Religious Voting and Moral Traditionalism: The moderating role of party characteristics

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Abstract

One of the most important theoretical explanations for why religion is associated with party choice is that religion affects citizens' moral values, which in turn affect party preference. In this article, I first estimate the empirical importance of this mechanism. On average, about ten percent of religious voting is mediated by moral traditionalism. Secondly, I argue that the importance of this mechanism varies depending on party characteristics. The effect is indirect through moral traditionalism to the extent that parties emphasise moral issues such as abortion or euthanasia. Under these conditions, group belonging may provide useful cues for voters. Combining data on 50 parties with survey data on more than 10,000 citizens from 13 West European countries, this article provides empirical evidence of this proposition in the case of the religious cleavage. The findings may be of relevance also for other social structural variables, such as class or gender.

Keywords: Religion; voting; cleavage; party; values; elections.

Introduction

Religion continues to shape political preferences in Western democracies (Broughton and ten Napel 2000, Norris and Inglehart 2011: 201), and constitutes one of the most studied and important cleavages in Western democracies (see, e.g., Esmer and Petterson 2007).[1] Despite predictions about the weakening political relevance of religion, empirical work suggests that the religious cleavage has been remarkably persistent over time (e.g. Elff 2009; Knutsen 2004b, Raymond 2011) or even possibly of growing importance (Olson and Green 2006). Especially for Christian parties as well as openly secular parties, such as many New Left parties, differences in support between religious groups and non-believers are immense (e.g. Langsæther 2019a: 8-10). Yet, as for other social structural variables, we know surprisingly little about why this is the case (e.g. Bengtsson et al. 2013: 695, Evans 2010: 637-638). What mechanisms shape the linkages between religion and political parties?

In this article, I first build on previous literature on religious voting to present one major theoretical mechanism, namely that the effect of religion on party preference is mediated by political values, in particular by moral traditionalism. The first research question is *to what extent does moral traditionalism mediate the effect of religion on voting?* I find that, on average, around ten percent of the total effect of religion is mediated by this value orientation. Secondly, I build on the cue taking literature as well as recent supply side theories of cleavage voting to argue that the importance of this mechanism depends on party characteristics, and in particular to what extent the parties focus on issues of relevance to moral traditionalism. The empirical evidence from across Western Europe supports this notion: The more parties focus

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[1] This has been documented in the USA (e.g. Manza and Brooks 1997); Canada (Johnston 1985); Australia (Bean 1999); in EU elections (Van der Brug et al. 2009); and all over Western Europe (Broughton and ten Napel 2000, Knutsen and Langsæther 2018).

on moral issues, the more does moral values mediate the electoral effects of religion at the individual level.

In sum, the article combines demand and supply side – i.e. voter and party – perspectives on political behaviour, and suggests how political parties can influence individual-level mechanisms that forge an association between religion and party preference. Finally, I discuss the theoretical implications of the findings and the broader implications for other cleavages as well as how democracies work.

Moral values mediate religious voting

The literature on religious voting has suggested several potential mechanisms that may induce an association between religion and party preference. The first set of mechanisms arises when citizens feel like one party represents their social or religious group, independent of the parties' current policies (Duriez et al. 2002). This can come about through historical ties that develop between social groups and particular political parties due to events or processes that occurred a long time ago, creating frozen party alignments (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, see also Knutsen 2004a: 4-6). One example would be a party that previously espoused moral traditionalism and had close ties to a conservative religious group. Such ties may be effectively transmitted between generations through parental socialisation or because children take political preference cues from their parents, leading to sustained group-party ties even if the party no longer explicitly advocates Christian moral tenets. Tilley (2015: 923) describes this as a 'relic of past associations between groups and parties'. They may also come about because a party makes appeals to the group (see Thau 2017) or has candidates that represent the social group (see Campbell et al. 1960: ch. 12, Heath 2015). In either case, a sense of belonging to the group influences the group members' political behaviour, regardless of shared political values. One example is Catholics in Flandern who vote for the Christian Democrats simply because they consider them the political representative of that particular

social group (Duriez et al. 2002: 36). Evans and de Graaf (2013: viii) describe this as "the idea that religious or class politics reflects an almost unthinking adherence to organizations representing religious principles or class interests".

The second set of mechanisms inducing an association between religion and party preference is indirect: Religion affects individuals' political values and attitudes, and these, in turn, affect party preference (Duriez et al. 2002, Knutsen 2018: 249). In other words, political values may (at least partially) mediate the electoral effect of religion. This idea has been expressed in several works, such as the cleavage model of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and the 'funnel of causality' in the Michigan model of electoral behaviour (Campbell et al. 1960, see also Raymond 2011: 127). Knutsen (2018: 9) claims that the basic causal model in both 'Inglehart's group polarisation hypothesis and Kitschelt's model (…) can be understood as being focussed on the indirect effect from social structure via value orientations to party choice'. This kind of religious voting is in line with standard normative democratic theory, as it implies that voters elect parties with whom they share political values. It is also the mechanism tested in this article.

