

RESEÑAS/REVIEWS

José Ramón Montero, Paolo Segatti and Kerman Calvo (eds.), *Religious Voting in Western Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023

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Is religion a relevant determinant of vote choice still today in the secularized societies and post-cleavage politics of Western Europe? This magnificent book convincingly argues that religion continues to structure voting in Western European countries to an important degree. While religious cleavage might be waning or already dead in some cases, what the editors and authors of this important contribution to electoral behaviour literature compellingly argue and masterfully show is that religious voting is well and alive.

Through an incisive theorization based on an impressive review of extant literature and a systemic empirical exploration of role of religiosity in electoral choice, José Ramón Montero, Paolo Segatti and Kerman Calvo, together with an excellent group of authors, offer a new framework of studying religion and voting, moving away from the traditional religious cleavage framework to the more accurate for describing contemporary politics concept of religious voting. Unlike the religious cleavage framework, the concept of religious voting allows for assessing the impact of religion on other parties than the Christian Democratic ones and incorporates the politicization of religious of moral issues by political actors to the equations. The role of political actors and political agency is nicely incorporated to the sociological determinism of the classical conceptions of religious cleavage. Parties shape the voting environment by mobilizing on religious and moral issues. After all, political and ecclesiastic elites can choose to intensify or reduce the conflict over religious issues. Importantly, as religious voting concerns both religious and non-religious voters, it can be applied also to highly secularized contexts.

The book is divided into six parts: the theoretical and comparative chapters, those dedicated to the case studies of the Catholic countries, the religiously mixed countries, the Protestant ones and the United States, with the last part offering the conclusions. Starting with the Karel Dobbelaere's chapter, it offers a thorough account

of conflicts on moral issues, i.e. “bodily self-determination” (abortion, divorce, euthanasia, homosexuality, and suicide) in each of the countries under scrutiny and comparatively grouped by denomination. It also brings in a relevant distinction between societal (creation of a secular subsystem), organizational (loss of control due to specialization, e.g. in Catholic hospitals) and individual (micro-level rejection of certain norms) secularization.

Stefano Bartolini’s chapter focuses on differentiating cleavages from group divides. The author pleads for a more considerate use of the concept of cleavage. In contrast to the simple or compound divides, what constitutes a cleavage is a combination of structural, attitudinal and behavioural dimensions with basis in historical divisions and with some overlapping and reinforcement among them. If only one of these dimensions is relevant, the Bartolini suggests that instead of cleavage, one can classify the following simple divides: interest divides based on social structure, cultural divides based on values, and behavioural divides. Those divisions for which two dimensions are relevant are classified as compound divides: corporate (structure and behaviour), social (structure and values), and political (values and behaviour). What follows is a detailed description of cleavage structuring based on the concepts of boundary and mobility with focus on the structural, normative and organisational dimensions. In the last part of the chapter, Bartolini applies this theory to religious voting, showing that while religiously based ‘interest’, ‘cultural’, and ‘membership’ divides are simple divides, religious cleavage combines denomination, religiosity and religious group membership, reflecting the specific trajectory of State- and nation-building. Religious voting, according to Bartolini, emerges from the following two compound divides: 1) issues more or less intermittently activated by membership organizations (religious issue-voting); 2) strong political identities of denominational groups (religious ideological-voting).

José Ramón Montero’s chapter proposes to distinguish religious cleavages from religious coalescence and religious voting offering three significant contributions. First, Montero sheds new light on the relationship between cleavages and voting, sometimes taken for granted in electoral behaviour. Second, he develops the concept of religious coalescence to account for the fact that neither in France nor in Spain and Portugal had the Christian Democratic parties endured, despite of confrontations between the Church and the State, and, in the case of the Nordic countries and to some extent in Britain and Scotland, the conflict between Churches and States was non-existent. Third, according to this account, religious voting occurs when ‘religious denomination or religious practice are aligned with vote choice once activated by party and ecclesiastical elites in electoral contests’ (p. 87) and thus incorporating both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms behind the impact of religion on voting. In an impressive *tour de force* review of the literature on cleavages, Montero offers a persuasive defence of the importance of religion for explaining vote choice across time and space, and a convincing argument on why it is better to use the concept of religious voting rather than religious cleavage to assess the impact of religiosity on the vote in the last decades. Montero’s and Bartolini’s contributions are relevant not only for studies of religious voting but to the field of electoral behaviour at large.

