

# The Political Sociology of Religion

The Impact of Religion on Political Attitudes and Behaviors in  
Secularizing European Societies

Weiqian Xia





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## The Impact of Religion on Political Attitudes and Behaviors in Secularizing European Societies

**Weiqian Xia**

Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Friday 22 October 2021 at 10.00 in Nordenskiöldssalen, Geovetenskapens hus, Svante Arrhenius väg 12.

### Abstract

European societies have experienced extensive secularization. However, the impact of religion in governing people's political attitudes and behaviors persists, which has been enhanced by several recent developments, including the growing salience of religious and conservative values for the remaining committed religious people, the rise of radical right parties that use Christianity in their anti-immigrant and nationalist rhetoric, and the increasing number of immigrants from outside Europe that contribute to the diversification of religion in European societies. This dissertation investigates the continuing impact of religion on political attitudes and political behaviors in European societies under a secularizing age as embodied in those developments. I will inquire using aspects of political cleavage, political institution, and political articulation related to religion.

Study I examines how national contexts related to religion (secularization and party polarization on morality issues) moderate the impact of same-sex marriage and partnership legislation on public attitudes towards homosexuality. Using eight rounds of European Social Survey (ESS) data, the study shows that, first, in more secular countries and after partnership legislation has passed, there are more divergences in attitudes towards homosexuality between core religious members and the more secular others, with the former showing more negative attitudes. Second, in countries where political parties are more polarized on morality issues, the impact of partnership legislation is more negative in the general population across religiosity and partisanship; however, this effect is not repeated for marriage legislation. The study uncovers distinct effects of different normative institutions in moderating the relationship between legislation and attitudes through the articulation process.

Study II focuses on the mechanism underlying the relationship between Christian religiosity and voting for populist radical right parties in Europe, using ESS Round 8 data. Mediation analysis shows that the factors suggested by previous theories, including tolerance towards immigrants, pro-social values and social capital, hardly explain the underrepresentation of Christians in radical right voters. On the contrary, Christians and radical right voters across Europe have high ideological compatibility in authoritarian and moral conservative values, highlighting ample political space for radical right parties to articulate within for attracting Christian support that has yet to be successfully capitalized. This finding is against Christianity itself being an antidote to the radical right. It suggests that the enduring religious cleavage linked to mainstream right parties may still explain why Christians avoid voting for radical parties.

Study III investigates the role of religion in mobilizing immigrant political participation in the context of Sweden, using the 2010 Level of Living Survey for the Foreign Born and Their Children (LNU-UFB) data. Contrasting the theoretical expectations, this study finds little evidence that religion mobilizes immigrants to participate in politics; actually, religious attendance is found to be negatively related to political participation. The demobilization effect of religion is stronger for women, first-generation migrants. Those who have experienced religion-based societal discrimination, especially Muslims, are less active in political participation. However, second-generation Muslim immigrants are more active in participating in demonstration than the first generation, possibly due to higher perceived discrimination. The results do not support the theory on religious organizations promoting immigrant political participation in Sweden, nor is there suggestive evidence for the emergence of immigrant or Muslim political cleavage in the Swedish context.

**Keywords:** *secularization, politics and religion, religious cleavage, political institution, political articulation, political attitudes, voting behaviors, contextual effects, party polarization, radical right parties, immigrant religions, political participation.*

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*To Be Continued*



## List of Studies

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- III. Xia, W. "The role of religious engagement in mobilizing immigrant political participation in Sweden". *Submitted manuscript*.

## **Abstract**

European societies have experienced extensive secularization. However, the impact of religion in governing people's political attitudes and behaviors persists, which has been enhanced by several recent developments, including the growing salience of religious and conservative values for the remaining committed religious people, the rise of radical right parties that use Christianity in their anti-immigrant and nationalist rhetoric, and the increasing number of immigrants from outside Europe that contribute to the diversification of religion in European societies. This dissertation investigates the continuing impact of religion on political attitudes and political behaviors in European societies under a secularizing age as embodied in those developments. I will inquire using aspects of political cleavage, political institution, and political articulation related to religion.

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Study II focuses on the mechanism underlying the relationship between Christian religiosity and voting for populist radical right parties in Europe, using ESS Round 8 data. Mediation analysis shows that the factors suggested by previous theories, including tolerance towards immigrants, pro-social values and social capital, hardly explain the underrepresentation of Christians in radical right voters. On the contrary, Christians and radical right voters across Europe have high ideological compatibility in authoritarian and moral conservative values, highlighting ample political space for radical right parties to articulate within for attracting Christian support that has yet to be successfully capitalized. This finding is against Christianity itself being an antidote to the radical right. It suggests that the enduring religious cleavage

linked to mainstream right parties may still explain why Christians avoid voting for radical parties.

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## Sammanfattning

Europeiska samhällen har upplevt en omfattande sekularisering. Religionens inverkan på politiska attityder och beteenden är dock fortfarande påtaglig. Detta har förstärkts av den senaste tidens utveckling med bland annat en ökad omfattning av religiösa och konservativa värderingar bland återstående engagerade religiösa människor, uppkomsten av radikala högerpartier som använder kristendomen i sin invandrarfientliga och nationalistiska retorik och det ökande antalet icke-europeiska invandrare som bidrar till diversifieringen av religionen i Europa. Min avhandling behandlar den fortsatta påverkan av religion på politiska attityder och politiska beteenden i europeiska samhällen i en sekulariserad tidsålder. Jag undersöker olika aspekter av politiska konfliktdimensioner, politiska institutioner och politisk artikulation relaterad till religion.

Studie I undersöker hur nationella kontexter relaterade till religion, sekularisering och partipolarisering i moralfrågor, påverkar effekterna av lagstiftning rörande samkönade äktenskap och partnerskap på allmänhetens attityder till homosexualitet. Med hjälp av åtta omgångar med data från European Social Survey (ESS) visar studien att det är större skillnader i attityder till homosexualitet i mer sekulära länder efter lagstiftning om partnerskap. Attityder är mer divergerande mellan kärnreligiösa medlemmar och de mer sekulära medlemmarna, där de förra visar mer negativa attityder. Studien visar även att i länder där politiska partier är mer polariserade i moralfrågor, kommer partnerskapslagstiftningens inverkan att vara mer negativ i den allmänna befolkningen tvärs över religions- och partitillhörighet, men en sådan effekt gäller inte när länder ändrade äktenskapslagstiftning. Studien föreslår tydliga effekter av olika normativa institutioner för att moderera förhållandet mellan lagstiftning och attityder genom en artikulationsprocess.

Studie II fokuserar på mekanismen som ligger till grund för ett samband mellan kristen religiositet och att rösta på populistiska radikala högerpartier i Europa, med hjälp av ESS Round-8 surveyen. Mediationsanalys visar att de faktorer som föreslagits av tidigare teorier, inklusive tolerans mot invandrare, sociala värderingar och socialt kapital, inte förklarar underrepresentation av kristna hos radikala högerväljare. Tvärtom har kristna och radikala högerväljare över hela Europa en hög ideologisk kompatibilitet i auktoritära och moraliskt konservativa värderingar, vilket indikerar stort politiskt utrymme för radikala högerpartier att omformulera sig för att locka kristna väljare, men att de ännu inte framgångsrikt har kapitaliserat på detta. Studien visar att kristendomen i sig inte är ett motgift mot den radikala

högern, och att istället att den bestående religiösa konfliktdimensionen som är kopplad till vanliga högerpartier fortfarande kan vara anledningen till att kristna undviker att rösta på radikala partier.

Studie III undersöker religionens roll för mobilisering av politiskt deltagande av invandrare i Sverige, med hjälp av 2010 års levnadsnivåundersökningen för utlandsfödda och deras barn (LNU-UFB). I motsats till teoretiska förväntningar finns det få bevis för att religionen mobiliserar invandrare i politiken. Religiöst deltagande är till och med negativt relaterat till politiskt deltagande. Religionens demobiliseringseffekt är starkare för kvinnor och första generationens migranter. De som har upplevt religionsbaserad samhällsdiskriminering, särskilt muslimer, är mindre aktiva i politiskt deltagande. Andra generationens muslimska invandrare är dock mer aktiva i demonstrationer än den första generationen, möjligen på grund av högre upplevd diskriminering. Resultaten stöder inte teorin om religiösa organisationer som mobiliserar invandringspolitiskt deltagande i Sverige, och det finns inte heller några bevis för uppkomsten av invandrar/muslimsk politisk konfliktdimension i ett svenskt sammanhang.