Mediation of religious voting can happen through any number of political attitudes and value orientations, such as environmentalism (e.g. White 1967, Hand and van Liere 1984), immigration orientations (e.g. Gross and Ziebertz 2009), and economic left-right values (e.g. Scheve and Stasavage 2006, Stegmueller et al. 2012). However, in this article I focus on the most important political value orientation in relation to religion, namely moral traditionalism.[2] Several studies show that religious people are more socially conservative when it comes to

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[2] In addition to this being most clearly related to religion, the evidence is mixed when it comes to the relationship between religion and some of the other political attitudes. For environmentalism, see Dietz et al. (1998) and Clements et al. (2014), for immigration orientations see Arzheimer and Carter (2009), and for economic attitudes see Nicolet and Tresch (2009). Recent evidence also suggests that religion is correlated with economic attitudes because religious citizens choose parties that espouse religious values, and then support these parties' economic policies. Thus, religiosity is related to right-wing preferences in Western Europe, but to left-wing preferences in Eastern Europe (see Savage 2019).

sexual norms, such as homosexuality or pornography (Woodrum 1988), gender and family relations (Hayes 1995, Woodrum 1988), or matters of life and death, such as euthanasia and abortion (Clements 2014, Scheepers and Van der Silk 1998). These issues are often considered intimately linked to, and even expressions of, religious values (e.g. Engeli et al. 2012, Lachat 2012: 8, Nicolet and Tresch 2009). De Koster and van der Waal (2007) discuss a dimension they label *moral traditionalism*, reflected in issues such as gender equality, homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, and divorce. Traditional stances on these issues are 'deeply inspired by the Christian Bible and by socialization in Christian institutions', and 'Christian religiosity seems, in other words, to be "naturally" tied to moral traditionalism.' (De Koster and van der Waal 2007: 453). In this article, I first study to what degree the indirect mechanism is at work across Western Europe: How much of the association between religion and party preference is mediated by moral traditionalism?

The role of political parties

Furthermore, I argue that the extent of mediation through moral traditionalism depends on party characteristics. Supply side perspectives on the social bases of politics argue that political institutions, parties, and elites, shape and activate the social divisions in the population (Evans and Northmore-Ball 2018). While present in earlier works (e.g. Sartori 1969), this perspective has recently received renewed scholarly attention (see e.g. the edited volume of Evans and de Graaf 2013). The key notion underpinning such perspectives is that parties need to diverge on issues of relevance to the social groups (for instance, moral issues for religion) to make it electorally relevant. The mechanism is quite simple, as Evans (2017: 185) explains it for the class cleavage: "Ideological convergence reduces the strength of the signal from parties to voters and the motivation for choosing parties on interest/value grounds derived from class is weakened, and *vice versa*." This notion finds empirical support for the class cleavage (e.g. Evans and Tilley 2012, Spies 2013).

Evans and de Graaf (2013: 17) argue that the extent of party ideological polarisation should also affect the link between *religion* and party preference. The more party polarisation along relevant issues such as abortion, the larger the association between moral traditionalism and party preference at the individual level and thus the higher the level of religious voting in the party system as a whole. If parties do not diverge on moral issues, then these differences between the groups are not activated in the voting booth. In other words, convergence on moral issues should reduce religious voting and polarisation should increase it. Several studies demonstrate empirically that the level of religious voting varies with the polarisation of the parties on questions of traditional morality (Elff 2009, Jansen 2011, Jansen et al. 2012). The major contribution of the supply side literature has been to demonstrate this relationship between party (system) characteristics, notably party polarisation, and the size of the total effect of religion and party preference. The causal model these studies rely on is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A causal diagram of supply side theory.
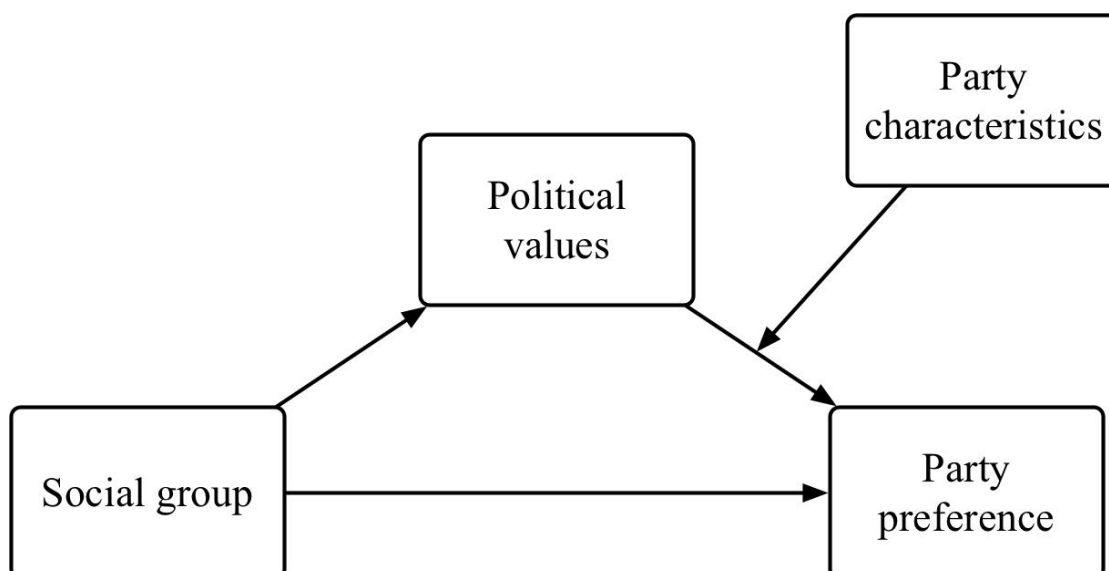
Source: Langsæther 2019a: 22.