What follows are three comparative chapters. In the first place, Ferruccio Biolcati and Cristiano Vezzoni describe the process of secularization focusing on the decline in church attendance and pointing towards the importance of the starting point on which such dynamics depend upon. Second, Rosa M. Navarrete, Guillermo Cordero and Jaime Balaguer trace the relationship between religiosity and ideology, demonstrating that religious denomination, church attendance, religious belief, and confidence in religious institutions are all positively correlated with right-wing ideology. However, this correlation is quite low in the Protestant North and although strong, steadily decreasing, in the Catholic South. It is also shown that religious polarization reinforces the effects of religiosity on ideology. Lastly, the authors find confirmation for a similar correlation between religiosity and ideology in the context of the religious marketplace of the United States. Third, Alberto Sanz, Stefano Camatarri, Paolo Segatti and José Ramón Montero focus on eliciting to what extent religiosity impacts the vote choice for all parties and not only the Christian Democratic ones. This chapter differentiates between party-based religious voting which has to do with party identification and election-based religious voting in which polarization on moral issues plays a central role. Assessing the effects of religious affinity between voters and parties and polarization on moral issues on vote choices, the authors find that positive or negative concerns towards religions are indeed politicized in two modes of religious voting: party-based and election-based, with the first one having a more substantial significance.

The subsequent 14 chapters dedicated to case studies of Catholic, Mixed, and Protestant countries offer an impressive array of knowledge on the idiosyncrasies and commonalities in religious voting across Western Europe and the United States. To name only the key findings, it is shown that, in Austria, the effects of religion on vote choice are largely indirect; in Italy, the hitherto very strong religious cleavage has practically disappeared; in Ireland, rapid secularization and successive scandals involving the Catholic Church reduced the salience of the moral agenda; in France, on the contrary, the influence of religiosity on voting is persistent despite the historical separation of the State and the Church; in Spain, religious voting regain its vitality after the ecclesiastical and political elites reacted to the progressive policies on moral issues of Rodríguez Zapatero; in Portugal, religious voting seems buried but not yet dead; in Germany, striking differences in religious voting exist between its East and West parts (with stronger secularization in the latter) and between Catholics and Protestants (with the latter decreasing in church membership); in the Netherlands, while religious voting is becoming less relevant for the Catholics, it gains strength for the Calvinists; in Switzerland, religious cleavage, once central to explaining electoral competition, has faded away; in Scotland the religious divides are still large, and, in Britain, relatively stable; in the Nordic countries, although the Christian Democratic parties become increasingly marginal in these secular societies, religiosity still plays a role and religious conflicts present; and, finally, in the US, religion is a factor that explains vote choice and party identification to a similar degree to the socio-economic variables, with a particularly strong association between the Evangelical Protestants and the Republican vote, and between high value ascribed to religiosity in life and the Republican preference.

While impressive in depth and scope, the volume nevertheless suffers from some limitations or rather some issues that could have been incorporated or further developed. Some of these shortcomings are acknowledged by the editors in the conclusions, however, I suppose it is pertinent to gather them here for future studies that for sure will follow the framework of this book.

As the authors duly note, secularization does not necessarily translate into weaker religious voting. However, what I missed in this volume is an assessment until which point the idea that those who are still in the increasingly smaller religious camp become radicalized, and thus religious voting might actually become reinforced with the passage of time, stands empirical scrutiny. Consider the evolution of the share of *dominicanes* (those who attend church each Sunday) and *communicantes* (those who also take communion) from another context – the Catholic Poland. While the former clearly decreases since 1980s', the latter is on the rise. This relates to the feeling of threat, of the loss of status, of becoming a threatened minority (subjectively rather than objectively but nevertheless), which has not been assessed in this volume as a possible nexus between religiosity and the vote. Similarly, disentangling the effects of affective communitarian feelings, especially salient in the rural areas, in which the Church plays also a distinctive institutional role compared to the urban ones, from religious belief might be a worthwhile endeavour and has not been assessed yet in detail. Is it group belonging or moral traditionalism which makes religious rural dwellers support right-wing parties?

This brings me to the reduced interest this volume has placed on eliciting the role of religion in support for far right or populist radical right parties. Following Bartoloni's framework from Chapter 3, voting for populist radical right parties would not be considered religious voting because it lacks a reference to a distinctive social group, while religion always refers to a stratification divide of membership in a denomination or non-membership. However, populist radical right parties many times "hijack" religion in that their rhetoric calls for a restoration of native religious identity and symbols, fighting back against secularization, immigration, and multiculturalism. "Islamization," "infiltration," and "invasion" are an inexorable part of this populist imaginary that mobilizes grievances over immigration (Marzouki et al., 2016). Islam is practically missing from this volume and one could argue that it is increasingly relevant for vote choice in Europe. Muslims and especially Muslim migrants are framed as a threat to national identity, traditional culture, security and so on. While religiosity seems not that relevant for the support for this type of parties in Western Europe (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022), the issue of Muslim migration should be accounted for in studies of religious voting in Europe. As well as the role of Catholic and Protestant religious denominations serving as possible vaccines against radical-right voting should be addressed in future studies.

In short, this book is on a straight way to becoming a landmark study of religion and voting. The framework proposed by the authors can and should be applied to other contexts: e.g., can Evangelical support for Bolsonaro in Brazil be considered religious voting? Can religious voting exist in the highly secularized Czechia? This volume will help to answer these and other questions related to the influence of religion on electoral politics for the years to come.

References

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