin Americans. At the same time, as Eaton (2014) notes, Latin America's right is no longer invested simply in championing discrete issues. Instead, the right has begun "engaging in deeper and ongoing project of identity formation," deploying "discursive and rhetorical practices that seek to transform political identities" (Eaton 2014, 87). While Eaton focused on sectoral and territorial identities, by 2021 the rightist project of identity formation has deepened and politicized identities ranging from religious to nationalist to antipartisan. Our definition of the right highlights its potential to advance a transformative agenda to entrench inequalities, which conceives of rightists as the true defenders of the traditional moral order.

When discussing the *grassroots* right, we refer to the citizens and civil society groups that engage in activism to support rightist issues and identities.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on the Latin American right has historically centered political elites, including politicians and governmental actors such as the military (Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser 2014; Power 2000). However, Latin America's rightward turn in the 2010s was particularly striking among citizens. While rightists of various stripes captured the presidency in a number of countries—from Brazil's far-rightist Jair Bolsonaro to Chile's technocratic center-rightist Sebastián Piñera—nearly every country in the region witnessed prominent movements advocating for conservative positions on issues such

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<sup>1</sup> In emphasizing mobilized support for rightist issues and identities, our definition excludes militarized local, right-leaning organizations whose primary purpose is criminal or extralegal territorial control, such as the *milicias* that dominate many urban neighborhoods in Brazil (Manso 2020). However, it includes right-wing groups that employ violent strategies.

as sexuality politics. The emergence of these movements signals that grassroots mobilization can come from those hailing from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds—not just the subaltern groups traditionally associated with leftist social movements.

This is not to say that current rightist movements are entirely novel in Latin America. Prominent right-leaning social movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century included conservative women's movements (Baldez 2002) and militarized groups such as armed landowners in Brazil (V. González and Kampwirth 2001; Payne 2000). Still, the grassroots right has flourished since the turn of the millennium, in both volume of mobilization and societal prominence.

We distinguish Latin America's grassroots right from two related concepts. First, it is not simply a mass public following elite direction; rightist citizens are independent actors whose views and behavior are not reducible to their relationship with politicians. Thus, the grassroots right extends beyond—but interacts with—rightist party organizations and electoral activism. Likewise, the grassroots right cannot be reduced to a top-down, “astroturf” dynamic, with participation simply being manufactured by elites. Second, Latin America's grassroots right often takes the form of social movements, yet it may also defy traditional understandings of movements. Its organizational forms range from formal or informal social movements, to religious congregations and denominations, to sporadic mobilization in contentious action among people who do not know each other and are only linked through social media, as emphasized in the article in this volume by Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi, as well as the article by Gold and Peña.

In practice, what does Latin America's grassroots right look like? Perhaps the single set of issues distinguishing the right today from that in previous periods is the centrality of sexuality politics—for instance, opposition to abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and school-based sexual

education (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Pérez Betancur and Rocha-Carpiuc 2020; Vaggione and Machado 2020; Zarembeg 2020). In this issue, for instance, Corredor and Reuterswärd describe movements opposing “gender equality” in Colombia and abortion access in Mexico, respectively. As Corredor (2019; this issue) argues, opposition to what rightists call “gender ideology” has emerged as a powerful counterframe that enables Latin America’s grassroots right to contest the sexual empowerment of lower-status groups. This counterframe derailed public-school sexual education initiatives in countries such as Brazil and Peru (Payne and de Souza Santos 2020; Rousseau 2020), and has even been harnessed to attack seemingly unrelated projects, such as Colombia’s peace process (Corredor this issue). One reason sexuality politics has become a magnetic core for the right is that these issues have unique power to mobilize religious conservatives—both Catholics and the growing body of conservative evangelicals (Smith 2019a; Smith and Boas N/D).