A key implication of the argument above, which has not yet been studied, is that the mediation of the electoral effects of religion through moral traditionalism varies with the strength of the signal from parties to voters for choosing parties on value grounds derived from religion.

To see why, consider that the indirect route requires that value orientations account for group differences in party preference. If religion is going to affect party preference through moral traditionalism, then religion must affect this value orientation, and, crucially, moral traditionalism must affect party preference. Yet moral traditionalism will only affect party preference to the degree that the parties send clear signals on moral issues (cf. Figure 1). If people in a religious group hold morally traditional values but do not know which parties offer policies in line with these values, their values are unlikely to lead them to prefer a certain party. Their ability as well as motivation for choosing parties on value grounds derived from religion is weakened (Evans 2017: 185).[3]

The focus in the literature has mostly been on party polarisation as a measure of signal strength, an aspect emphasised in the cue taking literature: 'When elites are polarized, they send voters clear signals about where they stand on the issues of the day' (Levendusky 2010: 114-115). In other words, what we are looking for are *clear signals* on issues *of relevance* to the cleavage. Polarisation certainly contributes to signal clarity. However, not only polarisation, but also salience, improves signal strength. Empirically, the salience of economic left-right issues does, indeed, matter for levels of class voting (Rennwald and Evans 2014), and salience of moral issues correlate with levels of religious voting (Jansen 2011: ch. 5).

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[3] Another theoretical mechanism not so far considered by the supply side literature is that the effect of religion on moral traditionalism may increase when moral issues are more salient. In that case, parties can affect the strength of both arrows making up the indirect effect. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing this out. Whether party characteristics affect one of or both of the two arrows, the theoretical prediction is the same: Party behaviour affects the importance of the indirect effect.

Thus, the more salient moral issues such as abortion or gay marriage are for a party – the more they talk about it in their electoral campaigns and the more they emphasise them in their party manifestos – the clearer are presumably the signals to voters. As Seeberg et al. (2017: 340) put it, "when parties talk more about an issue, voters see a stronger connection between the party and the issue." Unlike polarisation, salience can be calculated for individual parties, rather than for a party system as a whole (see the methodology section for more on this).

Furthermore, polarisation may not yield clear signals unless an issue is also salient. Parties might disagree strongly on issues they rarely talk about, and thus voters are unable to capture these differences. When the signals are clearer, voters are more likely to capture them accurately and respond to them. In other words, voters who do not share values with the party are more likely to abandon it, while the party may attract voters who share its values. Given that political values are not randomly distributed in the population, but rather depend on group belonging, this leads to a larger indirect effect from social group characteristics via values on party preference. In sum, any individual party's behaviour should affect the way the voters relate to that party, e.g. to what degree the association between religious groups and a party is mediated by moral traditionalism. Religious groups provide a better cue for party preference when parties give *clear signals* on moral issues, through emphasising questions such as abortion or euthanasia. This argument, unlike the polarisation argument, does not pertain to the party system, but to individual parties, who may choose to emphasise different policy areas. From all this, we may derive the *salience hypothesis: Moral traditionalism mediates more of the association between religion and party preference the more parties emphasise moral issues.*

Measuring religion

Religion can be understood in many ways. In this article, I am primarily concerned with religion as a social phenomenon: Religious denominations are social groups in which people may be more or less active members. In the literature on religion and voting, religion is measured in many different ways. In the cleavage literature, it is quite common to use either denomination affiliation or church attendance (Knutsen 2004b), and the latter is usually understood as a measure of religiosity. However, as Esmer and Petterson (2007: 492) point out in their review of the literature on religious voting, "clearly, church attendance is not the ideal indicator of religious commitment and practice. While some religions, for instance Catholicism, emphasize and require regular attendance at church services, this is not the case for others. Furthermore, going to church can, in many places, be interpreted as a social rather than a religious commitment."

In a similar vein, Kotler-Berkowitz (2001: 525) argue that "simply being affiliated with a religious group, without necessarily joining in the practice of its faith, may socialize individuals to certain political and partisan preferences. Behaving, in turn, increases the likelihood that socialized preferences will be reinforced; religious practice places people in religious environments, particularly organized environments like churches, where they are likely to receive political information and cues from clergy and co-religionists." Building on this, I follow other authors in the literature and distinguish between non-affiliated, passive denomination members and active denomination members (see, e.g., Lachat 2012, Tilley 2015, Goldberg 2019). The passive denomination members are those who expressed that they belong to a denomination while also responding that they visit church either only on special occasions, once a year or less often. The active denomination members are those who belong to a denomination and go to church at least monthly. The number of denominations vary by country – see the appendix for a full summary of the operationalisation of religion in each country.

Data and Methodology

The research design is in two stages. In the first stage, I use voter level data from the most recent European Values Study at the time of writing (EVS 2008-2010) to establish how much of the association between religion and party preference that is mediated by moral traditionalism for each political party in 13 West European countries. The EVS is ideal as it contains data on the respondents' religious affiliation, party preference, and a range of substantial questions about issues that can be used to construct a variable that measures the respondents' positions along an index of moral traditionalism.

