Why Are Pentecostals Politically Ambiguous?

Pentecostalism and Politics in Argentina, 1983-1995

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Protestantism and especially Pentecostal ministries have expanded widely in Latin America during the present century. The expansion did not cover the sub-continent in one swift stroke. It was a process that slowly arose in Brazil, Chile and parts of Central America from the 1930s to the 1960s, developing in Colombia, Peru, Guatemala and Nicaragua during the 1970s and '80s, only to reach Argentina and Uruguay by the second half of the 1980s (Dodson, 1997:28). Contrary to what many initially assumed, Pentecostal growth did not respond to the combined strategy of US-based giant religious denominations and CIA foreign policies. Instead, it was due to the efforts of 'small people': local churches and leaders, and micro – person to person – processes of communication and diffusion (Stewart-Gambino and Wilson, 1997:230).

Confronted with Pentecostal growth, researchers have asked themselves what the possible effects of this expansion in Latin American politics could be. Conflicting responses began to appear in the late sixties when Willems (1968) and d'Epinay (1969) pioneered the debate over the possible political influences of Pentecostalism. Willems sustained that Pentecostalism promoted democratic and horizontal social relations in mid-century Brazil and Chile. These types of relations contrasted with the traditional vertical patronage power structures of the two Latin American countries, implying a kind of symbolic protest against the status quo. Assuming a functionalist standpoint, Willems concluded that in this way Pentecostalism contributed to the 'modernisation' of Brazil and Chile. In contrast, d'Epinay asserted that, due to the kind of apoliticism it proposed, Pentecostalism bolstered the traditional patriarchal and authoritarian power structure of the hacienda. Thus, d'Epinay contended, Pentecostalism was a traditional force and not a modernising influence. D'Epinay's study also pioneered the debate over the effects of Pentecostalism in the political consciousness of the working classes, a topic that soon took centre-stage in the debates over Pentecostalism's political influences.

Subsequent work has taken up the same issues originally suggested by Willems and d'Epinay and thus may be grouped according to how they treat the problem of modernisation or the issue of class consciousness. In relation to the former, there is a body of authors, such as Martin (1990) or Stoll (1990) that stress the elements of rationality, thriftiness, respect for civil rights that, as part

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of the general Protestant heritage, are also present in Pentecostal doctrine and practice. Consequently, they perceive in Pentecostalism a modernising and democratic force that may help Latin Americans to eliminate corporatist practices and irrational behaviour such as machismo and alcoholism. In contrast, d’Epinay (1968), Hoffnagel (1980) and Bastian (1992, 1993) see in Pentecostal hierarchical relations between pastors and laity and in their spiritual zeal a traditional and authoritarian force which is reinstalling traditional corporatist and irrational practices in a changing Latin America.

There have also been contrasting positions in relation to the issue of class consciousness. Authors such as Rolim (1980, 1985); Assman (1987) and Prandi (1992) have stressed Pentecostal otherworldliness. Hence, they interpret the movement as an alienating force that assigns spiritual causes to social problems, thus promoting the search for solutions in the spiritual world instead of fostering social struggle. In opposition, Novaes (1980), Burdick (1993) and Ossa (1991) claim that Pentecostalism does not hinder people’s involvement in social struggle; they show how different elements of Pentecostal doctrine are occasionally used by its adherents to support their fights for social justice. According to this position, Pentecostalism may not easily be interpreted as an alienating movement.

Another series of Pentecostal studies has held what may be called the ‘paradoxical behaviour’ hypothesis. These authors’ position is simply that Pentecostalism is politically ambiguous. There are many and contrasting tendencies within Pentecostalism. Depending on the context and the type of Pentecostalism, it may bolster more progressive or conservative politics. Therefore, there is not just one political essence in the movement, but many versions that draw inspiration from the basic tenets of Pentecostalism. Ireland (1991, 1993) and Freston (1992, 1993) have reported these ambiguous tendencies for the Brazilian case, and Cleary and Sepulveda (1997:114) for the Chilean. Some researchers understand paradox to be a characteristic of Latin American Pentecostalism in general (Droogers, 1991).

Although these authors have been consistent in showing the ambiguous roles played by Pentecostals, they generally do not provide a systematic framework of interpretation. In my view, it is possible to explain Pentecostal political ambiguity by noting five factors that influence Pentecostals’ behaviour: (i) evangelisation; (ii) advancement in the church’s institutional structure; (iii) pragmatic use of politics (Cleary 1997) to achieve factors (i) and (ii); (iv) secular political identities and ideologies; (v) malleable Pentecostal doctrine subject to ad hoc interpretation.

Pentecostals’ main aim and motivation is evangelisation, thus politics is secondary to most Pentecostals. But Pentecostals also have a pragmatic relationship to politics which they will use to further evangelisation and their own advancement within the church. Pentecostal followers, and to a lesser extent leaders, have secular political identities and ideologies or political perspectives that were constituted previous to conversion or which recognize other sources outside Pentecostal doctrine. Even though certain elements of Pentecostalism such as evangelisation are central, doctrine is malleable and subject to ad hoc interpretation, allowing many different political ideologies and practices to be justified by it.