While no topic has aroused more attention than sexuality politics, the grassroots right mobilizes around many other issues. Most classically, it may oppose social policies benefitting marginalized groups, such as conditional cash transfers and affirmative action in Brazil (e.g. D.S. Côrrea 2015; Feres Júnior and Toste Daflon 2015). Relatedly, the regional autonomy movement in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, arose in reaction against the Evo Morales administration’s efforts to empower indigenous Bolivians and redistribute resources across regions (Bowen 2014; Eaton 2007). Similarly, Argentina’s agricultural producers revolted against an export tax hike to fund social programs during administration of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Fairfield 2011). In all these cases, rightist civil society actors mobilized to defend in-group economic interests, opposing redistributive policies under leftist administrations. Another area of rightist mobilization relates to security and crime, where citizens organize to support *mano dura* or

tough-on-crime policies. Examples include mobilization to demand repressive policing of marginalized groups in São Paulo (Y. González and Mayka N/D), movements for gun rights in Brazil (Bob 2012, Chapter 6), and organized opposition to police reform in Argentina (Eaton 2008, 22-25). Finally, mobilization has taken a distinctively international dimension, as rightists oppose the specter of creeping communism and chavismo, with Cuba and Venezuela serving as effective boogymen in arousing opposition throughout the region.

Because the right's objectives are socially constructed and contextual, its salient issues and identities vary across space and time. For instance, the European right tends to target immigrants to a greater extent than the Latin American right, which instead focuses on dark-skinned and lower-class internal enemies, such as "*bandidos*" in slums. Thus, the constellation of issues and identities that characterizes the grassroots right in twenty-first century Latin America is not definitional to the right. Instead, rightist activists can be identified via their general opposition to state intervention to dismantle existing inequalities and their support for a "traditional" social order.

Finally, it is important to distinguish the rise of the grassroots right from two other recent trends in Latin America: autocratization and populism. In some cases these three trends go together: most notably, in the Brazilian movement leading to the downfall of Dilma Rousseff and the rise of Jair Bolsonaro (Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi this volume; Gold and Peña this volume; Cohen et al. 2021; Layton et al. 2021). Grassroots right mobilization also coincided with authoritarianism in the 2019 movement overturning Evo Morales' disputed electoral victory, which led to the one-year right-wing rule of Jeanine Áñez in Bolivia. Nonetheless, support for authoritarianism and populism are orthogonal to rightism; in recent years, right-wing movements



have mobilized to support liberal democracy in Venezuela and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The grassroots right might even sometimes be a stabilizing, democratizing force, giving rightist actors a stake in the democratic system as well as connecting them to partisan elites (Boas and Smith 2019; Boas 2021; Smith 2019a).

## **How Does the Grassroots Right Mobilize?**

### *Organizational Forms*

The grassroots right adopts varied organizational forms, ranging from hierarchical institutional structures to loose, informal networks. For instance, the largest civil society organization in the world, the Catholic Church, has deployed its formidable networks and ideological resources to advocate rightist causes, including opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, as Reuterswård explains in this issue.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, rapidly growing evangelical churches have served as key nodes for right-wing activism. The grassroots right also may take the form of economic associations (Fairfield 2011), social movements such as the anti-sexual education movement *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* (“Don’t Mess with My Children”) in Peru (Boas N/D; Rousseau 2020), or loose coalitions organized among regional movements in Bolivia (Eaton 2007). Moreover, in this issue, both Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi, as well as Gold and Peña, describe how social media-based (even anonymous) networks framed issues and drove large cycles of protest, despite minimal formal organization. Right-wing individuals have also

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<sup>2</sup> During the early years of the Chávez presidency, Venezuela’s opposition undertook a number of anti-democratic moves (Gamboa 2017). As the Venezuelan regime hardened, right-wing opposition groups shifted their approach to support the checks and balances involved in democracy. However, authoritarian strands persist among some in the opposition.

<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the Catholic Church’s issue priorities are diverse and conflictual, and defy easy categorization on the left-right spectrum (Hagopian 2008; Hale 2019; Warner 2000).

mobilized through participatory institutions, rather than form organizations or movements, to promote police repression of marginalized groups in Brazil (Y. González and Mayka N/D). Often, activists coordinate through what Jessica Rich (2020) calls “federative coalitions,” uniting diverse groups into a hierarchical structure for targeted campaigns, while maintaining the flexibility of networks.

### Strategies and Tactics

As a consequence of its organizational diversity, the grassroots right deploys a range of mobilizational tactics, including ones traditionally associated with the left in Latin America. Historically, the right leveraged its superior resources and networks to exert influence through institutional channels, from the military to bureaucratic politics to the partisan arena (Bowen 2014; Loxton 2014; Power 2000; Schneider 2004). Moreover, right-wing activists often turned against democracy and toward armed violence when they saw democratic politics as inadequate for interest representation (Payne 2000). Democracy was most stable in places where strong rightist parties came to support democratic institutions, while the defection of the right destabilized democratic regimes in other countries (E. Gibson 1996). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, these channels narrowed, as democratization led to an increasing distance between military and political actors, and as leftist governments came to power.

