

Institutions, Education, and Religious Change: Evidence from Colombia

Extended Abstract (ERSA)

Héctor Galindo-Silva

Paula Herrera-Idárraga

Motivation and research question

Religious identity is often viewed as persistent, shaped by intergenerational transmission, community norms, and long-lived institutions. Yet many countries have experienced rapid religious change, including sharp declines in Catholic identification across Latin America. Existing explanations emphasize modernization, urbanization, demographic shifts, and the expansion of new denominations. We study a complementary mechanism: whether a major institutional reform that redefines church–state relations can durably reshape religious identity, and whether schooling serves as a key transmission channel for that reform.

Colombia provides a salient setting. Under the 1886 Constitution, Catholicism held a privileged status and was tightly linked to state-building and public life. The 1991 Constitution introduced a new institutional regime: religious freedom and state neutrality became constitutional principles. Importantly, the reform was paired with an educational mandate: Article 41 required compulsory constitutional instruction and civic education in schools. This mandate was subsequently operationalized—most notably through Law 107 of 1994, which required at least 50 hours of constitutional studies as a prerequisite for high school graduation, and reinforced within the broader education framework. We ask whether cohorts exposed to this civic-constitutional curriculum during late adolescence exhibit different religious identities and religious behavior later in adulthood.

Institutional context and conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework is that civic-constitutional education can affect religious identity through at least three mechanisms. First, by strengthening civic conceptions of citizenship, rights, and pluralism, it may reduce the perceived social cost of deviating from the historically dominant religion. Second, by making state neutrality salient, it may weaken the symbolic link between national identity and Catholic affiliation. Third, the direction of identity change may depend on territorial religious supply and institutional density: where non-Catholic churches are organizationally present and socially embedded, reduced switching costs may translate into denominational change; where Catholic dominance remains stronger and alternatives are less institutionalized, changes may appear as secularization.

This territorial perspective motivates our emphasis on regional heterogeneity. A single national institutional shock can generate different local trajectories depending on pre-existing religious infrastructure, local networks, and the menu of religious options available in each place.

Data

Our main source is Colombia’s Political Culture Survey (*Encuesta de Cultura Política*) conducted by DANE. The survey is nationally representative of adults and includes detailed measures of political attitudes and social values. We use the waves that contain a harmonized measure of religious affiliation (2015, 2017, 2019, and 2021), with each wave surveying tens of thousands of respondents. Religious affiliation is recorded across multiple categories, including Catholic; several non-Catholic Christian denominations (e.g., Protestant/Evangelical/Pentecostal and other Christian groups); other religions; and secular categories (none; agnostic/atheist). We also use survey information on religious practice (attendance) where available.

To document long-run national trends, we complement the analysis with Latinobarómetro data for Colombia (1996–2023), which shows a sustained decline in Catholic identification and growth in non-Catholic and secular shares over time. For territorial mechanisms, we merge respondents’ municipality or region with pre-reform measures of Catholic institutional presence (e.g., counts of Catholic churches in the mid-1990s from Fundación Social) and municipal characteristics from the early 1990s, including ethnic composition (Afro-descendant and Indigenous shares from the 1993 Population Census). These auxiliary data support heterogeneity analysis and interpretation rather than being central to identification.

Empirical strategy

We exploit cohort variation in exposure to the 1994 constitutional curriculum. In Colombia, students typically attend the final year of secondary school (grade 11) around ages 16–17. Because Law 107 (1994) made constitutional studies a graduation requirement, individuals who were young enough in 1994 to be in late secondary school after the reform are plausibly “treated,” while those who were older and had likely completed secondary school before the reform are “untreated.”

We estimate difference-in-differences style specifications comparing religious outcomes across treated and untreated cohorts among individuals who completed high school, controlling for cohort fixed effects, survey-year fixed effects, and region fixed effects. The coefficient of interest captures the differential change in religious identity associated with being of school age when the reform-mandated curriculum was implemented. Standard errors are clustered at the region level, and we rely on wild bootstrap procedures where appropriate given the number of clusters. We probe robustness by (i) using narrower age windows around the cutoff; (ii) testing alternative cohort definitions; and (iii) conducting placebo checks on pre-reform cohorts where no effect should be present.

The identifying assumption is that, absent the constitutional curriculum reform, adjacent cohorts would have followed similar trends in religious outcomes. The use of close cohorts around the exposure threshold and placebo exercises help assess this assumption.

Main findings

Across specifications, exposure to the constitutional curriculum is associated with a statistically and substantively meaningful decline in Catholic identification, on the order of a few percentage points. Given Colombia’s high baseline Catholic share in these cohorts, this constitutes a non-trivial shift in identity. Placebo tests using earlier cohorts do not show comparable “effects,” supporting a causal interpretation tied to reform exposure.

We then examine where the decline in Catholic identification goes. The evidence is inconsistent with a single, uniform national pathway. Instead, the reform exposure appears to trigger reallocation across religious categories, with strong territorial heterogeneity.

Territorial heterogeneity: switching versus secularization

A key contribution of the paper is to show that the same institutional and educational shock produced different religious trajectories across regions, consistent with differences in religious supply and institutional embeddedness.

- **Andean core (Central and Eastern regions and Bogotá): secularization.** In these regions, reduced Catholic identification is accompanied by an increase in secular categories (no religion/agnostic/atheist), and evidence points to lower religious participation. This pattern aligns with a secularization channel: civic education emphasizing pluralism and state neutrality weakens the symbolic link between Catholic identity and citizenship, and the “exit” from Catholicism is more likely to translate into non-affiliation.
- **Peripheral regions (Pacific and Atlantic/Caribbean): denominational switching.** In these regions, the decline in Catholic identification primarily corresponds to increased identification with non-Catholic Christian denominations, and we observe patterns consistent with higher religious attendance. This is consistent with a switching mechanism in places where non-Catholic churches have historically developed stronger organizational presence and social networks. When the perceived costs of leaving Catholicism fall, individuals in these territories are more likely to move into an available alternative rather than exit religion altogether.

These heterogeneous effects support a territorial-capital interpretation: civic-constitutional education may shift norms and perceived legitimacy, but the *destination* identity depends on local religious infrastructure, social networks, and the menu of options embedded in each place.

Ethnicity and interpretation

Because regions with switching patterns overlap with higher shares of Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations, we evaluate whether heterogeneity simply reflects ethnicity. Using individual self-identification and municipal ethnic composition, we find that the decline in Catholic identification is not confined to ethnic minorities and that the switching-versus-secularization pattern is better explained by territorial religious supply and institutional context than by ethnicity alone. Moreover, among groups and regions exhibiting switching, the simultaneous increase in attendance is inconsistent with a simple disengagement story.

Contributions and implications

This paper contributes to three strands of research. First, it adds to the literature on religious change by providing evidence that institutional reforms—not only market entry of denominations or modernization—can reshape religious identity. Second, it highlights education as a transmission mechanism through which constitutional reforms can have long-run cultural effects detectable decades later. Third, it contributes to regional science by showing that cultural change following national reforms is place-dependent, shaped by pre-existing territorial institutions and religious infrastructure. The results speak to broader debates on how formal institutions interact with informal norms and community structures, and how national reforms may yield heterogeneous local outcomes.

Keywords

Religious identity; constitutional reform; civic education; institutions; territorial heterogeneity; Colombia; secularization; denominational switching.