In the second stage, the result from the first stage (i.e. the share of the total effect that is mediated) is used as the dependent variable, while the independent variables are measures of how salient moral-traditional issues are for the party. These measures are taken from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). In the second stage, then, the units are the political parties in Western Europe.

The first stage: Estimating the importance of the indirect mechanism at the voter level

To estimate how much religious voting moral traditionalism account for, I utilise EVS data on a total of more than 10,000 respondents from the thirteen countries mentioned in the last section.

The independent variable: Religion

As discussed above, I distinguish between non-affiliated, passive denomination members and active denomination members.[4] The passive denomination members are those who expressed

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[4] While church attendance is almost always used as a measure of the religiosity aspect of the religious cleavage, it has sometimes been used as an indicator of religious values. This would be problematic for my analysis. Church attendance and religious values are of course correlated – more religious people are on average more traditional – and as such it may be used as a *proxy*. However, they are not the same. Clearly, one could go to church often and be relatively liberal, or never go to church and be quite traditional.

that they belong to a denomination while also responding that they visit church either only on special occasions, once a year or less often. The active denomination members are those who belong to a denomination and go to church at least monthly. The number of denominations vary by country – see the appendix for a full summary of the operationalisation of religion in each country.

The intermediate variable: Moral traditionalism

To measure moral traditionalism, I construct an additive index making up a traditional-progressive value orientation. The respondents are asked whether they think abortion, divorce, euthanasia, and homosexuality can be justified. The responses are combined into a single scale of moral traditionalism that is constrained to go from 0-10. Respondents with the value 0 on this index are traditionalists who *never* justify abortion, divorce, euthanasia, or homosexuality, while respondents with the value 10 always justify these, and as such are the most progressive. The most traditional countries are Greece (mean 3.55) and Ireland (3.70), while Sweden (7.47) and Denmark (7.17) have the most progressive citizens.

The dependent variable: Party preference

Party preference is operationalised through a question of vote intention in the EVS.[5] While this is not a behavioural variable, like actual vote choice, this is not necessarily a problem. What I study here is party preference, while actual voting could be affected by many short-term factors such as strategic voting, political scandals, etc. Parties with so few adherents in the data that no logistic models can be estimated are excluded. For a full list of the parties that are analysed in each country, see the online appendix.

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[5] Respondents who did not indicate a vote intention were asked about the party that appeals to them the most. This is only relevant for a very small number of units.

Control variables

All models estimated in stage 1 include controls for age and gender, as these clearly come before or at the same time as religion in the temporal sequence. As such, these will not bias the effects of religion downwards. Most other variables are likely to come after religion in the causal chain and introduce post-treatment bias. Religion is most commonly obtained at an early age and often remains relatively stable over time for a given individual (Voas and Crocket 2005: 15). Many denominations register new members already at birth, and while few people in general change their denomination during their lifetime, peak conversion rates are reached around age 13-16 (Regnerus and Uecker 2006: 217), while changes in religiosity levels reach a height at around age 18 (Regnerus and Uecker 2006: 226). It seems implausible that people obtain their income or education before they obtain their religious outlook. Although there might be reciprocity involved, studies show that college attendance rarely lead to apostasy (e.g. Mayrl and Oeur 2009).

However, concerns have been raised over so-called 'spurious' religious voting (see, e.g. Elff and Rossteutscher 2017). Essentially, the assumption is that other social-structural variables, such as urban-rural residence or class, are temporally prior to religion and thus should be controlled for. If this temporal order is correct, then the most likely case for such spurious religious voting is the UK, where Catholics tend to be poorer, are more likely to be working class, and have an immigrant background (see e.g. Elff and Rossteutscher 2017: 201). However, in his analysis of religious voting in the UK, Tilley (2015) controls for occupational class, household income, education, private schooling, housing type, employment status, sector of work, trade union membership, sex, birth cohort, region, and ethnicity. Even in this most problematic case, controlling for this host of variables does not substantially alter the relationship between religion and party preference.

To further ensure that this is not a problem in my analyses, I have re-estimated all the models with controls for social class, education, and urban-rural residence, in addition to gender and age. These results are reported in Appendix A.4.2, and do not alter any of the conclusions – the results are very similar to those from the main models.

Estimating the models

Multi-categorical independent variables are still problematic in mediation analysis, as we do not in this case want to calculate the indirect effect separately for each individual coefficient, which only measures one religious group's difference from the reference category.[6] Tilley (2015) instead compares the differences in predicted probabilities for preferring a party between religious groups before and after controlling for the relevant value orientations. Evans and Tilley (2017: chapter 8) apply a similar logic for class. I make use of a somewhat more advanced version of this way of thinking here, following the approach of Langsæther (2019b).

To measure the role of value orientations as an intermediate variable connecting religion and voting, we need a measure of the *total* impact of religion on voting, which may be used with and without control variables. The measure also needs to be able to distinguish between different parties. The *kappa* index has these desirable properties. It was developed by Hout et al. (1995) for class voting, but was later applied to religious voting by Manza and Brooks (1997) and has commonly been used in studies of both class, religion, and educational cleavages (e.g. Jansen 2011, Knutsen 2006, Lachat 2012, Langsæther and Stubager 2019). This measure is not limited to whether religious voters vote for religious parties, but captures *total* religious voting, i.e. the full relationship between a voter's religion and party preference.