The right has added new forms of contentious mobilization to its repertoire, including blockades and street protests. In 2008, for instance, Argentine rural agricultural producers made international headlines by blockading highways to stop tax increases, imitating a tactic developed a few years earlier by the *piqueteros* (Fairfield 2011; Richardson 2009, 250-251). In Brazil, a cycle of protest that began in 2013 (Alonso and Mische 2017) eventually culminated in massive protests to impeach Dilma Rousseff (Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi this issue; Gold and

Peña this issue). Meanwhile, participation in large-scale street demonstrations, such as the annual, evangelical-dominated “March for Jesus” in several countries, has helped to construct the politicized identities necessary for subsequent activism. This shift is seen in public opinion data from the AmericasBarometer. Across the region as a whole, participation in protests remained slightly more common among citizens on the left than on the right even in 2018. However, the Pearson correlation coefficient between protest participation and ideology dropped from .13 in 2006 to .06 in 2018, indicating a growing comfort with protest on the right.

The new right’s repertoire of contention still includes traditional insider strategies. For instance, Mexico’s Catholic pro-life movement relied on backroom deals and campaign contributions to pass anti-abortion amendments in some state constitutions (Reuterswärd this issue; see also Zarembeg 2020). In Peru, groups linked to Catholic and evangelical churches have drafted legislation replacing legislative references to “gender” with the words “women” and “men,” defined as distinct and complementary (Rousseau 2020, 30-31). Other recent instances of lobbying include efforts to promote *mano dura* policies in Bogotá and Argentina (Eaton 2008; Mayka Forthcoming) and to oppose disarmament in Brazil (Bob 2012, 163-165). The right also deploys legal strategies, turning to the courts to challenge school curricula that recognize gender equity and sexual diversity in Peru (Rousseau 2020, 29) and to contest gun control restrictions in Brazil (Bob 2012, 163).

The grassroots right has inserted itself into elite-level political battles—for instance, over impeachment, peace negotiations, and legislation. For instance, Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi (this issue) demonstrate how right-wing groups in Brazil used social media platforms to unify ideologically diverse individuals behind the political project to impeach Dilma Rousseff, and mobilize these individuals into street protest. Gold and Peña (this issue) show that recent cycles

of protest in Argentina and Brazil produced diffuse and horizontal mass-elite linkages, mediated through social media. Similarly, Smith (2019a) argues that evangelical clergy constitute a distinct type of interlocutor for elected politicians in Brazil; pastors can serve simultaneously as opinion leaders orienting both politicians and masses, and as brokers facilitating mass-elite linkages. As Corredor's article in this issue shows, clergy-politician relationships helped organize Colombian evangelicals' movement to defeat a referendum on the 2016 peace deal.

Finally, just as the grassroots right carries elite-level policy conflicts into the streets, it also mobilizes the streets to influence who occupies the halls of power. Sometimes this happens through financial support for candidates, given the deep pockets of some individuals on the right. In this volume, for instance, Reuterswärd argues that campaign donations help explain successful efforts to pass anti-abortion amendments to some state constitutions in Mexico. The grassroots right is also a fertile soil for cultivating future elites. Gold and Peña (this issue), for instance, reveal that the networks organizing protests via social media in Argentina and Brazil incubated the next generation of young, social media-savvy rightist politicians. Similarly, church leadership has proven an important platform for running for office on the right in Latin America (Boas 2014, 2021; Smith 2019a).

### Frames

As part of Latin America's pluralistic social movement field, activists on the right dispute the frames of leftist movements, counterframing the advances of marginalized groups as threatening the moral foundations of society (Y. González and Mayka N/D; Payne and de Souza Santos 2020, 33-34). For instance, Peru's Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas frames programs to promote gender equity as assaults on the family and an intrusion into the sacred space of the home (Rousseau 2020). Despite their religious influence, these movements often rely on what

Vaggione (2005) calls “strategic secularism”: reframing a Christian moral agenda in universalizing terms to build broad support (see also Reuterswärd, this issue).