Thus, what explains the differing political behaviour of Pentecostals in dif-
different contexts is the particular combination of some of these five factors. The argument in this paper is twofold: first, by adding new evidence to the 'paradoxical behaviour' hypothesis, it shows the different and contrasting political roles played by Argentine Pentecostals; and second, by referring to these five factors, it also shows how Pentecostal political ambiguity may be explained.

**Pentecostalism and Politics at the National Level**

Pentecostalism became a visible and relatively strong actor in Argentine society after 1985 when it had reached ten per cent of the population. The impact of Pentecostalism in politics occurred at two levels. At the national level, Pentecostals tried to create an evangelical party and, at the same time, lobbied in favour of religious freedom. At a more local or neighbourhood level, Pentecostals played significant roles in relation to the patronage networks of traditional political parties. The five factors mentioned above may help to clarify Pentecostal political behaviour at both levels.

To comprehend the political repercussions of Pentecostalism, it is necessary to understand the context in which Pentecostal political action took place. During the eighties Argentina re-entered democracy. This implied more political freedom, including an increase in religious liberty. First, prohibitions to proselytise, which specifically affected non-Catholic religious groups, were removed. Second, people acquired a more developed consciousness of the importance of civil rights, especially the right of free speech and thought (Cheresky, 1992) and thus felt more free to enter dissident religious minorities such as Pentecostals. However, the movement towards more religious freedom was not simple. The public manifestation of formerly marginal religious minorities produced a negative reaction by Catholic and other social sectors. This backlash was especially visible in the media and in a 'law of cults' restricting religious freedom promoted by certain senators and deputies connected to the Catholic Church (Frigerio 1993). The negative reaction was strong during the first presidency of President Menem (1989-1995), especially during the constitutional reform of 1994 and in the debates held in the National Congress over the 'law of cults' dating from 1989. These initiatives countering religious liberties were resisted by Protestants in general and Pentecostals in particular, and were another motivation to enter politics.

Another element that influenced the situation of Argentine Pentecostalism was the development of the local party structures and political culture soon after the return to democracy. During the initial democratic years people eagerly participated in politics. But, as in 'Mitchel's Iron Law of Bureaucracy', the two dominating Argentine parties, the Peronist Party (also called Justicialista) and the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), soon developed bureaucratic structures that privileged positions in the party or state government power structure over representation. They turned into what are commonly known as 'political machines' or 'catch-all parties'. This kind of party structure promotes political patronage and the use of state resources to favour political leaders and brokers. In the Argentine case the self-centred political culture stimulated corruption of government functionaries. This became particularly clear in the presidency of Menem. As shown below, the contrast between the context of co-
ercion created by these political practices and the quotidian support provided by Pentecostal congregations worked in favour of local participation in the latter. The perception that people's discontent with politics was favourable to Pentecostal initiatives gave the idea to some leaders that this could be capitalised upon by creating an Evangelical political party.

The Evangelical Party Experience

The first attempt to create an Evangelical party in Argentina occurred in 1991 and was undertaken by an ecumenical group consisting mainly of Baptists, Pentecostals and Plymouth Brethren. The initial group was formed by lower ranking leaders and did not comprise any of the more outstanding Pentecostal pastors (although there was an attempt to include pastor Gimenez due to his popularity outside Pentecostal circles). This group had two basic motivations. Firstly, Pentecostal leaders wanted to occupy spaces in the state power structure because they sensed this would foster evangelisation. They planned to use their positions in the state structure to provide resources for their churches and widely promulgated this in services and evangelical meetings.

Secondly, lower ranking leaders saw a possibility to enhance their own positions by using the Pentecostal suffrage to promote themselves in the state's power structure and in that way become more important in Evangelical circles as well. This became evident in the fierce struggles leaders had in order to occupy top positions in the electoral lists, and the resulting conflicts were elemental in driving the party to dissolution.

These issues exhibit how the five factors mentioned above had some influence in Pentecostal political behaviour. The initial drive to create the party responded to (factor i) evangelisation, and (factor ii) leaders' searches for promotion within the church. Church leaders' involvement in politics had a pragmatic character (factor iii) since they entered politics because (factor i) evangelisation and (factor ii) promotion in church rank might be advanced. The influence of secular ideologies (factor iv) and malleability of doctrine (factor v) have also intervened in the processes that explain the rise and decline of the Evangelical political party as shown in the following.

Factor (v) is perceivable when analysing one of the main problems the leaders had to face when promoting their parties in and out of Pentecostal circles. In front of Pentecostal followers and the secular public, they had to justify why they were entering the political terrain. Pentecostals in Argentina had the perception that politics were a 'thing of the world' (in the world of sin) in which they should not become involved. In order to enter politics Pentecostals had to trespass upon this old doctrinal prohibition. Given the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine they soon found ways to justify involvement. The leaders claimed that fostering evangelisation was more important than respecting the commandment of not engaging in the activities of the world. They also argued that they would not become 'of the world' by entering politics since they did not plan to accept the corrupt practices of traditional politicians. In opposition, they would carry the evangelical message to them, calling politicians to accept God and become more honest.