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[6] Even the KHB method, a very helpful recent advance that allows effect decomposition in logit models, decomposes each difference separately (see Breen et al. 2013).

Indeed, it is usually considered as the very definition of class voting or religious voting (see Hout et al. 1995, Manza and Brooks 1997), and I adopt that understanding of it here. Religious voting, or the kappa index, is simply the standard deviation of religious differences in vote choice (Manza and Brooks 1997: 50-51).

The kappa index can be broken down into sub-kappas that apply to any of the separate voting outcomes (Hout et al. 1995: 813), allowing us to study how the importance of value orientations as an intermediate variable varies between parties. In the first set of models, I estimate the following logistic regressions for each political party in each country[7]:

$$\ln\left(\frac{P_i}{1 - P_i}\right) = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_1 R_i} + \beta_2 AGE_i + \beta_3 SEX_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where P is the probability that a respondent i prefers the party in question (versus preferring any other party in the same country), $\boldsymbol{R_i}$ is a vector of dummy variables indicating what religious group the respondent belongs to, $\boldsymbol{\beta_1}$ is a vector of the coefficients of these dummies, β_2 is the coefficient of the variable age and β_3 is the coefficient of the variable sex.

It is then possible to calculate a "gross" kappa by simply taking the standard deviation of the coefficients in the vector $\boldsymbol{\beta_1}$. The larger the standard deviation, the larger the relative religious differences. In other words, the kappa for each party is defined as:

$$\kappa_{rel^j} = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{s=1}^{S}(\beta_s^j - \overline{\beta_s^j})^2}{S}}$$

where β_s^j is the coefficient from a binary logistic regression for religious group s and voting outcome j (with the β coefficient of the social group chosen as the reference category being equal to 0), and $\overline{\beta_s^j}$ is the average regression coefficient across all S religious groups for

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[7] I have also estimated multinomial logistic regression analyses; results are similar.

voting outcome j (Lachat 2006: 9). The kappa values from these models correspond to previous studies using other measures of the strength of religious voting, such as Cramer's V and pseudo-R^2, and they are essentially identical to kappa values calculated based on multinomial logistic regression analyses (see appendix A.4.1). Parties that do not have statistically significant differences between the religious groups at all are not used in stage two, as there is no bivariate association to be mediated.[8]

After having estimated the "gross" kappa, I then include controls for the moral traditionalism of the respondent (I add $\beta_4 TPV$ to the regression above) and re-calculate the kappa, now based on the coefficients from the new model including controls. The percentage reduction in the kappa value (i.e. the total religious voting) between Model 1 and Model 2 indicates how much of the religious voting the value orientation accounts for. While this is not standard mediation analysis, it supplies a rough measure of the share of the association between religion and party preference that is indirect through moral traditionalism (for similar approaches, see Tilley 2015, Evans and Tilley 2017: chapter 8, and Langsæther 2019b). The stage one analyses are conducted in each country individually and are available upon request (see also the appendix).

To sum up in a less precise, but also less technical way: I estimate how important religion is for preference for a party (controlled for age and gender), then re-estimate how important religion is for preference for that same party when controlling for the voters' moral traditionalism. The percentage reduction in the importance of religion between the two models is how much religious voting the value orientation accounted for, i.e. the share of the association that is indirect.

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[8] I have also run models where all parties are included, but where moral values are assumed to not play any mediation role for parties with non-significant differences between religious groups (the dependent variable in stage 2 is set to zero). The results are robust to this specification, see appendix A.5.2.

Stage Two: The Party Level

In the second stage, party-level data is used to test the policy salience hypothesis discussed in section 2. There is a total of 50 parties from 13 countries that are included in both the CHES and the EVS, and that have religious differences in party preference to account for.[9] The EVS data was collected in 2008-2009. I have therefore used the 2006 version of the CHES (Hooghe et al., 2010), which is the closest one that pre-dates the data collection at the individual level. The CHES works well because it contains a measure of the salience of "lifestyle issues", such as opposing or supporting liberal policies related to homosexuality, for each party. This measure corresponds reasonably well with moral traditionalism. There are multiple experts coding each party in each country. The experts combine information on promises parties make in their manifestos with actions they undertake, as documented in the media or perceived by voters (Netjes and Binnema 2007: 48). Since the experts rely on a wide variety of sources, "the measures tend to have high *face validity* and internal consistency among experts" (Bakker and Hobolt 2013: 35).

All Western European countries that are included in the CHES 2006 are included in this study, i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The only exception is Italy: In this country, the data for the EVS were collected throughout 2009. Due to changes in the party system from 2006-2009, there is a low correspondence between the parties present in the EVS 2010 and the CHES 2006.[10] To sum up, I use the salience of moral issues for parties to account for the link between religion and party preference at the individual level.

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[9] Eight additional parties could be included if we use less strict criteria. This does not change any conclusions, see appendix A.5.1. An additional 12 parties from Italy, Norway, and Switzerland were also included in the analysis based on different data. The results are also robust to including these data (cf. appendix A.5.3).