The grassroots right also emphasizes valence issues such as security, opposition to corruption, or patriotism. In Brazil, diverse movements—organized around issues ranging from free-market economics, to opposition to women’s and LGBTQ+ rights, to frustration with rising crime—united under an anti-corruption frame to demand the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi this volume). Unifying frames also link right-wing issues to patriotism and nationalism, depicting feminist and LGBTQ+ rights movements as neocolonial intrusions that threaten sovereignty (Biroli and Caminotti 2020, 3; Bob 2012, 162). Perhaps ironically, such nationalist frames are shared across transnational networks of right-wing movements (Bob 2012; Vaggione and Machado 2020, 9-10).

In addition, the grassroots right harnesses and repurposes the language of rights that has been historically favored by the left. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latin America’s religious conservatives developed an alternative scholarship and narrative of human rights to contest abortion rights, one that drew on figures such as the U.S. civil rights hero Rosa Parks to justify civil disobedience (Morgan 2014). More recently, right-wing movements frame expansions of LGBTQ+ rights as endangering children’s rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Corredor 2019), or threatening religious liberties (Payne and de Souza Santos 2020, 36). They also argue against “gender ideology” and feminism on women’s rights grounds, claiming women’s advancement requires acknowledging the fundamental, complementary differences between men and women (Corredor this issue). In the field of public security, grassroots right activists contend that *mano dura* policing is essential to protect “deserving” citizens’ rights to safety and freedom of movement (Y. González and Mayka N/D). Embracing

rights frames yields considerable advantages, presenting rightists' demands as righteous and non-negotiable, and depicting their opponents as depraved human rights violators (Bob 2019, 14; Mayka Forthcoming). Moreover, rights frames open up new venues for contention, given institutional obligations to protect human rights (Bob 2019, 8-9; Mayka Forthcoming; Merry 2005; Vaggione and Machado 2020, 8-9).

Yet another effort at counterframing involves repackaging opposition to sexuality politics in scientific terms. Religious anti-abortion activists have long sought partnerships with secular groups on the basis of scientific arguments about fetal development (Morgan 2014). More recently, Santos (2019) demonstrates that Catholic theology of environmental protection has been adapted to justify conservative positions on gender based on supposedly biological distinctions between men and women. Even the notion of “gender ideology”—a term invented by rightist activists who attribute it to leftists—implies that progressives have adopted false, politicized understandings of gender in contravention of nature and science (Corredor 2019). Reuterswärd (this issue) demonstrates that appealing to biological arguments can play an important role in building support from the non-devout.

Future research is needed in these areas. First, how do the strategies, tactics, and frames of right-wing movements shift once the right comes to power? A number of studies have focused on the grassroots right's role in opposing left-wing governments, and in mobilizing support for ascendant politicians on the right. As Gold and Peña (this issue) show, having right-wing allies in power can open up new opportunities for influence (as seen in Brazil under Bolsonaro), but might also demobilize and coopt these movements (as occurred in Argentina following the election of President Mauricio Macri). Further research is needed to understand the conditions that enable sustained mobilization and influence. We also know little about how the grassroots

right interacts with institutional channels for citizen participation—especially participatory institutions for issues of concern for the right, such as child-welfare policy and security (Rich, Mayka, and Montero 2019, 13). Existing studies of participatory institutions have largely ignored these policy sectors,<sup>4</sup> signaling the need for research that explores whether right-wing groups might seek to occupy these participatory institutions typically associated with the left. Finally, the crucial role of social media in the mobilization of the grassroots right raises important questions about how social media platforms have connected right-wing activists throughout the world, transformed transnational advocacy networks, and enabled the diffusion of strategic repertoires and frames across borders.

### **What Causes the Grassroots Right?**

What has led to the present surge of grassroots mobilization on the right? We can immediately dismiss one possibility: the hypothesis that Latin American citizens are becoming more conservative. Analyzing AmericasBarometer data on citizens' self-placement on a 1-10 ideological scale, where 1 indicates far left and 10 indicates far right, we see little movement in ideological self-placement in the aggregate between 2006 and 2019, across the region as a whole. In most waves, a bit over ten percent of citizens place themselves at a '10' on the scale (indicating association with the far-right), and a bit over one-third choose a position from 6 to 10.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Abreu Maia, Chiu, and Desposato (2020) find no evidence that either progressive

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<sup>4</sup> Important exceptions include the work by Yanilda González on particularly security councils (Y. González 2019; Y. González and Mayka N/D).