Using the Evangelical monthly *El Puente* (along with secular media) and Evangelical meetings, the leaders rationalised these motives in the following
way. The main purpose of the party was to defend the Evangelical people from the possibly discriminatory laws that had been presented to the Congress, which could restrict their evangelising capacities. Also, positions in the state structure could eventually be used to promote evangelisation. Another official motive was that Evangelical politicians would help to promote a more clean, transparent and less corrupt political practice, thus contributing to the well-being of the Argentine people in general. This latter motive was highlighted when advertising the political party and candidates in the secular media, whereas the former motive was stressed in Evangelical media and meetings.

In spite of many efforts, the 1991 initiatives to create the party failed. The party received only 80,000 votes from the 6,000,000 cast in that opportunity. The amount was not even enough to position one of its candidates in office. Only in 1993 was this group of Evangelicals able to run candidates in national elections. The constitutional reform of 1994 represented the second time that the party had candidates in national elections. Again, they received very poor electoral support. Contrasting with the experiences of Peru, Brazil and Central America, it seems that in Argentina 'brothers don't vote for brothers' (cf. Freston, 1993). According to interviews and to the analysis made by Pentecostal leaders themselves, the main intervening factor was due to factor (iv): the secular political identities of Pentecostal people inclined them not to support the Pentecostal candidates. These secular political identities were of two sorts: (a) some had previously acquired political identities, most of them Peronists, which they were not willing to give up in spite of their conversion; (b) others had a long established perception that politics are dirty. This view was already strong in the secular political culture of the popular sectors. Because of these two elements, people were very reluctant to support the candidates of the Evangelical party in elections in spite of the promotion given to them in religious services, media and meetings.

After the two disappointing electoral experiences, schisms began to appear in the Evangelical party. In the reasons explaining these ruptures factors (ii) and (iv) are present. The conflicts stemmed from the struggle to occupy leading positions in the party together with ideological differences between party members. The latter had to do more with secular political ideologies than with contrasting Evangelical identities. A group of party leaders were former policemen of the state of Buenos Aires who had participated in the repressive task forces during the right-wing dictatorship of 1976-83 and had converted to Pentecostalism afterwards. According to the opposing group within the party, they had not really repented from the role they had played in the violent years, and during harsh discussions had remembered the 'good old times' in a wry yet threatening tone. Given the lack of electoral success, this group favoured the initiative of making an alliance with the Justicialista party, and especially with a right wing sector related to the governor of the state of Buenos Aires. Because this group had the strongest contacts with the Justicialistas, they would get the leading positions in the electoral lists in case the alliance was finally carried through.

The other sector favoured a different strategy. Although they did not have strong political commitments, they were sensitive to a blurred progressive ideology and did not tolerate the kind of authoritarianism of the other sector. Thus, profiting from their contacts with a few well-connected Protestant pas-
tors (who had participated in the constitutional reform, but were not members of the group) they joined the more progressive centre-left alliance Frente del País Solidario or Frepaso. The smooth contact with these pastors granted them — or so they thought — access to the leading positions in the electoral lists. So, besides ideological differences, there was also a struggle between the groups for the better positions in the electoral lists.

Both groups failed in their purposes. The lack of effective electoral support, and the scarce knowledge and preparation for public functions put these groups in a weak negotiating position. Thus, neither the Frepaso nor the right wing Justicialista sector paid serious attention to the initiatives undertaken by these groups, only giving them minor roles and no positions in party or state structure. As a result, the basic motivation of the Pentecostal leaders (fostering evangelisation and self-promotion) have waned, and the initiative to create an Evangelical party seems to have been put to rest for the time being.

The influence of some of the five factors may be perceived here. The basic motivation of the leaders had been to enhance their institutional positions by entering politics; they favoured any initiative that would have granted them better positions in the electoral lists. Then, when it became impossible to achieve these positions, their interests in politics waned. The leaders’ secular political ideologies also influenced the kind of alliance they had favoured in that more authoritarian leaders favoured a right wing alliance and more progressive leaders a centre-left one. We may therefore conclude that here the interaction of factors (ii), leaders’ search for institutional power, and (iii), secular political ideologies, can explain the political behaviour of these Pentecostals.

In summary, we can see how the five factors are present. The leaders were motivated by factors (i) and (ii): they wanted to foster evangelisation and to promote themselves to more powerful institutional positions. Factor (iii) is also present in the pragmatic relationship to politics of these leaders. They remained interested as long as factors (i) and (ii) could be achieved through political involvement, and lost interest when this was no longer the case. This is also a partial explanation why the initiative to create the party ultimately failed. The absence of major electoral support for the party is illustrated by factor (iv). Specifically, these ideologies did not incline the Pentecostal constituency to support the Evangelical party. Factors (ii) and (iv) help to explain the schism that occurred within the party. Factor (v), the malleability of doctrine such as either supporting or countering political involvement or supporting right-wing or left-wing politics, was be supported by invoking the basic tenets of Pentecostalism.