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Xia Weiqian

Stockholm, September 16, 2021.

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## Introduction

European societies have undergone drastic secularization since the beginning of industrialization. Across Europe, with few exceptions, individual religiosity has declined in membership rates, frequency of church attendance and prayer, and perceived importance of religion over generations (Bruce, 2002; Voas & Doebler, 2011). Religion's historically dominant role in providing a worldview, caring for the socially and economically deprived, and maintaining social cohesion has now been largely replaced by modern institutions, including scientific thinking, the market economy, welfare states, and individualized networks (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009). Traditional religious values, such as opposition against abortion and homosexuality, are increasingly unpopular in public opinion (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2021; Strimling et al., 2019), and relevant policy-making is also becoming more permissive (Budde et al., 2017; Hildebrandt et al., 2017). It seems to confirm Weber's prediction: religion is being "disenchanted" (Weber, 1958 [1917]); it is increasingly fading away in the public sphere and retreating to the private domain.

The influence of religion has declined in the political arena due to the structural secularization of European societies. In Western Europe, religion, particularly Christianity, has played a profound role in political systems. The religious cleavage, profilled by Christian democratic parties and conservative parties, has been a major pillar of the post-war political structure in advanced Western democracies (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Manza & Wright, 2003). These parties have close connections to Christian churches, represent the Christian interest in defending traditional moral values, and have enjoyed solid support from the Christian population (Knutsen, 2004; van der Brug et al., 2009). The religious cleavage is nevertheless facing declining traditional morality and the emergence of new salient political issues in the public sphere. Christian democratic/conservative parties are engaging in new issues or changing previous positions, which may not stop the religious cleavage's breakdown (Jansen et al., 2012; Otjes, 2021) or incorporation into new cleavages (Kriesi et al., 2008b).

While religiosity and its connection to voting behavior could be decreasing, religion seems to have maintained and even remained relevant in Western politics within the growing salience and intensifying politicization of cultural politics over the past two decades. Among its consequences, we find the election of Donald Trump as the U.S. President, the Brexit Referendum, and the electoral gains of populist radical right parties across Europe. "Moral polarization" and "cultural backlash" have become some of the most discussed terms in

intellectual debates and public discourse (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rapp, 2016). To understand this, the developments and changes in the role of religion under a secular age have to be reexamined. Beyond the enduring influence of religion on political attitudes and behaviors in making the “backlash,” several other factors are worth investigating.

First, while religion has been declining or marginalized, the process could paradoxically strengthen the importance of religiosity to the remaining religious community, either by self-selection that more liberal people are leaving the religion or by the reinforcement of religious identity under secular threats (Hoffmann & Miller, 1997; L. Schnabel, 2016). This “religious polarization” or “cultural backlash” is proposed to explain the ongoing rise of right-wing national conservatism in Western societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The contradictions in empirical findings on whether the effect of individual religiosity is strong in more secular or more religious societies indicate that the question requires further investigation (Achterberg et al., 2009; Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Siegers, 2019; Storm, 2016).

Second, the populist radical right parties in Europe, while focusing more on nativism, nationalism, and populism (Rydgren, 2007), are also trying to include Christianity in their agenda (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Ozzano, 2019). While not being able to attract Christian voters with the traditional connection between church and Christian democratic/conservative parties (Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2021), they have successfully driven the positions of mainstream parties in their direction, especially regarding immigration (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Otjes, 2021).

Third, globalization brings many non-Christian immigrants to Europe who experience widespread hostility and discrimination in their host societies (Doebler, 2014; Quillian et al., 2019; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). These attacks are primarily from radical right parties (Rydgren, 2008); however, antagonism against Muslim immigrants stems from both religious and secular European natives, albeit for different reasons (Brubaker, 2017; Minkenberg, 2018; Ribberink et al., 2017).

This dissertation aims to investigate the continuing impacts of religion on political attitudes and political behaviors through the various aspects mentioned above. Study I examines the role religion plays in cultural conflicts created when legislating marriage or civil partnership for same-sex couples through two dimensions: secularization and party polarization on morality issues, which are concluded to have distinct effects. Study II focuses on the rising radical right parties in Europe and how they have (or have not) encroached on the traditional religious cleavage by testing potential mechanisms linking Christianity and radical right voting. Study

III takes the perspective of immigrants, looking at whether religious engagement could contribute to immigrants' more active political participation in the host society, with specific attention paid to Muslims. To provide a coherent, broader picture connecting the studies, in the following section, I will demonstrate a theoretical framework consisting of political cleavages and political institutions as explanatory factors, political articulations as intermediation, political orientations and political actions as outcomes, and the interplay among these components. The individual studies have their specific focus, reflecting different aspects of the framework and its varying combinations.

## Theoretical Framework

In the current dissertation, I will use an analytical framework borrowed from Stefan Svallfors (2007a) taken from his edited book, *The Political Sociology of Welfare State*. The framework in the book captures how attitudes and behaviors regarding welfare state are risen and shaped by various explanatory and intermediary factors. I will fit the framework into my research context of religion in the current dissertation.

Svallfors (2007b) defined three key concepts in the explanatory framework. The first explanatory factor, *political cleavage*, refers to the social categories that define the borders within which political attitudes and behaviors are formed. In the case of the current dissertation, three different political cleavages are involved. First, the Christian political cleavage is one of the major cleavages in post-war European politics, represented by Christian democratic parties and conservative parties supported by the Christian community (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Second, in recent years, the political party system in Europe has been undergoing dealignment and realignment, with old cleavages losing significance and new cleavages emerging. A new cultural cleavage is focusing on issues such as immigration, cultural diversity, and environmentalism. Prompted by new party families, notably the populist radical right parties and the green parties, this cleavage has gained significance (Kriesi et al., 2008b). Third, with the number of immigrants rising in Europe, their political integration into society and whether they could arguably form a new cleavage has attracted much research attention, especially regarding Muslim immigrants (Dancygier, 2017; Dancygier & Saunders, 2006). It is worth clarifying here that social scientists may have different definitions regarding cleavages. According to some scholarship, cleavage should only be in organizational forms (Bartolini & Mair, 2007). Thus, “cleavages” lacking substantial organizational presence in politics, like immigrants, may not be qualified. Yet, the current dissertation takes the broader definition of political cleavages, which includes group identification (Svallfors, 2007b).

The second explanatory factor is *political institution*, which refers to systemic factors in society, including structural, procedural, and legal arrangements. These arrangements encompasses different aspects embodied in peoples’ lives which shape their attitudes and behaviors explicitly or implicitly. There are a few dimensions of institutions related to religion that are discussed in the dissertation. First, religion has long been a socially normative institution regulating people’s values, attitudes, and behaviors via its teachings, as well as an organizational institution that reinforces community norms (Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009). Second, religion plays a crucial