<sup>5</sup> These estimates include people who choose non-response to the ideology question, given evidence that understanding of and ability to locate oneself on the ideological scale is uneven and non-randomly distributed in Latin America (Ames and Smith 2010; Batista Pereira 2020; Zechmeister and Corral 2013). The conclusion is roughly similar if we examine only citizens choosing a position from 7 to 10.

policies or conservative social movement backlash have led to growing conservatism on sexuality politics issues among Latin Americans, on net. What, then, might drive increasing mobilization? In the paragraphs that follow, we sketch a series of speculative hypotheses.

First, scholars point to long-term changes in the political opportunity structure that encourage grassroots mobilization on the right. Democratization, growing state capacity, and changing international norms made recourse to military intervention and armed rebellion increasingly unattractive for societal elites dissatisfied with democratically elected leaders (Linz and Stepan 1996; Loxton 2014; Power 2000). Moreover, the secular decline of clientelism and patronage politics restricted another channel for upper-class influence on politics (Eaton 2014, 76; Weitz-Shapiro 2014). Even behind-the-scenes bureaucratic influence may be increasingly foreclosed to rightist societal elites, as centrist and leftist administrations bolstered authority and autonomy within the bureaucracy (Abers 2019; Rich, Mayka, and Montero 2019, 4-5; Rich 2019). Thus, the rise of the grassroots right might indicate the maturation of Latin American democracies, in which rightist groups must compete for policy influence on relatively even footing with other civil society actors. From this perspective, it is notable that even movements with close ties to elites—such as the Mexican pro-choice movements analyzed by Reuterswärd in this issue—operate through protest and lobbying instead of just relying on secret back channels.

A second hypothesis highlights the rise of evangelical Christianity in most Latin American countries over the past several decades (Boas and Smith 2015; Chesnut 2003; Pew Research Center 2014). Both evangelicalism and Catholicism are highly pluralistic traditions encompassing actors ranging from the far right to the far left; neither has been associated with uniformly rightist voting and activism in Latin America (Boas and Smith 2015). Nonetheless,



evangelical politics may lean to the right of Catholic politics in the current era. Despite substantial moderation since the 1980s, Catholic progressive groups with roots in liberation theology organizing of the 1960s and 1970s remain active even today. By contrast, such movements were always weaker in evangelicalism (Boas N/D; Mainwaring and Wilde 1989). In addition, although Latin America's lay evangelicals are centrists or even slightly left of Catholics on issues such as the environment, crime, and economics, they are distinctly conservative on sexuality politics—precisely the bundle of issues that has become most salient for the contemporary grassroots right (Smith and Boas N/D; Smith and Globus Veldman 2020).

The rise of evangelical Christianity has bolstered new mobilizing structures on the right. Evangelical converts attend church more frequently than they had as Catholics; one recent study conservatively estimated that evangelicals and Pentecostals spend at least twice as many hours in church per year as do Catholics (Smith 2019b). Members of evangelical and Pentecostal churches may be particularly prone to adopt shared political views due to regular socialization, shared identities, and the salience of moralistic frames (Smith 2019a). Hence, Latin America's changing religious landscape is likely associated increased exposure to religious messages with political import. Evangelical churches offer a promising mobilizing structure to channel these new grievances into political participation, as seen in Corredor's article on right-wing activism against the 2016 Colombian peace deal (Corredor this issue).

A third set of hypotheses points to the emergence of new grievances. It is not a coincidence that the grassroots right arose in the wake of Latin America's "pink tide" of the mid-2000s. As left-wing administrations engaged in ambitious programs for redistribution and reducing economic and ethnic/racial inequality, privileged sectors had new reasons to feel threatened (Eaton 2007; Fairfield 2011). Moreover, the tragically poor performance of

Venezuelan Chavismo and a more mundane frustration with corruption and economic stagnation in countries such as Argentina and Brazil triggered backlash that crossed class lines.