[10] However, using slightly different data, I have also been able to include Italy, Norway, and Switzerland in the analysis. Including these three countries does not change the results (see the online appendix).

We can use the percentage reduction in the kappa value as a party-level measure of how important the indirect effect of religion on preference for that party is. This becomes the dependent variable in the second set of analyses. To test the *policy salience* hypothesis, I need a measure of the salience of moral issues for the parties. The CHES provides a measure of how salient "lifestyle issues", such as homosexuality, are for each individual party. The experts rate the salience of these issues for each party from 0 (not important at all) to 10 (extremely important), with an observed range of 4 to 8.6 in the data, and a mean of 5.9. I can then estimate the relationship between the saliency of moral issues and the importance of the indirect mechanism.

There may be differences at the country-level, notably party polarisation, that correlate with both the independent and the dependent variables. For this reason, I also estimate the models with country fixed effects, essentially controlling away all differences between party systems. I also estimate multilevel models where I control for two different measures of party polarisation (see appendix A.5.5). There might be confounding variables at the party family level, for instance related to the salience of *other* issues. I re-estimate the models with party family fixed effects as well. Finally, I estimate very conservative models with both country and party family fixed effects. The conclusions are always the same.

Results

Summaries of the stage 1 analyses are available in the appendix. On average, around ten percent of the association between religion and party preference is mediated by moral values. However, this mediation varies between parties. For instance, *none* of the differences between religious groups in support for the Conservative party in the UK are accounted for by moral traditionalism. On the other hand, about 60% of the differences between the religious groups

in support for the *Izquierda Unida* in Spain are accounted for. These numbers now become the dependent variable in the stage 2 analyses.

Party behaviour affects the mechanism at the voter level

Table 1 shows the results from four models. The first column – the main model – gives clear support to the policy salience hypothesis. The more salient morality policies are for a party, the more of the association between religion and party preference is mediated by moral traditionalism. When morality policies are one unit more salient for a party, the share of the effect of religion that is indirect increases on average by more than five percentage points. Salience alone explains 13.7% of the variance. The result is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, even with the low statistical power given by only 50 units.[11]

Table 1: OLS analyses. Dependent variable: Size of the indirect effect of religion on party preference (in %). Units: Parties.

|	Main Model	Country FE	Party Family FE	Full Model
Salience of moral policies	5.55* (1.89)	5.77** (1.53)	7.81** (2.35)	5.66** (1.84)
Country FE		Yes		Yes
Party Family FE			Yes	Yes
Constant	-23.12* (9.27)	-39.54** (10.00)	-43.09** (13.63)	-37.46* (12.99)
N	50	50	50	50
R^2	0.137	0.416	0.550	0.785

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. See the appendix for a replication with Efron's HC3 standard errors. $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$.

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[11] The statistical power is so low with only 50 units that I would consider any coefficient with p-value < .10 as statistically significant.

The result from the main model is visualised in Figure 2 to give a better impression of the magnitude of the effects. The experts in the CHES did not assign any party to a salience of zero for moral issues. In fact, none of the 50 parties are considered by experts to have any lower value than four. It thus seems fair to consider four a low salience in this context. The figure demonstrates how there is no indirect effect of religion on party preference through moral traditionalism for parties which do not discuss moral issues much. However, for a party with the highest emphasis on moral issues, the predicted share of the effect that is indirect is more than 25%.[12]

Figure 2: The effect of policy salience on the importance of the indirect mechanism, with 95% confidence intervals. Predictions from the main model in Table 1.