**Struggles for Religious Freedom**

Even though the initiative to create an evangelical party failed, we should not conclude that Pentecostals have not had any political role to play in Argentina. On the contrary, they have certainly played a role, especially in what concerns the issue of religious liberties. Protestants, among them Pentecostals, have strongly opposed a ‘law of cults’ restricting religious freedom. This particular law had been promoted by certain Catholic sectors and circled the chambers of Congress since 1989 without reaching a final approval. This was due, in part, to
Protestant lobbying and street demonstrations (Maróstica 1994). During the constitutional reform of 1994, the lobbying and demonstrations contributed to the derogation of an article demanding that the president be a Catholic.

My observation of the meetings where pastors and leaders planned these actions show that there has been a certain heterogeneity in the motivations that the different denominations had. Historical churches defended religious liberty as a value in itself. Pentecostals did not really defend the democratic principle of religious liberties. They were not comfortable with the idea that this would allow other religious groups, which they consider evil (i.e. Afro-Brazilian religions and curanderas or faith healers), to proselytise freely, and some even proposed that religious freedom should be restricted to Christian groups. In spite of these doctrinal obstacles a majority concluded that it was better to support complete religious freedom, because they sensed that going against it might backfire and affect some of their own groups in their evangelising capacities. Thus, they proceeded pragmatically and concluded that it was better to disregard pure doctrine and not run the risk of being affected by legal limitations. Again, given the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine, they found ways to justify their position. They claimed that, according to the scriptures, God was mighty and that they would be able to overcome the evil forces of Umbanda and Curanderismo in the new context of religious freedom.

As in previous cases, a combination of the five factors may help us to understand these issues. Factor (i) is present in that the main motivation in the leader’s actions was to enhance, or at least avoid restrictions to, their churches’ evangelising capacities. This is what initially prompted them to engage in lobbying and to organise street demonstrations against the ‘law of cults’. Pentecostals again established a pragmatic relationship towards politics by pursuing the enhancement of evangelisation through political action, hence factor (iii) is involved. This case also makes evident how factor (v), the malleability of doctrine, allows them to pursue their main aims, yet always finding an ad hoc doctrinal interpretation that justifies their actions. Three elements interact here: the paramount character of evangelisation, pragmatism and the malleability of doctrine. The interaction of these three factors explains the behaviour of Pentecostals in this case.

We have now examined the political behaviour of Protestants and Pentecostals at a national level, but the picture is still incomplete. To comprehend the political implications of local Pentecostal action at the neighbourhood level, it is necessary to understand how traditional political parties behave at local levels. This behaviour transforms into political issues what normally would only be administrative procedures. The patronage networks of dominating parties tend to subordinate the implementation of social policies of assistance and development to the parties’ interest. Because of this, inhabitants acting independently from political patronage structures become frustrated. Their demands receive no attention even when they strictly meet legal and administrative requirements. In this context Pentecostal congregations sometimes act as a channel through which the demands of these independent people are expressed and their needs satisfied. This has given Pentecostal churches a political dimension which they usually do not seek and many times are not aware of. As will be shown at the end of the next section, this political behaviour may also be clarified by the five factors model.
Pentecostalism and Politics at Local Levels

We are now about to explore the political behaviour of a Pentecostal church in Villa Eulalia. Villa Eulalia is a popular neighbourhood located in the second urbanisation belt of Buenos Aires City. The neighbourhood inhabitants belong to the lower-middle classes and the poor. Their salaries range between US$300 and US$1200 a month per family. It is estimated that the minimum income necessary for a family to live in Argentina (the poverty line) fluctuates around US$900; thus, numerous families in Villa Eulalia lack enough to cover their basic needs. Hence, many families depend on state welfare. Another poignant problem for Villa Eulalia’s inhabitants is the lack of neighbourhood infrastructure: proper sewerage, water, transportation, paved streets. Local institutions and most of the neighbourhood’s associative life are pervaded by forms of political patronage. For inhabitants to become beneficiaries of the local social services or to be successful in negotiating improvements in the neighbourhood’s infrastructure, they need to become ‘clients’ of the dominating political apparatuses. In this relation, clients must vote for a candidate in exchange for some sort of benefit, which is something they are entitled to as inhabitants of a certain area in the first place. As a reaction to this abusive political practice, people demand more ‘clean’ politics where politicians do not privilege their own personal or party interests over the common well-being.

The role perception of the political leaders interviewed in the neighbourhood clearly illustrates the situation described above. For example Chichi, a Justicialista leader, was appointed as a ‘Neighbourhood Advisor’. Formally, the Neighbourhood Advisor is a paid position, appointed by the Deliberative Council (the legislative power of the Municipality). The advisor should make local policies known, act as a neighbourhood agent in the implementation of social programs and inform the legislative body of the social situation of the neighbourhood inhabitants. The way Chichi understood her job as advisor clearly contrasts with this formal profile. She had named the place where she assisted people ‘Justicialista Affiliation Centre N°1’, and defined her role in the following way:

Chichi: I was given this job by Councillor José, so he is my boss really. And my job is to deliver the food, clothing and so on that he gives me, and also to register people. Because that is my job as well, to get people affiliated to the party.