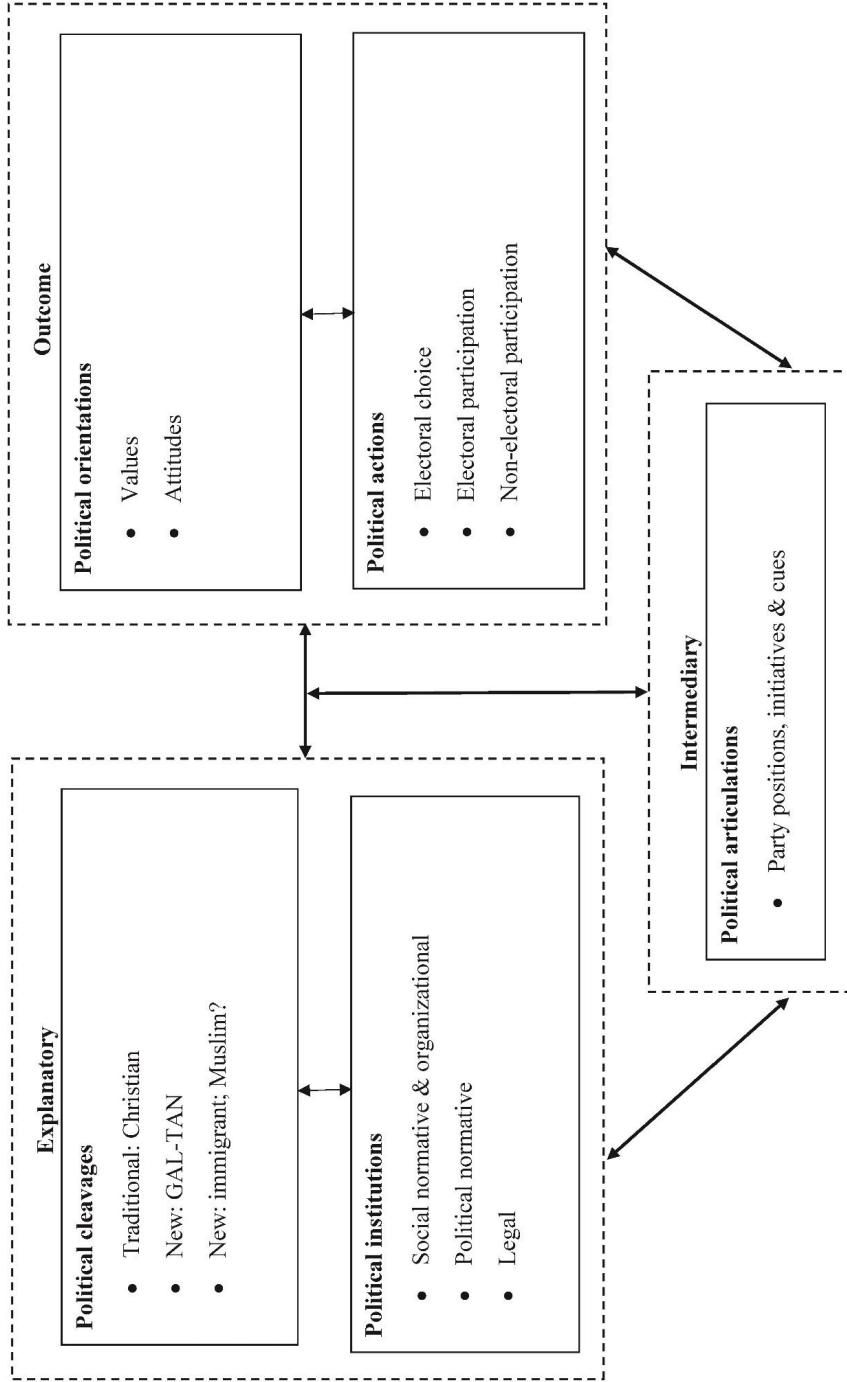
role in political issues regarding morality, and political norms determine relevant attitudes and behaviors (Svallfors, 2007b). Third, policies are made in the realm of morality politics, such as same-sex marriage and partnership, which are also expected to shape attitudes and behaviors (Pierson, 1993).

Third, *political articulation* is proposed as an intermediary factor mediating or moderating the explanatory factors and the outcomes. Political articulations are how political arguments are articulated in public via channels of public discourse, party agenda, political campaigns, media presentation, etc. The extent of articulation based on political cleavages and political institutions could affect how and to what extent those factors influence political outcomes.

Finally, the outcomes that the framework aims to explain are *political orientations* and *political actions*. Political orientations can be a variety of psychological and attitudinal dispositions related to politics, not limited to political and social attitudes (the dissertation's focus), but also values, identities, trust and political efficacy. Following the orientations, political actions are subsequent behaviors, including electoral behavior, such as voting, and non-electoral behavior, such as contacting politicians, demonstrations, and boycotts. Political behaviors that are not based on established political institutions, for example, demonstration, are also defined as non-institutional political behavior instead of institutional political behavior.

Figure 1 presents the factors and their interrelations in the theoretical framework for the current dissertation. Political institution and political cleavage are the explanatory factors, political articulation is the intermediary factor, and political orientations and actions are outcomes. Note that first, the factors are often interwoven: this means that one analyzed phenomenon could be a combination of several factors not easily disentangled. For example, political polarization could be based on a political cleavage, forming a normative political institution, and amplified through political articulation. In the following elaboration of these factors, I will focus on the most relevant aspect based on the context of this dissertation. Second, there are no (certain) presumed directions of these relationships since the factors could affect one another in one direction or vice versa. For instance, public moral attitudes could be the cause or the effect of legislation on morality (Lax & Phillips, 2009; Pierson, 1993), or political parties could alter their positions and discourses upon electoral outcomes (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020).

**Figure 1: Theoretical framework**





## ***Political Cleavages***

I will start the discussion with the first explanatory component: political cleavage, beginning with the dealignment and realignment process in European politics, as seen in recent years with the decline of old Christian cleavage and the rise of a new cultural cleavage. Immigration has been a focal point in the new cultural cleavage. Still, the immigrant group may not yet be able to build an influential cleavage itself, towards which the current dissertation aims to contribute and further explore.

### **From Religious Cleavage to GAL-TAN Cultural Cleavage**

The religious and class cleavages are the two most important political cleavages in Western European politics (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Across Europe, Christian democratic parties, and in some cases their conservative party counterparts, represent the Christian population, which had been dominant majorities in Europe until recently. These parties defend traditional Christian moral values, thus receiving main electoral support from the religious population (Knutsen, 2004, 2018; van der Brug et al., 2009). Christian democratic and conservative parties are the major forces rallying against permissive policies on morality issues (Casanova, 1994; Engeli et al., 2012). The Christian democratic parties also made a significant contribution to European integration by taking the initiative to create the European Union (Hix & Lord, 1997) and are now still an influential group in the European Parliament.

During the past three decades, dealignment and realignment have been the main themes of European politics, indicating the erosion of the old cleavage system and the establishment of new ones. The Christian cleavage cannot avoid the challenges. First, the religious population in Europe is decreasing as societies become more secular, and changes also occur significantly in social norms that people are turning more liberal in morality (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Voas & Doebler, 2011). Thus, the population committed to Christianity and traditional moral values will shrink, greatly threatening the Christian democratic/conservative parties' voting base (Manza & Wright, 2003). Second, in general, party membership has declined over generations, as the younger cohorts are less satisfied with the established political system (Grasso, 2014). Third, to maintain votes, these parties may have to adopt more liberal positions in terms of morality, which could harm their solid support from the committed religious population (Jansen et al., 2012). Third, issue salience has also changed, as new cultural issues have gained more attention, such as immigration, cultural diversity, globalization, environmentalism, and

European integration (Kriesi et al., 2008b). This trend coincides with the rise of new party families, including the populist radical right parties that are radically against immigration, cultural diversity, and European integration, as well as the green parties that focus on environmental issues (L. Hooghe et al., 2002; Marks et al., 2006; Rydgren, 2007). Mainstream parties may also strategically accommodate and take positions on these new issues to remain competitive (Meguid, 2005). Scholars coined the newly emerging cultural cleavage as GAL-TAN (green, alternative, libertarian—traditional, authoritarian nationalist). The TAN side of the cleavage still overlaps with the Christian cleavage in opposition to morality liberalization, but much emphasis has been shifted to nationalism, nativism, and Euroscepticism. While Christianity has partly been overlapping nationalism and nativism (Camus, 2007; Minkenberg, 2018), Euroscepticism is not in accordance with the core values of European Christian democracy (Hix & Lord, 1997). Thus, as old and new cleavages interplay, the party system has become less clear-cut, or “tripolar,” as many scholars argue (Kriesi et al., 2008a; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

Moreover, Christian democratic/conservative parties occupy the space with conservatism on cultural issues and market-liberalism on economic issues and are relatively central in European integration. They could have faced challenges from populist radical right parties that could have mobilized the conservative population more efficiently by outright conservatism, nationalism, and ethnocentrism. Radical right parties are actively using Christian rhetoric for their nationalist and anti-immigrant discourse (Camus, 2007; Ozzano, 2019), which may attract Christian voters, albeit unsuccessfully in Western Europe (Immerzeel et al., 2016; Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2021; Montgomery & Winter, 2015). This question is revisited in Study II in the dissertation. Nevertheless, Christian democratic/conservative parties have become more anti-immigrant (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020; Otjes, 2021).