Consequently, grassroots right protests attracted a wide range of participants, united by opposition to the policies and records of leftist administrations (Alonso and Mische 2017, 6-7; Eaton 2007, 85; Tatagiba and Galvão 2019, 79-85). Although protests initially targeted isolated grievances, they coalesced into larger movements that generated anti-leftist identities (Alonso and Mische 2017; Samuels and Zucco 2018; Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi this issue). These new anti-left identities appear to be particularly powerful among popular sector voters who had, ironically, risen out of poverty under left-leaning governments (Junge 2019; Naím 2015; Pinheiro-Machado and Mury Scalco 2020).

One particular set of grievances bears special mention: anxiety over changes in sexuality politics. While the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought major changes in women's rights and family structures, the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in previously unimaginable policy changes on abortion and same-sex marriage, as well as dramatic shifts in understandings of gender and gender norms (Abreu Maia, Chiu, and Desposato 2020; S. Côrrea, Petchesky, and Parker 2008; Corredor 2019). Although there is little evidence that these changes triggered a conservative backlash in public opinion in society as a whole (Abreu Maia, Chiu, and Desposato 2020), they did raise the salience of such issues for social conservatives. In a new paper, Smith and Boas (N/D) show that when issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion rise in the news, religious conservatives—including Catholics, but especially evangelicals—increasingly translate their conservative views into political behavior. As Reuterswärd (this issue) shows, in the Mexican state of Yucatán, anxieties about the advances made by LGBTQ+ movements triggered right-wing mobilization to expand restrictions on sexuality more broadly, including a state

constitutional ban on abortion. While right-wing movements have organized in response to shifts in sexuality, they are not advocating a return to the status quo, but rather a transformed gender order that imposes new regulations on sex and sexuality (Corredor this issue).

Fourth, the rise of social media has served as a valuable resource that enables flexible and adaptable organizational forms (Castells 2012; Rich 2020, 432) and can translate grievances into collective action through framing (Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi this issue). Social media may be particularly suited for rightist mobilization. As Gold and Peña argue in this issue, Latin America's leftist parties were historically more effective than rightist parties in cultivating organizational linkages with civil society. However, social media may invert that scenario, advantaging groups with deep pockets or wealthy friends who can support costs that range from "boosting" posts to funding technological access and know-how (Schradié 2019). Indeed, Gold and Peña (this issue) show that right-wing parties have formed novel forms of linkages with digital activist groups. Moreover, Dias, von Bülow, and Gobbi argue in this issue that the "reductionism" and "antagonism" of right-wing populist messages makes them particularly effective in social media.

Fifth, the twenty-first century has brought new patterns of diffusion across borders. Growing ties among the global right-wing contributed to diffusion processes through transnational networks. One understudied topic is the mobilization of opposition to Chavismo as an organizing tool across borders, acting in parallel to the transnational coordination among leaders of the Bolivarian left. Moreover, we have also seen the emergence of transnational advocacy networks on rightist issues, including gun rights and opposition to abortion and LGBTQ+ rights (Bob 2012).

Additional studies are needed to examine empirically the relative importance of these

explanations for the rise of the grassroots right as a whole or in particular cases. Moreover, it is worth noting that the literature implicitly posits that the grassroots right must be composed of different segments of society, including at a minimum economic elites, religious conservatives, and members of the popular sectors. Future research should investigate how these very different social segments have constructed networks and engaged in collective action, and how they navigate the challenges of sustaining mobilization with such a heterogeneous coalition. Yet another line of inquiry that so far remains underexplored, with the exception of important work by Clifford Bob (2012), relates to the international right-leaning networks—both “North-South” and within Latin America—that link the grassroots right across Latin America.

From a more theoretical perspective, further questions remain. One relates to the circumstances under which progressive or left-wing organizing thrive in both churches and social media. While there does appear to be an elective affinity between these mobilizing platforms and rightist issues and identities, long histories of leftist organizing in both churches and social media leaves no doubt that these platforms are far from hegemonic for the right. Theoretically informed explanations of the multivalent nature of these organizing platforms in Latin America could provide an important contribution to the literature.