It clearly follows from Chichi’s definition that, on the one hand, she was using state resources derived from social programs to promote her party’s cause; on the other hand, she was also inclined to pressure people to affiliate using her power to dispose of the much needed resources she distributed. Her perception of her political role was far from unique. A nearby leader of the opposing party, the Unión Cívica Radical, defined politics in similar way: ‘Politics are a feedback circle. I help the people and in return they support me with their affiliation and vote’. People’s reaction to this kind of practice was very clearly expressed by Elvira who, during a critical situation, had asked Chichi for assistance.
Elvira: Chichi? I don't like her at all.
Researcher: You don't like Chichi?
Elvira: No, she's a bitch, she's a self-interested bitch.
Researcher: And she's a Peronist Advisor?
Elvira: I think she's a Neighbourhood Advisor, I don't know what that means.
Researcher: Ah, a Neighbourhood Advisor.
Elvira: Well that's what she is. She's one of those.
Researcher: And she is a Peronist?
Elvira: Well of course. The other day they signed me up to be a Peronist, too.
Researcher: And you don't like Peronists?
Elvira: No. Because they call you compañera [partner, companion], but they say it in a way... you can see that they are being phoney from a mile away. And the other day I signed up to be a compañera as well, at least in that way, I said, they'll give me something.
Researcher: You signed up to get what, the food that Chichi distributes?
Elvira: I signed up because she asked me if I wanted to register with some party, and if I wanted to affiliate to hers. So I said sure, why not? Like as I said it's the same for me.
Researcher: And then what happened?
Elvira: Well, one day I went, I don't know if she was giving out milk, I don't remember what she was giving – oh yes – she was distributing some school clothes for the kids, so I signed up to get some clothing for Adrian [one of Elvira's sons] and that same day they asked me if I wanted to join to the Peronist party. So I say – okay – since I am here, if we are going to dance, then let's dance.

The previous quote shows how independent people's demands do not find a solution through the expected channels due to the patronage networks of the major political parties. When they do find a solution, it is only by accepting the coercion of political patrons.

The context of patronage gives a secondary political role to Pentecostal congregations. That is to say, even though the purpose of creating and developing a congregation is not to become an alternative channel to assist people in need or to express demands to improve neighbourhood infrastructure, this role is occasionally played. Pentecostals are at times conscious of the political implications of their actions, but in other cases they are not. Nevertheless, even in the latter cases, they do constitute an alternative to the parties' patronage networks, and in this way they do play a political role. I will illustrate this in the next section using what Geertz (1973) has called 'thick description'.

The Political Roles of a Pentecostal Community

The way in which the largest Pentecostal congregation of the neighbourhood developed and currently functions contrasts sharply with the coercive character of local political groups and scarce space available for participation. Although the church has a certain hierarchical order, it provides wide spaces for participation within which only very loose control is exerted. The organisation-
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The structural hierarchy is headed by a senior pastor, who is followed hierarchically by four other pastors, each being economically supported by the congregation. The pastors come from the area and have the same socio-economic standards as the rest of the local population. Prior to becoming pastors, their occupations were, in this case respectively, mason, mechanic, butcher, and soda deliverer. They are examples to the rest of the congregation, showing how any committed member may reach a leading position in church.

Besides the position of pastor, there are many other influential roles for protagonists of church life. An individual may be an ‘area leader’ and head a group of followers within a particular sector of the neighbourhood. Other opportunities for active involvement that take place at church or in private homes include youth services, women’s services, elderly people’s services, prayer meetings and house meetings. All these activities allow different people to occupy some space in the organisational structure of the Church.

The intense interaction between church members fostered by these activities and the space provided to become a protagonist in them combined with the charismatic character of the Pentecostal ritual produces a strong emotional identification. Even though people may have approached the church for help with health, economic or family problems, they find that the congregation provides other, perhaps unexpected, payoffs. In contrast to the coercive character of patronage networks, these appeals by the needy for close human relations in the neighbourhood are heard in the Pentecostal congregation. This is not something that goes unnoticed by people, for many of my interviewees praised the fact that the congregation is ‘like a family’. But the Pentecostal congregation does not only provide ‘warm feelings’. Bonds of solidarity are sources of material support, especially during ‘difficult times’. In this way, the church is sometimes able to function as a substitute for the patronage networks of political parties, giving church social assistance a certain political dimension.

Elvira’s case will serve as an example, showing how her experiences in the Pentecostal community contrasted to her encounter with local political leaders. Elvira approached the Pentecostal congregation for the same reason she went to Chichi: she needed some assistance. Her grandfather (already a believer) had recommended her to ‘go and see what the brothers can do for you’. During her first visit, the Area Pastor in charge of the block where Elvira lived gave her some clothing and food and invited her to participate in the following Sunday service. Elvira accepted the invitation: ‘I did it out of curiosity. I saw that my grandfather liked the services so I decided to see what it was like’. Elvira liked the joyful atmosphere of the services, the songs, the testimonies and the warm attitude of the pastors to newcomers. She increased her participation in church by becoming an active member, and from then on she requested assistance from church brothers and sisters, and did not resort to Chichi any longer.