### **Immigration: A New Cleavage?**

During recent political realignment, immigration and the rise of populist radical right parties have gained much salience. Notably, the anti-immigrant sentiment in contemporary Europe is disproportionately targeted towards Muslim immigrants. Anti-immigrant rhetoric often claims that the increasing Muslim immigrant population threatens the “Judeo-Christian civilization” that is native to Europe (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Kallis, 2018). Meanwhile, attacks on Muslim immigrants are not limited to Christian nationalists: a form of “civilizational”

nationalism has emerged, and it claims that Muslim immigrants represent an over-conservative and patriarchal culture that is incompatible with the secular-liberal political regime of the West (Brubaker, 2017; Ribberink et al., 2017). Immigrants, especially those from the Middle East who are often presumed to be Muslims, suffer systematic discrimination in the labor markets (Quilliam et al., 2019; Vernby & Dancygier, 2019), suffer through mobilization, face a hostile political climate (Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008), and are even restricted in their freedom of religious practices (Kallis, 2018). It is also worth noting that compared to immigrants with other religious backgrounds, religiosity and its influence on attitudes has remained relatively strong among Muslims (Bevelander & Hjerm, 2015; Jacob & Kalter, 2013; Simsek et al., 2019).

Although immigrants, especially Muslims, should be more active in political engagement to defend their rights and show their integration into democratic politics, they have lower political participation than natives across Europe (de Rooij, 2012; Spies et al., 2020). Thus, there is not yet a cleavage to represent and defend the immigrant population. On the one hand, there are few specific immigrant parties (Vermeulen et al., 2020). Second, the mainstream parties are also reluctant to make immigrants more representative. In principle, immigrants will be more prone to support left parties due to these parties' tolerant profile towards immigrants (Dancygier & Saunders, 2006; Strijbis, 2014). Yet, parties may only strategically recruit and mobilize immigrants who are often more socially conservative, which will be against their ideology on socio-cultural issues (Dancygier, 2017). It is also prevalent that political parties may discriminate against immigrants in recruitment, although to a lesser extent among left parties (Dancygier et al., 2015; Eriksson & Vernby, 2021).

As there is no built-in cleavage for religious immigrants, the potential of religion in immigrant political participation is still worth discussing. In line with the Tocquevillian tradition of civic engagement (Tocqueville, 1956 [1835]), like other civic organizations, religious communities could encourage members to participate in politics by building mutual trust, democratic norms, and extending political networks (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Moreover, the main religion of immigrant groups in Europe, Islam and, to a lesser extent Christianity, are global religions that break national boundaries; thus, cooperation among different ethnic groups has great potential under the religious umbrella (Kastoryano & Schader, 2014). It would be particularly salient for Muslim immigrants, as they have experienced more profound and more prevalent mistreatments across countries (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). An abundance of literature has focused on the role of religion in immigrant political participation (Just et al.,

2014; Moutselos, 2020) but has not been investigated in the contexts of Nordic countries, which have recently been privy to higher levels of immigration. Previous studies in Nordic countries show that engagement in ethnic organizations, similar to religious ones, plays a minor role (Adman & Strömblad, 2009; Togeby, 2004).

### ***Political Institutions***

Political institutions are the second explanatory component in the theoretical framework. The current dissertation investigates the role of religion in political institutions from social normative, organizational, political normative, and legal aspects.

### **Social Normative and Organizational Institutions of Religion**

Religion is a strong normative and organizational institution governing people's attitudes and behaviors due to its predominant social, cultural, and political role in pre-modern societies. First, religion provides a holistic worldview to explain natural phenomena and moral guidance to everyday life and interpersonal relations (Berger, 2011 [1967]). Second, by its spiritual teaching and economic support generated in religious community-based charities, religion serves as a relief for the socio-economically deprived in society, which Marx coined as the "opium of the people" (Marx, 1970 [1843]) that comforts the suffering so that the status quo in the socio-economic structure could be maintained in favor of the ruling class. Third, religion has a function in social integration by creating shared identity and social norms in the "moral community," which helps to strengthen interpersonal networks and social cohesion in the group (Durkheim, 1965 [1912]). Thus, through these approaches, religion asserts controls on individuals, indoctrinating their values, attitudes, and behaviors and reinforcing them through collective norms and organizations.

Modernization is the process that has removed religion's influence and replaced it with modern institutions. Through the process, religious worldviews have been replaced by rational and scientific thinking, the socio-economic function of religion has declined with the expansion of market economies and modern welfare states, and traditional communities maintained under religious norms have waned as interpersonal networks become increasingly individualized and diversified (Ruiter & van Tubergen, 2009; te Grotenhuis et al., 2015). Thus, secularization becomes the obvious consequence, as religion is no longer necessary. Different versions of the

*modernization theory* predict the continuation of secularization. For instance, Norris and Inglehart's (2004) theory on cultural change suggests that existential security, prompted by growing economic prosperity and welfare states, frees people from traditional communities and binding religious views. Therefore, people who have experienced more existential security in early adolescence will develop less religious views but more individualistic values. It will persist as values do not readily change after formative years, making religion decrease steadily by cohort replacement (Inglehart, 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The remaining religious people in the society would be those who are still disadvantaged under current socio-economic arrangements, such as those who have lower education, lower income, insecure unemployment positions, and experiencing economic crisis, social inequality, and political instability (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Ruiters & van Tubergen, 2009; Solt et al., 2011; te Grotenhuis et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the modernization theory would argue that religious decline should continue with security being addressed economically.

The deterministic view on secularization has recently received various counter-arguments in the sociology of religion. While religion has significantly declined, its impacts on political attitudes and behaviors seem to be persistent (Doebler, 2014; Halman & van Ingen, 2015; A. Schnabel & Hjerm, 2014; van der Brug et al., 2009). Moreover, many scholars argue that the impact of religion could even grow in the secular age. The theory of *religious defense* proposes that in a more secular context, the effect of individual religiosity on attitudes and behaviors will be stronger, i.e., a religious polarization (Achterberg et al., 2009; Hoffmann & Miller, 1997). First, as modernization theory would predict, as society further secularizes, more and more people will leave religion and stop religious practices. However, it will also lead to self-selection: the remaining religious population will be the most committed and the most adherent to traditional religious values (Achterberg et al., 2009). Second, the marginalization of religion in society could make the remaining religious perceive extra threats from the secular majority, develop a stronger religious identity, and make the symbolic boundary between the religious and the secular even more salient (Hoffmann & Miller, 1997; L. Schnabel, 2016). It coincides with Norris and Inglehart's (2019) recent revision to their early theory that modernization is not monotonic. We are currently experiencing a “cultural backlash” that the increasingly marginalized conservative is now more motivated and committed to countering the liberalization of societies. These arguments are in contrast to conventional understandings of the interplay between religiosity on the individual level and secularization on the societal level. The *moral community thesis* states that the effect of individual religiosity on attitudes and

behaviors is stronger in more religious contexts, as religious influence requires cohesive community and norms to be effective (Durkheim, 1965 [1912]; Ruiters & de Graaf, 2006). Surprisingly, mixed empirical findings support both theoretical predictions (Siegers, 2019). Some studies show that the effect of individual religiosity is more substantial under more religious contexts (Finke & Adamczyk, 2008; Storm, 2016), while others find the opposite (Achterberg et al., 2009; Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2016).

