

How did abortion become legal in majority-Catholic Argentina?

In Latin America, faith and politics are being disentangled.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue



GREEN WAVE: Protesters at a 2018 demonstration in Paraná, Argentina, in favor of abortion rights. (Photo by Paula Kindsvater via Creative Commons license)

In recent years, Argentina has experienced a mighty social movement, as many thousands of women have worn green to show support for abortion rights. One demonstration in 2018 reported a million women participating; more recently, green face masks have been ubiquitous. The eventual success of that “green wave” campaign—a landmark law was enacted this January—came despite fierce opposition from the churches. This points to an epochal change in the power of organized religion in the region at large.

One of the most significant trends in modern US history has been the sharp growth in the Latino presence: by 2050, perhaps 25 or 30 percent of the population will claim a Latino identity. Yet despite that, Americans often view Latin America through stereotypes that are dated and increasingly dubious, and that is especially true in

matters of faith.

It's still common to find media reports suggesting that Latin American nations are overwhelmingly and unquestioningly religious, and that the main question at issue is whether those supposedly pious populations adhere to traditional Catholic loyalties or else convert to some Protestant or Pentecostal denomination. Underlying that picture is the assumption that these societies are still marked by very high, "third world" fertility, with large families and markedly young age profiles.

Those two facts, high faith and high fertility, do usually go together—and both are changing rapidly across the continent. Fertility rates have collapsed in recent decades, creating much older populations, and that usually heralds a drift to secularization. Brazil's fertility rate is now the same as that of Denmark or Sweden.

Not surprisingly, then, we see a steep growth in the number of people questioning and rejecting religion of all kinds. Brazil now presents a threefold religious landscape of Catholics, Protestants, and secular or unaffiliated people. This new mood is reflected in legislation. Over the past decade, several Latin American nations have passed notably liberal laws on LGBTQ rights and other issues, despite ecclesiastical opposition.

Argentina was the scene of intense debate in 2010, when it became the first country in Latin America to go beyond civil unions and approve same-sex marriage. Catholic and Protestant conservatives received the weighty support of Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the archbishop of Buenos Aires, who later became Pope Francis I. He described the proposed marriage reform as "a move by the Father of Lies that seeks to confuse and deceive the children of God." The law passed anyway, and today, two-thirds of Argentines support same-sex marriage.

In such debates over morality and legislation, abortion has long been the most contentious question. It is very striking, then, that the new Argentine law legalizes terminations up to the 14th week of pregnancy. Such a change might seem wildly improbable in a country where a sizable majority officially claim Catholic loyalty, a country that also contains small but highly vocal *evangélico* churches. As in earlier campaigns, the churches fought the legislation, and once again they were supported by Pope Francis, who remains very popular in his homeland.

But the myth of simple Latin American piety has to be examined. The actual number of Argentines who are practicing Catholics is at most 20 percent of the population,

and many self-described Catholics approach the church's teachings selectively. The country's rate of contraceptive use is over 80 percent, quite comparable to any Protestant country. Meanwhile, the fertility rate has fallen steadily in recent decades and stands presently just above the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman.

What that means in practice is that many Argentines are happy to practice their faith but not to accept restrictions that impinge on key matters of sexuality and family, whether those come from church or state. One major study in 2019 found three-quarters of respondents opposed to any state financing of religion, and around half believed that religion should not be taught in schools.

For large sections of the population, religion thus becomes a privatized affair, almost on the model we associate with "godless" Western Europe. "I'm Catholic," said Argentine president Alberto Fernández, speaking in support of the abortion reform, "but I have to legislate for everyone." However uncontroversial such a statement might appear in Europe or the United States, it represents a stunning departure from the traditions that prevailed in most of Latin America until the present century.

Following the Argentine decision, campaigners on both sides agreed that it would ignite campaigns over reproductive rights across the region, with Brazil and Chile the obvious next battlefields. The coming decade will witness continuing struggles over faith and morality, in which the churches' power and prestige will come under repeated challenge.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Secular in Latin America."