



The religious and spiritual underpinnings of party choice in christian Europe



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ABSTRACT

Many studies have shown that individual religiosity is related to a Christian Democratic vote. Recently, studies from sociology of religion have reported the rise of holistic spirituality. This paper is the first to examine the effects of holistic spirituality on party choice. In addition, it critically assesses the assertion that conventional religiosity prevents individuals from affiliating with Green parties.

Our results show that spirituality is related to a higher probability of choosing Green parties. Moreover, conventional religiosity increases the probability that moderate left voters will prefer a Green party to a Social Democratic party. This result shows that there is common ground between the electorates of Green and Christian Democratic parties, thus creating possibilities for new political coalitions.

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1. Introduction

Influenced by findings about decreasing levels of religious belief and participation (Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere, 1995), secularization theories have dominated social science thinking about religion in Europe. Implicit in secularization theory is the assumption that the impact of religion on political cleavages diminishes as Christian churches lose support in Europe. However, Christian religiosity remains a powerful explanation of voting patterns (van der Brug et al., 2009; Immerzeel et al., 2013; Knutsen, 2004).¹

Since the 1990s, however, critiques of secularization theory have noted that religion does not disappear; rather, it changes its social forms. Critics argue that the rise of holistic spirituality has contributed to the pluralisation of the religious field in Western and Northern Europe (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2007). Holistic spirituality can be expected to influence attitudes associated with the 'New Politics', which is based upon environmentalism, emancipation and self-expression.

This is the first study to address the possible effects of religious pluralisation on party choice in Europe. Studying holistic spirituality is relevant because there is evidence that it is systematically related to a specific set of beliefs (Houtman and Mascini, 2002) that potentially shapes political behaviours. Therefore, our primary research question is whether and how holistic spirituality influences party choice.

We argue that holistic spirituality is correlated with Green voting because holism and religious individualism are consistent with the idea of sustainability and with the permissive morality policies that underpin Green politics. Thus, spirituality is linked to the 'New Politics'.

Moreover, some studies suggest that conventional religiosity prevents believers from voting for New Politics parties (Dolezal, 2010; Knutsen, 2004). The evidence for this contention seems to be limited because only a few studies have researched this relationship. Christian churches in Europe increasingly advocate the preservation of the natural world, which is congruent with the ecological policies of Green parties. Therefore, Green parties might also be attractive to religious people. Our second research question is whether conventional religiosity dissuades believers from voting for Green parties.

This study contributes to discussions in electoral studies, the literature on party competition, and to sociology of religion. With

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respect to electoral studies, our results suggest that research on the importance of religion to party choice should not be limited to conventional Christian religiosity because alternative beliefs also affect party choice. Therefore, improved measures of religiosity and spirituality should be used in election studies. Regarding party competition, we identify potential spaces for cooperation among Christian Democrats and Green parties based on their respective electorates' shared beliefs. In particular, we show that Green parties not only attract the spiritual vote but also, to some extent, the religious vote. Finally, our results are relevant to sociology of religion. We show that spirituality has an effect on political behaviour. This finding is important because some scholars question the capacity of spirituality to support a specific and distinct worldview due to its syncretistic nature (Voas and Bruce, 2007). Our study provides evidence refuting this assertion.

The first section presents hypotheses about the effects of conventional religiosity and non-religious orientations on vote for Christian Democratic parties. The second section presents hypotheses about the effects of holistic spirituality and conventional religiosity on the vote for Green parties. The third section presents the data and the operationalization of the theoretical constructs. This section includes a detailed discussion of the measurement of religious and spiritual beliefs established measurements for holistic spirituality in survey research do not exist. The fourth section presents the results of the multinomial logistic regression model. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for party choice and party competition research.

2. Religion, secularity and the Christian Democratic vote

Many recent studies have confirmed that conventional religiosity is related to the vote for Christian Democratic parties, whereas Socialist and Liberal parties attract the votes of non-religious citizens (Knutsen, 2004; van der Brug et al., 2009; van der Eijk et al., 2006). This general pattern varies slightly across time and space. For example, Arzheimer and Schoen (2007) show that in Germany, Catholics tend to vote for Christian Democrats, while Protestants tend to vote for Social Democrats and Greens.