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[12] Some parties, notably from the New Right, show a suppression effect. These parties often take on traditional stances in moral issues, yet they are underrepresented among religious voters (for instance because they adhere to Christian Democratic or Conservative parties, see e.g. Arzheimer and Carter 2009) *despite* the fact that these voters on average hold more traditional values than the secular ones. When comparing religious and secular voters at the same levels of traditional-progressiveness, then, the differences between them become larger.
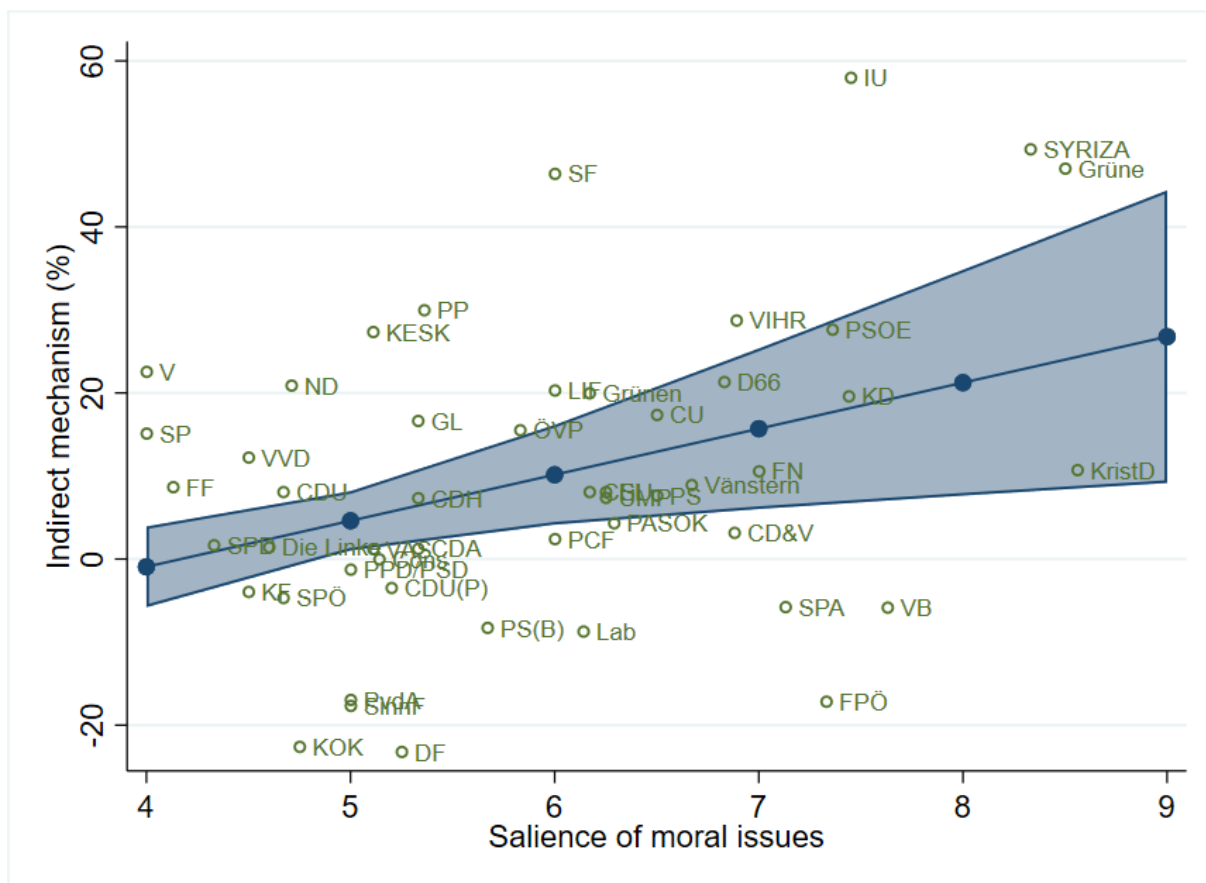
The effect of policy salience is equally important after controlling for all country level differences (see column 2 in table 1). In fact, it is slightly increased, and the standard error decreases. This means that *within the countries,* religion has a larger indirect effect on party preference for parties who emphasise moral questions more. Notice that this model effectively controls away all differences between party systems.

There might also be confounding variables at the party family level. For instance, the indirect effect of religion for several Left Socialist parties like the Danish *Socialistisk Folkparti* (SF) or the Spanish *Izquierda Unida* (IU) are even larger than the model predicts based on their levels of salience for moral issues, while some New Right parties have a smaller indirect effect, or even a suppression effect. This could be, for instance, because Left Socialist parties like the IU has had moral questions among its most important issues for decades and actively push them on the agenda (see Bonafont and Roqué 2012). On the contrary, many of the New

Right parties are primarily known for their immigration policies, and their extreme salience on this issue might "crowd out" their visibility in moral issues.[13] I re-estimate the models with party family fixed effects in column 3 in Table 1. Just as in the country fixed effects model, this controls for all unmeasured aspects at the *party family* level that might confound the coefficient of the main independent variable. We can see whether, within each party family, the relationship between religion and party preference is more indirect for parties for which moral issues are more salient. As we can see in column 3, the effect is now in fact even stronger than before, at 7.81. Increasing salience from the lowest value observed to the highest increases the indirect effect with an impressive 35 percentage points. The coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level.

Finally, in the column "Full Model", I introduce both country and party family level fixed effects at the same time. Any difference between party families and countries is then controlled away. This is a very conservative test of the argument. Yet, the relationship holds. The coefficient is of similar size as in the main model, and significant at the 0.01 level.[14]

To further underline the fact that this relationship is meaningful, I perform a placebo test. In other words, in addition to showing that there *is* a relationship where my theoretical proposition predicts it, there is *not* a relationship where my theoretical proposition does not predict it. If the argument above is correct, the salience of issues *unrelated* to moral questions should not affect the mechanisms at work between religion and party preference. In Table 2, I

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[13] Future research could look into the effect of *relative* salience.

[14] An alternative interpretation of the findings is that party characteristics affect the level of religious voting, and that values only mediate the effect of religion when the relation between religion and voting is quite strong to begin with. If so, variation in the salience of moral issues explains variation in the strength of the indirect effect only because it explains variation in the total effect of religion. To make sure that this is not the case, I have re-estimated the models while controlling for the total effect of religion (see appendix A.5.6). The results are similar, thus ruling out this alternative explanation.

therefore replicate the main model from Table 1 with the three measures in the CHES that cover the salience of *economic* policies.

Table 2. Placebo tests. OLS analyses. Dependent variable: Importance of the indirect effect of religion on party preference through moral traditionalism (in %). Units: Parties.