The following are two other important theoretical approaches in the current sociology of religion literature that are not directly tested in the dissertation but are worth mentioning. First, scholars have also called for “post-secularization” frameworks with potential revival of religion and a counterargument to modernization. First, *individualization theory* suggests that religion would benefit from the secularization process. As religion retreats from the public and increasingly becomes an individual matter, it can be atoned from the oppressive historical figure and become empowered and legitimized (Beck, 2010). Religious demand would increase, as individuals would still need spiritual comforts and moral guidance facing the volatile dynamics and great uncertainty in modern societies (Beck, 1994, 2010). However, there is little evidence supporting the revival of religion in post-secular Western societies (Hagevi, 2017; Pollack & Pickel, 2007). A second prominent argument is the *religious market theory*, which proposes that religion will flourish under deregulation and pluralization (Iannaccone, 1992). As the state loses control over religion and the diversity of religious denominations grows, religious denominations will have more incentives to innovate and compete with each other to keep or attract followers (Casanova, 2019; Iannaccone, 1992). A vigorous religious market would lead to a higher religious practices rate and a more substantial impact of religiosity on individual attitudes and behaviors.

On the one hand, while deregulation is robustly correlated to higher levels of religious practices (Aarts et al., 2010; Ruiters & van Tubergen, 2009), the effect of religious pluralization is unclear and could be spurious (Olson et al., 2020). On the other hand, varied findings are also reached regarding the moderating effect of contexts on individual religiosity. For example, Borgonovi (2008) shows that the effect of religiosity on volunteering is stronger in more religiously heterogeneous contexts, while Bohman and Hjerm (2014) show that the religiosity has more negative effect on anti-immigration attitudes contexts with more religious regulation and less religious homogeneity and government religious favoritism. The influx of non-Christian immigrant populations in Europe, particularly Muslims, plays a major role in the intensification of “religious competition” in public discourse (Brubaker, 2017; Kallis, 2018), as religious

identity is strongly related to national identity and anti-immigrant sentiments (A. Schnabel & Hjerm, 2014; Storm, 2011a, 2011b).

### **Political Normative Institution of Morality Politics**

Besides fostering social norms as a social institution, religion is also embedded in the political institutions of Western societies, having a powerful influence on issues of morality. As discussed previously, countries vary in the strength and salience of political cleavage, and the difference could be reflected in the political norms of the public. One example could be the role of “welfare state regimes” in Svallfors’ (2007) analysis. Welfare states in Western societies could be classified into various regimes, from the most restrictive “liberal regime” to the most generous and egalitarian Nordic “social-democratic regime,” categories stemming from the seminal work of Esping-Andersen (1990). A generous regime not only means higher social expenditure in redistribution but also influences social norms, making welfare and redistribution issues more supported and salient in the political arena (Edlund, 2007; Svallfors, 1997). The political institution will insert normative influence by promoting the issue’s visibility, creating more opportunities for relevant agents for further change-making, and shaping how the public perceives the issue as just and fair (Svallfors, 2007b).

A similar approach could be applied to the cleavages on the cultural dimension, and for religion, the focus would be on morality issues. Engeli et al. (2012) develop the framework of “two worlds of morality politics,” analyzing the varied levels of salient and politicization on morality issues across Western European countries and how that contributes to different trajectories in making permissive legislation on morality. In this framework, the “religious world” refers to countries where morality issues are highly salient and politicized, often with a strong religious cleavage represented by Christian democratic and conservative parties linked to the church. While the strong presence of religious conservative political forces is certainly an obstacle to permissive legislation making, parties representing liberal values in such contexts are also more motivated to politicize the issue from the other side of the spectrum and make use of opportunities to pass permissive legislations. Conversely, the “secular world” countries more often have economic issues as the priority, and the religious cleavage and the politicization of morality have weaker salience. Therefore, they are often ironically lagged in legislation making since initiatives are less made. It is worth noting that a country in the “religious world” does not mean the country is religious, with the notable exception of the Netherlands, which is highly

secular in population but has influential Christian democratic parties (Timmermans & Breeman, 2012). Hurka et al. (2018) proposed a later revision of the framework, adding the descriptor “traditionalist world” for countries without religious cleavage but secular conservative parties take the role against permissive morality and an “unsecular world” for countries with strong religious cleavage, but the morality issue is no longer salient. The *world of morality politics* framework offers great insight into analyzing the legislation on morality trajectories across countries; it certainly can explain public opinion on morality and interact with other individual- and contextual-level factors related to religion. We could expect similar mechanisms argued by Svallfors (2007b): visibility promoting, incentive making, and perception shaping in how political norms influence social norms working here. The analysis of this framework on the micro-level is scant, except that Arzheimer (2020) used it to explain moral attitudes in the German case.

### **Legal Institution: Permissive Legislations on Morality**

Finally, I will introduce the religious perspective on how legal institutions affect attitudes and behaviors. Policies are usually designed to play an active role in monitoring people’s attitudes and behaviors, creating a “critical juncture” (Neyer & Andersson, 2008) in changes. Compared to comprehensive studies on the impacts of policies in socio-economic domains (Billingsley & Ferrarini, 2014; Gangl & Ziefle, 2015; Gingrich & Ansell, 2012), policies concerning moral attitudes and behaviors have received more research attention in recent years. Under rapid secularization, permissive legislation on morality issues, such as the legalization of abortion, same-sex marriage and partnership, and euthanasia, has also increased in European countries. These policies are expected to have a positive impact on liberalizing people’s moral attitudes. The implementation of the policy will improve the condition of the targeted disadvantaged group, e.g. the sexual minorities, help to raise their incentives and resources to achieve further progress, and enhance the visibility and traceability of the issue in the public, making them more recognizable and acceptable (Pierson, 1993). This picture is undoubtedly idealistic, as policies with good intentions do not necessarily meet satisfying outcomes, which could be likely if we consider unique characteristics of policies on morality. Unlike socio-economic policies, morality policies attempt to regulate basic moral values deeply affected by religious worldviews, which rational argument could not easily change, especially for those who have experienced religious socialization (Mooney, 1999). Moreover, to have an opinion on morality issues does not require sophisticated knowledge on technicalities, which lowers the barrier of discussion



and participation and enhances the intensity of debates (Mooney & Schuldt, 2008). In the example of legislation on same-sex marriage and partnership examined in the dissertation, for those religious people who hold conservative moral values, such legislation would be a serious threat to their values and identity, which could be enhanced under a highly secular society in which religion is marginalized (Hoffmann & Miller, 1997; L. Schnabel, 2016). Thus, many scholars argue that permissive legislation could lead to backlash for the conservative religious community, making them grow more negative attitudes toward homosexuality, or at least make attitudes towards homosexuality diverge or polarize across liberal and conservative populations (Kreitzer et al., 2014; Pratto et al., 1994). In addition, there is also a possibility that policy will not impact attitudes, as long as it is responding to a previous consensus in the public opinion supporting it (Lax & Phillips, 2009). Flores and Barclay (2016) provide a comprehensive summary of possible impacts of permissive legislation on same-sex marriage or partnership, with a consensus model (no impact), legitimacy model (positive impact), backlash model (negative impact), and polarization model (diverging impact across groups, not mutually exclusive from other models).

The empirical findings on the impact of same-sex marriage and partnership legislations on attitudes towards homosexuality have been lending support to different models, especially when the study is cross-national comparative (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019; Bishin et al., 2016; Flores & Barclay, 2016; M. Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Kreitzer et al., 2014; Redman, 2018; van den Akker et al., 2013). This reminds us that one should more carefully look at how the legislation impact differs across contexts and how contextual factors could explain the difference. As noted earlier, secularization liberalizes people's moral values and could make permissive policies more acceptable if the majority of the population already approves granting sexual minorities more rights. However, as the religious defense thesis suggests, the religious community, marginalized under secularization, would perceive higher levels of threats from the legislation and react more negatively towards it (Achterberg et al., 2009; Hoffmann & Miller, 1997), creating more divergence or backlash in the legislation's wake. The political norms in the country can also play a role. Countries with strong salience and politicization on morality, e.g., "religious world" and "traditionalist world" (Engeli et al., 2012; Hurka et al., 2018), would be more divided on issues of morality, and the legislation impact could be more negative in general and more divergent compared to countries that have low politicization and more consensus. How this context moderates the legislation's impact on attitudes is investigated in this dissertation's Study I.