### **What Are the Impacts of the Grassroots Right?**

Finally, we briefly consider the impacts of the grassroots right on a range of outcomes related to public policy and democracy, including legislation, social citizenship rights, political parties and party linkages, and polarization. The grassroots right’s track record on legislation related to public policy has been mixed so far, often disappointing newly mobilized rightist

citizens and civil society groups.<sup>6</sup> For instance, following the legalization of abortion in Mexico City, anti-abortion movements were able in short order to get anti-abortion constitutional amendments passed in nineteen (out of 32) state constitutions in Mexico—but failed to do so in other states (Reuterswärd this issue; Zarembeg 2020). In Colombia, right-wing activists mobilized fears over gender ideology to defeat a popular referendum to approve a peace deal with the FARC guerrilla group. Yet, this movement failed to stop the deal in Congress, or to even significantly change the gender-sensitive language in the peace plan (Corredor this issue). Most recently, pro-choice activists out-maneuvered the anti-abortion movement in Argentina when abortion was legalized up to 14 weeks.

It is impossible to explain the success or failure of the grassroots right without also considering the strategies, resources, and frames deployed by progressive movements. In the recent case of abortion legalization in Argentina, for instance, the failure of the grassroots right was the same as the success of feminist activists. Feminist movements' use of frames related to public health and social justice for poor women proved to be more effective than pro-life narratives about the human rights of the unborn (Daby and Moseley Forthcoming; Morgan 2014). Just as the policy successes of left-wing governments may restrict the policy alternatives of subsequent rightist leaders (Niedzwiecki and Pribble 2017), the actions taken by left-wing movement may constrain the strategies and impact of movements on the right. We need more empirically careful and theoretically informed case studies to begin to draw general conclusions

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<sup>6</sup> Although we will not address this topic here for the sake of space, it is worth noting that the grassroots right has not had overwhelming success in electoral politics, either. The 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil is the new right's most prominent electoral success, but the 2018 second-round loss of the evangelical, anti-gender ideology pastor Fabricio Alvarado in Costa Rica may more accurately reflect the general fate of the grassroots right at the ballot box in Latin America.

about the relative strengths of the grassroots right and progressive groups in such battles, and how the actions of each side change the political calculus of the other. One promising case study may be Chile's constitutional rewriting process, which will certainly draw both rightist and leftist mobilizing.

Additional work is needed to understand how allies inside the state shape the influence of right-wing groups. As the 2019 special issue of this journal on the "politics of participation in Latin America" (Rich, Mayka, and Montero 2019) emphasized, allies within the bureaucracy and judiciary might amplify the policy impact of civil society groups. These allies may support the aims of the grassroots right, as seen in Corredor's analysis of the peace process in Colombia. Likewise, actors such as medical professionals that are tasked with implementing policy such as abortion can coordinate with right-wing movements to block progressive changes (Morgan 2014; (Pérez Betancur and Rocha-Carpiuc 2020). Yet progressive bureaucrats can also block the social change envisioned by the grassroots right (Abers 2019). In other words, even if the grassroots right succeeds in electing its allies, state actors may resist conservative retrenchment. Further theoretical and empirical work remains for scholars to disentangle the complex interactions within the state that shape the impact of the grassroots right in both advocating legislative change and influencing policy implementation.

Turning from discrete policy changes, how has the grassroots right impacted Latin American democracy? We would argue that the grassroots right has enhanced democratic quality in some instances by providing representation and opportunities for participation to groups that had historically been excluded, such as evangelicals (Boas 2021; Boas and Smith 2019; Smith 2019a). This position is not dissimilar from an older argument that rightist participation in democratic politics forestalled military coups and armed right-wing subversive activities by

giving those on the right a stake in the democratic system (Loxton 2014; Payne 2000; E. Gibson 1996). In addition, in countries led by the “radical” or Bolivarian left, right-wing activists have at times mobilized to support liberal democratic institutions and checks and balances.

Nonetheless, the grassroots right also has potentially pernicious effects on democracy, particularly when it seeks to restrict the rights of marginalized groups. Indeed, Pentecostal and evangelical groups have been the most prominent opponents of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion in Latin America (Corrales 2017). Right-wing activists have demanded repressive policing that violates the civil liberties and procedural rights of marginalized communities, even rejecting the very notion that these groups should have citizenship rights (Y. González and Mayka N/D). In some countries of the region, grassroots right mobilization has accompanied societal trends toward an increasingly Manichean polarization. Yet, leftists have also abetted polarization along with rightists in Latin America, which is why we argued that both populism and authoritarianism are orthogonal to left-right divides in Latin America earlier in this essay. Overall, we see these trends toward increasing polarization, populism, and illiberalism as worrisome for the long-term stability of Latin American democracy.