It’s better with the brethren [in church] because it is like a family where everybody helps each other. With Chichi, you depend on her, and you have to do what she wants you to do, you have to play by her rules. Here [in church] you don’t feel that pressure, you just tell the pastor ‘look I need some help’. He then asks the brothers and sisters to help you and they do it
with joy and with no conditions, just because they are your brothers and sisters, because we all are God’s children.

Elvira’s case is not exceptional. As reported by researchers (Roberts, 1968; Mariz, 1994), assistance between church members in practical matters is very frequent. Help in finding jobs, financial aid at critical moments, for example, are habitual among members of the Pentecostal community. As shown in Elvira’s case, this is not only an economic resource that the congregation provides, but it also plays a political role by acting as a more acceptable alternative to the coercive and patronising options offered by political parties.

In addition, this Pentecostal congregation acted as a conduit for demands to improve neighbourhood infrastructure by helping people to bypass political patronage networks. In this situation, it transcended the role of responding only to the individual needs of a church member and assumed a political role in community matters that involved people who were not Pentecostal believers. However, it is noteworthy that these cases generated some tension within the congregation through conflicts with traditional Pentecostal doctrine.

One of the demands for which the congregation served as a conduit was for street paving. A group of people who were not integrated in any political or social neighbourhood association were trying to get the municipality to pave one of the most important streets in the area. This was necessary since they lived far away from the road providing bus service. On rainy days they had to walk some ten or fifteen blocks through the mud to get to the bus stop. However, this independent group of neighbours did not want any political party to capitalise on their initiative. They looked for an independent institution to channel their demand. They decided to ask the Pentecostal Area Pastor responsible for that zone if he was willing to act as a mediator between the people and the municipality. After giving some thought to the matter the Area Pastor accepted. He sensed that, ‘by establishing close contact with the people we may find more ways to spread God’s word to unbelievers’. More plans were made by the independent group to demand a more efficient garbage disposal system. These initiatives, however, generated debates among groups of church members. Some agreed with the Area Pastor’s attitude, while others thought this was too much worldly involvement. The following dialogue, which I have reproduced in part, developed between two students during one of the doctrinal courses given in church that discussed whether Evangelicals should get involved ‘in the world’. It illustrates the line of the debate.

Alberto - With pastor Marcos [the Area Pastor involved] we are working together with some of our neighbours to improve our environment. What we are doing is to present a letter that some people wrote to the municipality. We are asking the authorities to pave some of the streets so people won’t have to walk through so much mud on their way to work. I think that even if we are not of this world, we still have our feet in it, so we must help other people, even if they are not believers.

Beba - Well, I think that that is... I don’t know, but getting involved in politics, in political things, I am not sure we should do this. God wants us to evangelise, to spread the word, to win new converts, and when everybody
has heard the message and opened their hearts there will be no need to ask for things or send letters, or organise. People will do good spontaneously, because they are going to have a new heart.

Alberto -Yes, but what are we going to do meanwhile? Just wait? No, I think God wants us to help others, also to give testimony of what Christians can do in this world, to give testimony of God's power. And in that way we may win souls, showing how Christians may get involved in things of this world, but not as people of this world. We can participate in politics without becoming corrupt.

A similar example, but with different results, took place when a group of lay church members took the initiative of founding a primary school and a kindergarten. The school was important in the neighbourhood context since good educational services were lacking in the area and thus demands for more and better schools were often expressed by the local population. Again, the initiative aroused conflicts within the congregation since establishing a school implied that a significant amount of church resources (pastors and leaders' time, and funds) would have to be diverted from evangelisation. The senior pastor objected to this deviation of resources and obstructed the initiative. Here is how he tackled the matter during a service:

[...]I still feel that we should do more in the task of winning souls, of enlarging the temple, to work more. I wouldn't like it if the school would affect me, or [other pastors] [diverting time from evangelisation into the school project]. I am already short of time; and this may even be the Evil one's plans. I think it is more important to win souls [...].

These brief descriptions of the ways in which local politics and Pentecostalism are linked illustrate the ambiguity of church members. The local congregation was willing to enter the political terrain and act as an alternative channel to express the people's demands for street paving. On the other hand, the congregation was not willing to assume any financial obligations in establishing a primary school. This kind of paradoxical behaviour may be explained by referring to at least some of the five factors. Particularly important here are factors (i), the importance of evangelisation; (iii), the pragmatic attitude toward politics; (iv), the influence of previously constituted ideologies; and (v), the malleability of doctrine.