### ***Political Articulations***

In the current theoretical framework, political articulation is the intermediary connection between explanatory factors and outcomes. Relevant political actors, including political parties, activists, and media, initiate political articulations through political discourses, politicization, political campaigns, symbolic cues, media presentation, etc. to raise or redefine issue salience, mediating and enhancing the influence of political cleavages and political institutions on outcomes of attitudes and behaviors.

Political articulation is most directly represented in the influence of the party system and its corresponding political norms. Recalling the “worlds of morality politics” framework (Engeli et al., 2012; Hurka et al., 2018), countries differ in the salience of morality issues and the strength of religious cleavage. Therefore, in countries with a strong presence of Christian democratic parties and high salience of morality issues, debates, proposals, and legislation on morality will more likely be raised by both sides of the socio-cultural spectrum and gain attention in the public sphere. There could, therefore, be more polarization between parties and their supporters. Polarization and issue salience could enhance the effect of party cues in political preference, which means that people would be more likely to support political arguments from parties they identify with and disregard the actual content (Bullock, 2011; Druckman et al., 2013; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). Thus, voting patterns will be more clear-cut between the two sides of a political cleavage when the issue is salient and polarized (Finseraas & Vernby, 2011; Sanz et al., 2021). High salience and polarization could also be incentives for political actors to take actions against political opponents, which will not be limited to further politicization, but also substantive actions such as blocking policy implementation or referendums (Engeli & Varone, 2012; McCarty et al., 2016). These consequences will also, in return, solidify the issue salience and related political cleavages and political institutions, building into the “inertia” of the political climate (Edlund, 2007).

The dissertation primarily focuses on politicization and political polarization as channels of political articulation. However, other channels, such as political activism (Ayoub, 2014; Berntzen & Weisskircher, 2016) and media, especially social media in the current digital era (Froio & Ganesh, 2019), are also crucial and worth further investigation.

### ***Political Orientations and Actions***

Religion and related explanatory factors introduced above profoundly impact political orientations and political actions in numerous domains (Halman & Gelissen, 2019; Siegers, 2019). In the following section, I will briefly summarize some of the political outcomes examined in the current dissertation.

### **Pro-Social Values and Behaviors**

The relationship between religion and pro-social values and behaviors such as charitable giving and volunteering has been abundant (Saroglou, 2006; Wuthnow, 1991). Theoretically, most religious teachings encourage tolerance, benevolence, and altruism, and encourage caring for others, especially the vulnerable in society. In general, empirical findings show that the relationship between religion and pro-sociality can be complicated as well. First, religious people exhibit higher levels of charitable giving and volunteering behaviors than non-religious people. However, these actions are more common within religious activities, which means that peer pressure in the community rather than pro-social values could be the mechanism under pro-social behaviors (Bekkers & Schuyt, 2008; Regnerus et al., 1998). Second, the pro-sociality of religious people is more often shown towards in-group members but less toward people outside the community (Saroglou et al., 2004). Experimental studies also found that religious people tend to express more pro-sociality with the priming of God (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), and others suggest that religious pro-sociality could be expressed due to social-desirability (Galen, 2012).

Pro-sociality has been proposed as a mechanism to explain the underrepresentation of Christian voters in populist radical right party supporters (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Montgomery & Winter, 2015), which is doubtful with the ambiguous relationship between Christianity and ethnocentrism (Doebler, 2014; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). This puzzle is addressed in Study II of the dissertation.

### **Morality and Conservatism**

As the primary source of moral guidance throughout history, religion profoundly impacts people's moral views (Halman & Gelissen, 2019). In the context of Europe, in line with religious teaching, Christians have more traditional moral values which are against issues such

as abortion, homosexuality, gender equality, etc. (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019; Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2017; Halman & van Ingen, 2015). There are also denominational differences in moral values; for instance, Muslims are most negative towards homosexuality among major religions in Europe, followed by Orthodox, Protestants, and Catholics (M. Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; van den Akker et al., 2013). However, in the case of civic morality, for instance, attitudes towards illegal behaviors such as tax fraud, religious people also hold fewer approval views, but the effect is not as strong as on moral views (Finke & Adamczyk, 2008; Storm, 2016). Similarly, as the dominant historical ideology in European societies, Christianity is also associated with authoritarian values that emphasize authority, obedience, and social order, but the effect is weaker than in the morality domain (de Koster & van Der Waal, 2007; Pless et al., 2020).

In addition, how contextual religiosity shapes the impact of individual religiosity has been unclear, as moral community theory proposes the effect of individual religiosity being stronger in a more religious context, while the religious defense thesis suggests the opposite, and both arguments have received empirical support (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Siegers, 2019; Storm, 2011a). Study I in the current dissertation examines how this interaction further interplays with another factor: the legal institution of permissive legislation on homosexuality.

### **Attitudes Toward Immigration**

Attitudes towards immigrants is another political orientation that has shown inconsistent findings. Following the discussion above, one could expect religiosity, which is Christianity in the European context, to positively and negatively affect immigration. If the religious had more tolerance, benevolence, and altruism towards others, they should refrain from holding antagonistic views on the immigrant group. However, religious identity could foster a sense of group competition and lead to negative attitudes against the out-group (Turner & Tajfel, 1986), which, in this case, is Muslim immigrants for Christian natives. Moreover, religiosity is often associated with authoritarianism, which tends to preserve the status quo social order, including the ethnic hierarchy (Adorno, 1950; Allport & Ross, 1967). In light of the inconsistent findings, the effect of religiosity on attitudes towards immigrants could be curvilinear and multidimensional, as different dimensions of religiosity play different roles. Several studies show that religious identity has a stronger effect on anti-immigrant attitudes than religious attendance, or marginal church members are more xenophobic than active church members

(Billiet et al., 1995; Doebler, 2014; Storm, 2011a). Holding religious fundamentalist views is also strongly correlated to anti-immigrant attitudes (Doebler, 2014; Immerzeel et al., 2013). The context of religion also matters, as the degree of individual religiosity is more strongly associated with anti-immigrant attitudes in Catholic countries where the religious norm is more cohesive (Bohman & Hjern, 2014). The effect of religious identity is strong in Protestant contexts where Protestant churches often enjoy state church status and are linked to national identity (Storm, 2011a, 2011b). As the key determinant to voting for radical right parties, the role of anti-immigrant attitudes is also examined in Study II in the dissertation dealing with Christian supports for radical rights.

### **Political Participation and Voting**

On the behavioral level, religiosity has in no doubt a great influence on voting choice, as Christians in Europe would vote along the religious cleavage to Christian democratic/conservative parties (Knutsen, 2004; van der Brug et al., 2009). While the cleavage is declining but still substantial, how its strength could differ across contexts would call for further examination. As traditional morality is the major focus on the Christian cleavage, how Christian democratic/conservative parties could mobilize their Christian voting base would depend on how they emphasize this issue (Jansen et al., 2012; Langsæther, 2019), as well as the issue's extent of politicization and salience (Sanz et al., 2021). The secularization process would also shape the Christian voting pattern, as Christian voters would be more attached to Christian democratic parties in contexts where they are more marginalized (Raymond, 2019).

Religion could also impact promoting non-electoral political behaviors, such as signing petitions, protesting, and boycotting. On the one hand, like other forms of civic engagements, religious communities provide cooperative norms, mutual trust, and networks for political recruitment that would facilitate political participation (Almond & Verba, 2016 [1963]; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, however, the homogeneity of religious communities would undermine such a function of civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). For the immigrant community, especially Muslims, religion could add another dimension of impact since these groups are facing widespread discrimination due to their religious minority status, which could potentially both act as incentives or obstacles for participation across contexts (Dana et al., 2019; Kastoryano & Schader, 2014; Oskooii, 2020). Previous literature has overwhelmingly shown that frequent mosque attendance facilitates political participation among Muslim immigrants

(Dana et al., 2011; Fleischmann et al., 2016; Moutselos, 2020; Vergani et al., 2017). Just et al. (2014) examined the effect of different religious traditions on immigrant political participation across Europe. They found a more substantial effect of Islam, especially for non-institutional participation such as demonstration. Study III in this dissertation is the first to explore the context of Sweden that has not yet been examined.