These tensions pose an urgent research agenda for future scholars. What circumstances encourage the representation of diverse ideological perspectives without exacerbating populism, polarization, and illiberalism? Under what circumstances and in what contexts can grassroots right mobilization be a force for stability and inclusion, without sacrificing the rights of other groups? One line of investigation that may be promising focuses on the potential of “rights” frames for bridging divides. In the United States context, for instance, Lewis (2017) shows that evangelicals’ strategic adoption of rights-based framing in anti-abortion mobilization has had positive downstream consequences for democracy. Such frames have warmed evangelicals’

attitudes toward rights and democracy themselves, and can encourage U.S. evangelicals to become more tolerant of groups they oppose (Lewis 2017). Future work should investigate the roles of frames and political context in inclusion and moderation of the grassroots right in Latin America.

### **Overview of Articles in this Special Section**

The four articles review recent developments in mobilization by the grassroots right, examining a range of countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico) and issues (LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, peace processes, corruption, removing elected officials from office). They highlight innovations in strategies, tactics, and frames, and generate new hypotheses about the causes and consequences of the grassroots right in Latin America.

The article by Camilla Reuterswärd explores the impacts of right-wing movements through a comparison of struggles over abortion in two Mexican states: in Yucatán, pro-life movements succeeded in getting a restrictive anti-abortion law passed, while a comparable initiative failed in Hidalgo. Both pro-life movements framed their demands on biological and bioethics grounds, while cloaking the role of the Catholic Church. To explain their varied success, Reuterswärd points to movement resources, leveraged through tight networks between religious organizations, economic elites, and politicians. The hegemonic Yucatán Catholic Church mobilized moral and financial resources to pressure politicians to pursue anti-abortion reform. Conversely, the Church in Hidalgo lacked such ties, creating an opening for feminist groups' demands. Reuterswärd signals the roles of networks, material resources, and frames in explaining the impact of the grassroots right.

The article by Elizabeth Corredor also examines the policy impact of the grassroots right,



this time in opposition to Colombia's 2016 peace deal. Opponents of "gender ideology" objected to an intersectional approach used in the peace deal that recognized diverse sexual identities and promoted gender equality. Anti-gender activists creatively framed their opposition using human rights discourses, portraying a gender-sensitive approach as an assault on freedom of religion, the right to life, the right to marriage and a family, and the right to dignity. Using careful content analysis, however, Corredor demonstrates that anti-gender activists ultimately failed to strike references to gender sensitivity from the final document; nor could they stop its legislative passage, despite close ties to prominent politicians. One implication is that backlash against progressive causes does not necessarily succeed, but can spark new dynamics of contention, as movements and countermovements respond to each other.

The article by Tayrine Dias, Marisa von Bülow, and Danniell Gobbi also explores framing processes via an impressive content analysis of thousands of Facebook posts made by five right-wing groups during the 2017 campaign to impeach Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. The authors show that despite marked ideological differences, these five groups coordinated messages that cast blame for endemic corruption on the ruling Workers' Party, and framed impeachment as the necessary corrective. This article highlights the crucial role of social media in creating a shared interpretation of grievances among right-wing individuals that may share few off-line network ties and hold diverse political views.

The final article, by Tomás Gold and Alejandro Peña, further probes the power of social media in right-wing activism, comparing protest cycles in Argentina (2012-2013) and Brazil (2013-2016). Gold and Peña argue that right-wing parties have developed novel forms of linkages with voters by aligning with digital activist groups, leading these parties to embrace protest and other forms of contentious politics that were historically the purview of leftist and

other labor-based parties. While these linkage strategies enabled right-wing parties to rise to power in both countries, digital activists maintained an important role under rightist rule in Brazil while being displaced in Argentina. This divergence raises important questions about how digital linkage strategies endure over time, and their potential to yield institutional influence for the grassroots right.

Together, the four essays shed new light on the role of grassroots right in politics and raise important questions for further study. We hope that this special issue serves as a call for future research to make sense of the crucial role of the grassroots right in have emerged as central figures in contemporary struggles over public policy, human rights, and partisan politics in Latin American democracies.

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