The paramount importance of evangelisation may be perceived in these cases. The debates circled around how entering the socio-political terrain could affect the congregation's evangelising capacities. This can be perceived in the debate between Alberto and Beba. Beba's main argument against political involvement is that they should concentrate on evangelisation instead of diverting their interests to politics. Alberto's response does not question the central importance of evangelisation; instead he argues that playing socio-political roles in the neighbourhood may be a good way to win souls. Senior Pastor Marcos, when explaining why he became 'politically involved', argued that this could help him 'spread God's word to unbelievers'. These arguments recognise evangelisation as the church's central task, and socio-political in-
volvement must be ‘instrumental’ to it in order to be acceptable. This is illustrated even more clearly in the senior pastor’s reaction against the school in that his main objection to this plan is the negative effect on the church’s evangelising capacities. It is clear that political involvement in local contexts (as in national ones) depends upon its pragmatic character and that evangelisation is the paramount motivational factor. Further analysis will show the presence of factors (iv) and (v) as well.

Before turning Pentecostal, Alberto had been involved in a Communist worker’s association, and although he left the association upon conversion, he still maintained parts of his former ideology. In contrast, Beba had never been involved in politics because: ‘even before becoming a believer I thought politics were dirty’. This new information shows what inspired the different interpretations of doctrine that Alberto and Beba made. The more leftist position embraced by Alberto and the more conservative posture of Beba may come from their secular political ideologies. Thus, factor (iv) is present. It is also possible to see in their debate how factor (v), the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine, allowed both contrasting positions to be maintained by making reference to it. We may conclude that for Pentecostals, even in local contexts, evangelisation always has the priority over socio-political involvement. However, given the influence of secular political ideologies and the malleability of doctrine, different Pentecostals may alternatively argue that involvement either fosters evangelisation or is an obstacle to it.

Finally, something should be said in relation to the political role played by the social assistance that Pentecostal networks provide, and Elvira’s is the case in point here. As noted, helping the brethren is part of the Pentecostals’ congregational practice. It is a common feature of Pentecostal communities in general as reported by almost every study of Latin American Pentecostalism. In this case there is no ambiguity in Pentecostal behaviour. Other Pentecostals in very different circumstances provide this kind of help, too. It is not casual, and it responds to a common feature of Pentecostal doctrine. Helping the brothers and sisters is a strong commandment among Pentecostals. It is important to note that this practice does not have political connotations for Pentecostals themselves, but what is so particular to this case is exactly the political implications that this has in the larger Argentine context. There are the implications related to the context of political patronage in which it takes place. Thus to an extent, this situation escapes the five factor model we are applying here. It does so only because Pentecostals perceive it as an intrinsic part of their community life, and not as any political activity.

Explaining the Ambiguity of Pentecostal Political Behaviour

In these accounts of the relationships between Pentecostals and politicians, we can see that the former do not play a paramount role in Argentine politics. This is for two reasons. First, politics are not very important for most of the Argentine Pentecostals, and second, their intervention is not decisive in the major political issues, for Pentecostal opinion and suffrage does not overturn electoral polls or strongly influence Argentineans beyond church limits. However, this does not mean that Pentecostals are completely invisible in the Argentine
Looking at these roles we may conclude that authors supporting the 'paradoxical behaviour' hypothesis have offered the more sound theory hitherto. In certain circumstances, Pentecostals may be a democratising force (even if not really following democratic principles), as in the issue of religious liberties. There are certain Pentecostals that prefer conservative politics while others are more progressive, as shown in the schism within the political party. And there are situations in which Pentecostals may engage in socio-political activism, while in other cases they may be reluctant to enter such arena, as in the neighbourhood. I hope I have shown that this ambiguous behaviour can be explained by referring to the five intervening factors.

The analysis of the different cases explored here permits us to go one step further and show the logical connections between these five factors. The first two factors represent the basic motives Pentecostals may have to enter politics. They enter politics when they feel that it will enhance their evangelising capabilities by putting their churches into institutionally more powerful situations, and when they perceive that politics may offer an avenue for promotion to more advantageous positions within the church. But because these motivations are in themselves basic, politics in particular are not important for Pentecostals. Thus the relationship towards politics remains essentially pragmatic, since they seek political involvement only as long as this contributes to religious aims. However, though these core elements influence Pentecostal political practice, there is another significant factor to be considered. Pentecostals may have secular political ideologies or identities which they acquired before conversion, or which have been inspired by secular views initially not influenced by Pentecostal doctrine. Although the core elements may never be ignored, secular political identities or ideologies may influence the way the core aims are pursued. In this way some Pentecostals see politics as a channel for evangelisation, whereas others see it as an obstacle; some see their doctrine as close to right-wing politics, while others espouse more progressive ideologies. Given the malleable character of Pentecostal doctrine, within certain limits, these various positions may be justified equally. It is this particular combination of influential factors which explains the floating and ambiguous Pentecostal political practice.