## **Research Contexts**

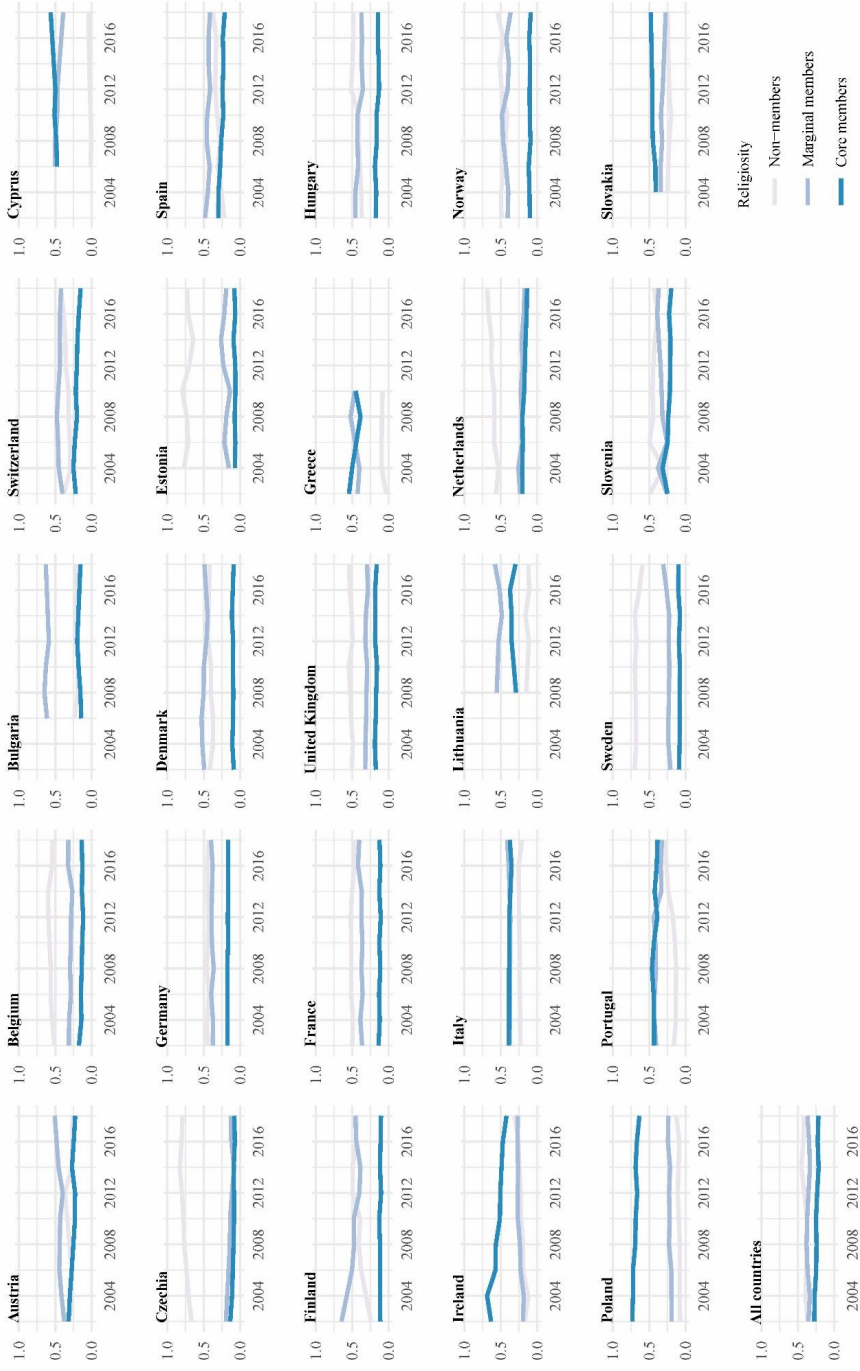
In this section, I will present and visualize the contexts of the dissertation. I will demonstrate trends of religious engagement and politicization on morality issues across European countries and the process of secularization and religious diversification in Sweden.

### ***Secularization in Europe***

In Figure 2, I show the trends of changes in religious engagement across European countries covered in the dissertation, using European Social Survey (ESS) data spanning from 2002 to 2018 (European Social Survey, 2018). Here, the core member denotes people affiliated with a religious denomination who attend services at least once a month. Marginal members are those who belong to a religious denomination but attend services less frequently. Non-members are the rest of the population without religious affiliation. The classification is constructed in line with the ESS methodological guideline (Billiet, 2002) and is used for all studies in the dissertation. This issue will be further discussed in the section on methodology later.

It has been well established that religious membership and religious attendance have continuously declined in most European countries since the 1980s, with cohort replacement being the major mechanism (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Voas & Doebler, 2011). However, as the figure shows, secularization has come into a stabilized stage in the past two decades. In most countries, the proportion of core members, marginal members, and non-members has been stable over the past 16 years, including very secular countries like Sweden and Belgium. For most religious countries, religiosity has declined in some countries like Poland and Ireland but increased in cases such as Slovakia. The trends suggest that secularization has slowed in pace and may eventually end sometime. Religion will not disappear but will instead become a marginal group in a society that is small in size (Bruce, 2002). This situation may lead to a stronger salience of religion in political discourse. The remaining religious population would be more committed and faithful, have a stronger religious identity, and be more different from the secular majority (Achterberg et al., 2009; Hoffmann & Miller, 1997). Study I explores this paradoxical role of deep secularity.