Christian Democratic parties were originally formed to protect the interests of Catholics from the growing power of the nation state at the end of the 19th century (Frey, 2009). Therefore, the principal competitors of the early Christian Democratic parties were the Conservative parties (Kaiser, 2007). Consequently, Conservatives and Christian Democrats remained at variance for a long time, though both ideologies accommodate religious attitudes (Kaiser, 2007). The common threat of communism led to the temporary alliance of Christian Democrats and Conservatives during the second half of the 20th century, but across Europe, this alliance has recently become strained. While conservative parties mainly attract people favouring the nation state, a free-market economy, and a traditional moral world-view, the ideology of Christian Democratic parties clearly relies on the church-inspired ideas of subsidiarity, solidarity, anti-communism and the cross-class politics of political mediation (Frey, 2009: 31; Van Kersbergen, 1995). Religiosity leads people to identify with Christian Democrats, and Christian Democratic support for mediation politics leads to a sceptical attitude towards extremist parties. Studies show that religiosity does indeed reduce the likelihood that an individual will vote for right-wing extremist parties because it fosters identification with Christian Democratic parties (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009). Immerzeel et al. (2013) also showed that religious practice decreases the probability that a practitioner will vote for right-wing extremist parties, whereas religious orthodoxy increases the likelihood of casting a ballot for right-wing extremist parties in some countries (e.g., Belgium, Switzerland, and Norway). However, this

effect is mediated through anti-immigrant attitudes and is not a direct effect of religiosity.

The most significant trend in religiosity since World War II has been the continuous decline in individual religious belief and practice in Western European countries (Voas, 2009). Nevertheless, there is no evidence for a generalized decrease in the effects of religiosity on voting behaviour (Knutsen, 2004; Raymond, 2011). One exception is a study by Jansen et al. (2012), which indicates that the effect of religion on party choice in the Netherlands decreased from 1971 to 2006. The authors argue that the effect of denominational membership on party choice is stronger when parties emphasize policies based on traditional morality because this deters non-religious citizens from casting a vote for religiously affiliated parties.

Based on these findings from previous studies, we expect that conventional religiosity and membership in a Christian denomination will increase an individual's probability of voting for a Christian Democratic party (*hypothesis 1a*). In addition, we expect that a secular orientation reduces an individual's probability of reporting a Christian Democratic vote and increases the probability that an individual will prefer Social Democratic and/or Socialist parties (*hypothesis 1b*).

2.1. Religion, holistic spirituality and the green vote

Green parties—as a part of the New Politics—are typically classified within the secular domain of political competition (Inglehart, 1997). Several studies yielded evidence that a conventional religiosity reduces the likelihood of voting for Green parties (Knutsen, 2004; Dolezal, 2010; Pappi and Brandenburg, 2010; Otjes and Krouwel, 2015). Summarizing results from a recently published edited volume on Green parties in Europe, van Houte concludes that Green voters are “young, nonreligious, female, urban and educated” (Van Haute, 2016:319). This paper challenges this view in two respects. First, research in the sociology of religion indicates the proliferation of new forms of belief (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). These beliefs might strengthen individuals' disposition to vote for Green parties. Second, Christian churches in Europe are gradually changing their positions towards environmental issues (Clements et al., 2014). The protection of the environment has become a prominent aim of church officials, potentially decreasing the distance between religious individuals and Green parties.

Sociology of religion scholars have discovered evidence of the existence of new forms of belief that are independent of traditional churches and most often conceived of as an alternative to conventional religiosity. These beliefs are referred to as ‘post-Christian spirituality’ (Houtman and Aupers, 2007), ‘New Age spirituality’ (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Houtman et al., 2009) or just ‘spirituality’ (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Houtman et al. (2012) defined spirituality in terms of its ontology and epistemology. A spiritual ontology rejects the dualistic worldview that asserts the existence of “a transcendent personal God who has created the world [...] and must therefore exist beyond His own creation” (Houtman et al., 2012: 26). The monotheistic religions posit that God is morally superior to humans and distinguish between the pure soul and the sinful body, etc. Spirituality, in contrast, conceives of transcendental reality as “immanent and hence situated within the world and the cosmos themselves” (Houtman et al., 2012: 26). Therefore, the distinction between God (in heaven) and humans (on earth) is meaningless within a spiritual ontology. All things are understood to be connected. In short, a spiritual ontology is a holistic conception of transcendental realities.

A spiritual epistemology is based on the idea that all individuals must develop their own religious practice based on their own experiences. Within Christian churches, in contrast, the clergy plays

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