Now, the question that still remains is whether this model could also be applied to other circumstances and cases. What would happen if we tried to apply this same scheme to explain the relationship between Pentecostals and politics in Brazil, for example? The Brazilian case differs from the Argentinean one in many respects. In Brazil Pentecostal initiatives to enter an alliance with political parties have been successful. Some Pentecostal candidates have been elected to congress thanks to their support. As Freston (1993) has reported, it seems that in Brazil Pentecostal suffrage supports Evangelical candidates in that brethren vote for brethren. However, these circumstantial differences do not necessarily refute the model. It may well be that different political ideologies or a more open attitude towards religion from traditional politicians can explain these differences. If this is the case, these contrasts would not necessarily escape the explanatory power of this model. However, more comparison and
refinement is necessary before the true significance of the model can be established.

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**Notes**

1. The evidence used in this section was collected between 1992 and 1997 when I did research on Argentine Pentecostalism. Information was gathered by canvassing literature produced by different Pentecostal ministries, through interviewing Pentecostal leaders and attending meetings at different levels. It also involved fieldwork in Villa Eulalia, a neighbourhood in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. I did research there between 1988 and 1995 on the political, social and religious institutions.

2. The process that lead to this expansion is too complex to develop here in full. It was a process that resulted from a combination of several influential factors: 1) a negative economic situation which affected the living standards of lower-class Argentines; 2) a context of increased political freedom; 3) new forms of leadership and ritual developed among Pentecostals favoring the expansion of an already growing church. As a result of these processes, about ten per cent of the Argentine population were Pentecostals by 1985; from 2.5 per cent in 1960. For a more thorough account of the growth of Pentecostalism in Argentina, see Wynarczyck and Seman (1994, 1995); Maróstica (1997); and Miguez (1998).

3. Menem belongs to the Peronist Party -- one of the two traditional parties in Argentina (the other being the Unión Cívica Radical or UCR). He was the second democratically elected president after Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983. Following the presidency of Alfonsin (1983-1989) who belonged to the UCR, Menem ruled for two consecutive periods (1989-1995 and 1995-1999).

4. Here I follow the traditional division between Historical, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Historical churches are those directly derived from Lutheran reform. These churches arrived in Argentina during the nineteenth century, especially through North-European immigration and never had evangelisation as a central aim. The Evangelical churches (mainly Baptists and Plymouth Brethren) that arrived in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century were influenced by the North American spiritual awakenings of the nineteenth century and did have evangelisation as a central task. Pentecostal churches first arrived in Argentina in 1909 through migratory networks and then through independent missionaries. In addition to evangelisation they had baptism in the Holy Spirit as a central ritual and doctrinal element. This differentiates them from the other evangelical groups. The term ‘Protestants’ is used to refer to the three groups in general.

5. Gimenez is one of the better-known Pentecostal pastors. Together with pastors Cabrera and Anacondia he is one of the leaders responsible for the activism in the Pentecostal sphere during the 1980s. The ministries Anacondia, Cabrera and Gimenez especially blossomed during the second half of the eighties. In 1986 Anacondia reached an average attendance rate of 36,445 in each massive evangelising campaign. Cabrera had 107,600 adherents in 1987. In 1989 Gimenez’s main church had a daily attendance of 14,000 (Wynarczyck, 1989). Besides their growth, these leaders introduced new forms of campaigning and discourse that went beyond the limits of their own churches, unifying the movement and producing new dynamics in the Evangelical field in general (Maróstica, 1997: 53 ff). However, even if these ministries dynamically contributed to the Evangelical field, they did not become the major national Pentecostal churches. Original groups such as the Assemblies of God or the Union of the Assemblies of God still outnumber the new ministries in churches and adherents (Wynarczyck and de Majo, 1995).
6. The unofficial motives were inferred from my own observation and interviews with group members.


8. Recent surveys done by Roemers show that Pentecostals consistently vote Peronist over any other party.

9. The attitude of the Pentecostal electorate questions, to a certain extent, my previous claim that Pentecostals’ political behavior is pragmatic in that it always gives privilege to evangelisation over any other political motivation. In this case, it seems that secular political ideologies (like Peronism) take preeminence over the Pentecostal one and thus people will not vote according to the characteristic priorities of the movement. What may explain this is that among the Pentecostal constituency there are different degrees of compromise within the church. Thus, although following Pentecostal doctrine in many aspects of life, a number of church-goers will not do this in what concerns the political field. In this case, this fact would not necessarily counter my current argument since these people would not be adopting a Pentecostal behavior in political concerns. Here they are not acting as Pentecostals, but instead they are behaving as Peronists, socialists, or other political ideologists.

10. The effectiveness of this lobbying is not due entirely to the limited strength of Protestantism. However, it did succeed in making the restrictive measures present in the law of cults more public and evident before an unfavourable public opinion. The political price this might have had for supporting it deterred the support of the congressmen.

11. The name of the neighbourhood and of its inhabitants has been changed to preserve the privacy of my informants. The research done in the area comprised participant observation and interviewing in some of the more important social institutions, local political posts and Pentecostal and Catholic churches. The evidence presented below is not only based on observation but also in sixty life stories collected during research, and in statistical data obtained through secondary sources. More information on the neighbourhood’s political and religious institutions may be found elsewhere (Miguez, 1995; 1998).

Bibliography