Salience of…	Placebo test 1	Placebo test 2	Placebo test 3
Public service VS tax reduction	1.69 (2.27)		
Deregulation of markets		0.05 (1.66)	
Redistribution			0.92 (1.08)
Constant	-1.60 (14.13)	9.25 (10.04)	3.73 (5.81)
N	50	50	50
R^2	0.011	0.000	0.006

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses. $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$.

The first column shows the effect of the salience of increasing public services versus tax reduction. The second column takes on the salience of deregulation of markets, and the third the salience of redistribution. None of these have substantially important effects on the size of the indirect effect, and they all have larger standard errors than coefficients. The explained variance is tiny, ranging from 0.0003 to 0.011.

A final implication from the theoretical proposition in this article is that the relationship between the meditation through moral values and the salience of moral issues should be larger for more politically attentive respondents.[15] Citizens who do not pay attention to politics are

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[15] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this implication.

unlikely to capture differences in moral policies between parties, and vote accordingly, regardless of how salient these issues are for a party. In appendix A.5.8 I demonstrate that this is indeed the case: The coefficients for moral salience in the stage 2 analyses are larger when stage 1 analyses are estimated for respondents with higher political attentiveness, yielding further support for the theoretical proposition of this article.

In sum, then, there is evidence that the more parties emphasise their views on moral issues, the larger is the role for moral traditionalism as an intermediate variable that accounts for the association between religion and party preference. The coefficients are substantially important, statistically significant, and of quite similar magnitude across a large number of different specifications. These include (but are not limited to) controlling for other social-structural variables, such as class and urban-rural residence, in the stage 1 analyses; using multinomial logistic regression instead of binomial logistic regression to calculate the kappa values; adding country- and party family-fixed effects; running multi-level models with controls for different measures of polarisation; or including additional parties and countries. On the contrary, the coefficients are no longer substantially important nor statistically significant in the placebo analyses where we consider how much parties emphasise their views on *economic* issues. Finally, the coefficients are consistently larger when studying respondents with high levels of political attentiveness than when studying those with low levels, as one would expect if the theoretical argument behind the salience hypothesis is correct.

Discussion and conclusion

This article contributes to filling the knowledge gap regarding mechanisms behind religious voting, by studying one of the most important mechanisms: The extent to which moral values mediate the electoral effects of religion. For some parties, moral values cannot account for religious differences in support at all, while for others more than half of all religious

differences disappear when controlling for such values. On average, around 10% of the association between religion and party preference is mediated by moral values. The results suggest that religious voting, at least in Western Europe, is not primarily a question of moral values, but rather 'a relic of past associations between groups and parties' (Tilley 2015: 923). One interesting question, then, is how the original associations came into being. Were they the product of shared values, so the 10% mediation identified here is less than what one would have observed in, say, the 1950s and 1960s? Or were they originally the product of identity politics and group cues, so even less of the religious voting was mediated by moral values in the past? This is also likely to depend on historical party strategies and whether the parties primarily made policy-based or group-based appeals to mobilise voters (Thau 2017). Future studies could test this using old survey data.

Tilley draws the conclusion that religion may be a stronger and more resilient cleavage than e.g. class, because it is rooted in socialisation processes rather than contemporary politics and party policies. It may well be that cleavages built on frozen group-party alignments are more durable than those built on immediate self-interest or shared values. However, this article suggests that contemporary party politics affect to what degree religious voting is a relic of past associations or a question of moral values, as the importance of this indirect mechanism is related to how parties behave: The more a party emphasises moral issues, the more of the association is mediated by moral values.

However, the conclusion comes with a caveat. The results are based on cross-sectional data, and the multi-categorical nature of the independent variable makes traditional mediation analysis hard to conduct, making the calculation of the indirect effect somewhat imprecise. Future studies should consider survey experiments or other ways to get further leverage on the causal question.

There is reason to believe that these findings may be relevant also for other social structural variables. For instance, class voting may be mediated to a larger extent by economic left-right values when parties send clearer signals on economic issues (for preliminary evidence that this is the case, see Langsæther 2019b). However, we need further studies on other cleavages to further substantiate the model. Gender may, for instance, work indirectly through gender equality values to the extent that parties emphasise gender equality policies.

A study of religious voting in the UK found that values were rather unimportant mediators (Tilley 2015). However, this seems not to be because religious voting generally is not mediated by moral values, but rather because it sometimes is and sometimes is not, and this depends on party characteristics. My analysis also indicates that there is rather little mediation for the major British parties – as expected, since these parties do not emphasise moral issues (Larsen et al. 2012). Moral values mediate much more of the effect of religion for parties who do emphasise moral issues, such as the Austrian *Grünen* or the Spanish *Izquierda Unida*. The findings suggest that supply side perspectives on politics are important: Not only can party characteristics affect the total effect of social structural variables, as previous research has shown, but they may even affect the individual-level mechanisms at work.

While it is in itself important to further our understanding of the mechanisms connecting social groups to political parties, the findings also come with potential implications for the functioning of democracy. Voters relying on their group belonging for electoral cues are more likely to do so effectively when parties emphasise issues of relevance to the groups. When parties do not provide voters with clear signals, social group cues may make voters more likely to vote for parties with whom they do not share fundamental values, as frozen group-party alignments survive. Citizens following these cues may end up voting for parties that no longer represent them substantively. Thus, the democratic merits of cleavage voting potentially depend on party characteristics.

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