**Figure 2: Secularization trends in Europe 2002-2018**



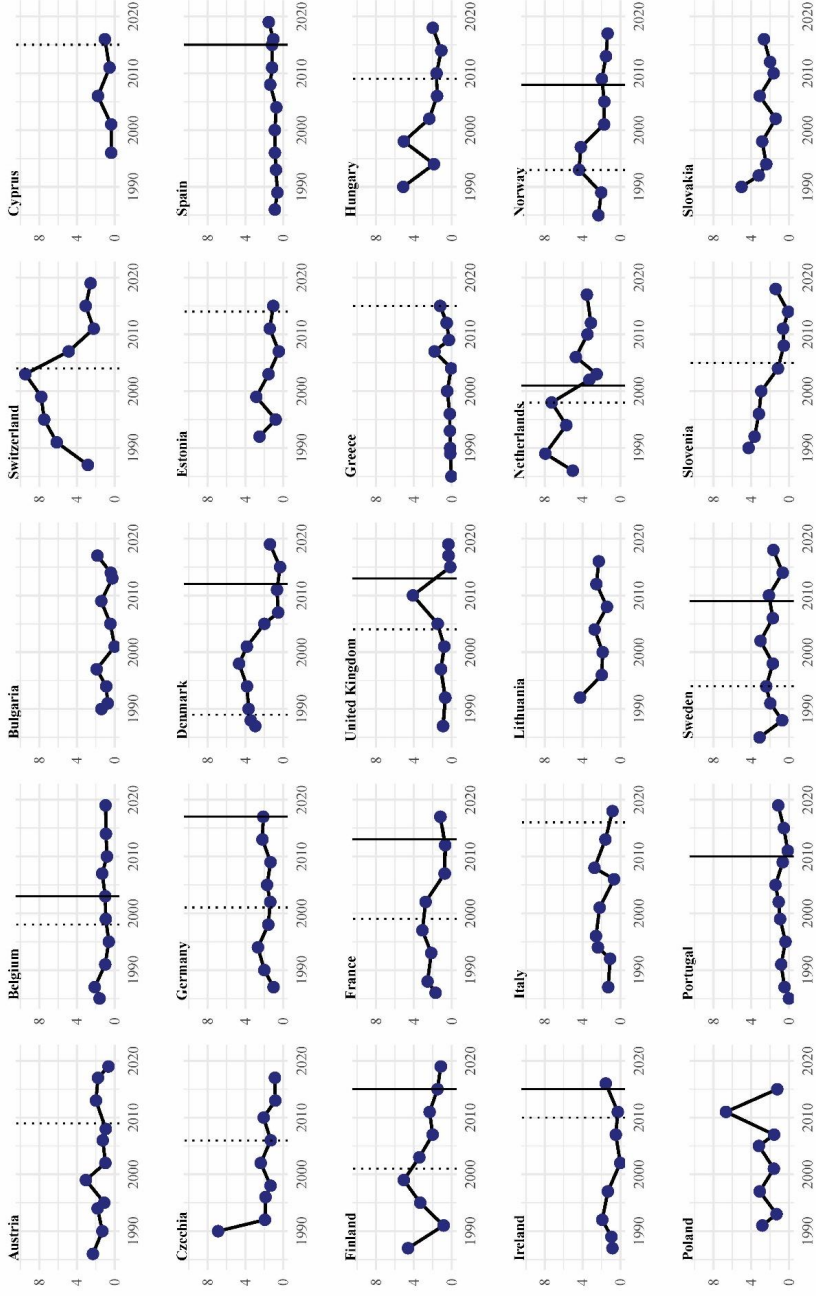


### ***Morality Politics in Europe***

Figure 3 shows the trends of how morality issues are being politicized in countries covered by this dissertation, with data derived from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2017). The score indicates the average extent of traditional morality used in party electoral manifestos, using two items in the data that represent parties' positive or negative politicization on traditional morality. The score is calculated by subtracting the negative item from the positive one and taking the absolute value. Additionally, the vertical lines represent the times that legislation recognizing same-sex civil partnership and same-sex marriage are made, respectively, to show the progress in permissive legislation on morality issues. In most countries, the politicization of morality issues has been stable and fluctuating around certain levels, suggesting that issue salience remains. The figure demonstrates the methodological drawbacks in the "worlds of morality politics" framework. The classification of morality politics regimes by Engeli et al. (2012) is rather arbitrary (Hurka et al., 2018) and should be improved using systemic operationalization. For example, Spain, as mentioned as the "religious world" with high politicization on morality issues by Engeli et al. (2012), actually has a rather low level of politicization on morality, at least for political parties, compared to Denmark, which is a Scandinavian country classified into the low-politicization "secular world" regime by Engeli et al. (2012).

Further, it is also worth noticing that politicization on morality issues often coincides with the legislation time in some cases, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the UK, but not in others, such as Spain and Belgium. The different patterns suggest that countries undergo different legislation processes due to their political norms in morality politics. The cases with legislation and high politicization coinciding should be "religious world" or "traditionalist world," and there are some coincidences for "secular world" and "unsecular world" countries since the legislation is more likely to be the consequence of political consensus. Therefore, it is possible that the presence of politicization could even alter the outcomes of legislation on attitudes, as it may generate higher salience of and polarization on the issue, which provides grounds for the test in Study I.

**Figure 3: Trends of politicization on morality issues and permissive legislation on same-sex unions in Europe**

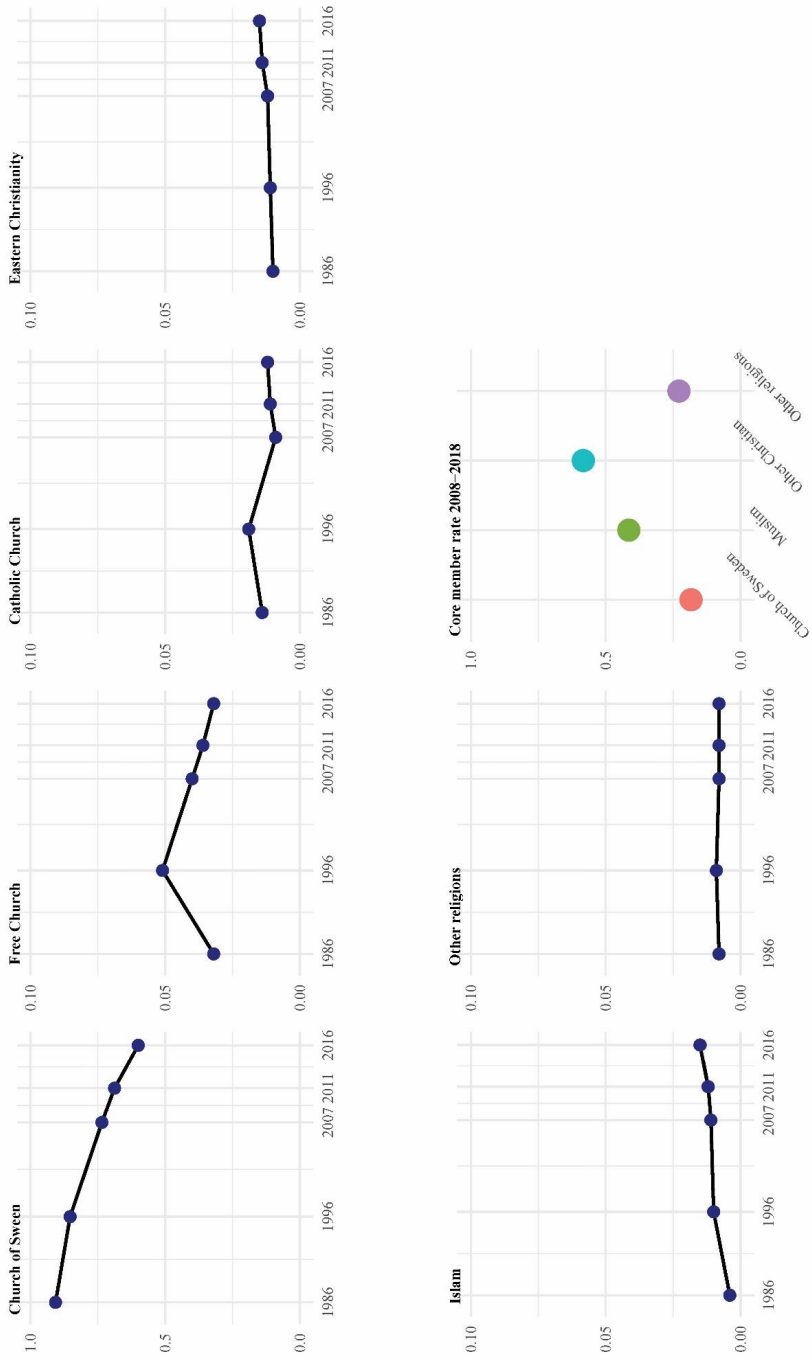


Dashed lines: partnership legislation; Solid lines: marriage legislation

### *Secularization and Religious Pluralization in Sweden*

Figure 4 shows the religion trends in the case of Sweden, with data from the Church of Sweden statistics (Svenska kyrkan, 2021) and the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (Willander, 2019). In the Swedish context, the former state church, the Church of Sweden, has been a religious monopoly that most Swedish people automatically became members at birth. Even now, it still serves important functions in the state, not only in ceremonial but also administrative manners, such as taxation, which is a major reason why the secular population would dislike it in the Nordic countries (Furseth et al., 2018). It is shown that the membership rate of the Church of Sweden has decreased drastically since the 1980s, from over 90% to just over 50% in 2016. Meanwhile, minor denominations have grown substantially, even still very small in sizes, below 5% of the population. Other Western Christian denominations, such as the Free Church and Catholicism, grew until the 1990s and then declined. The religions mostly found in immigrant communities, notably Eastern Christianity and Islam, have steadily been increasing. Using ESS data from 2008 to 2018, it is shown that the actual levels of engagement, indicated by the proportion of core members (who attend services at least once a month), are much higher among Muslims and people from non-state-church Christian traditions, as most Church of Sweden members are now merely nominal. Those minor religious groups also hold more conservative values than Church of Sweden members and the non-religious (Bernhardt et al., 2007; Goldscheider et al., 2014). Even though religious diversity in Sweden has greatly expanded, its consequences on political behaviors have been less studied, towards which Study III will contribute to.

**Figure 4: Trends of religious membership in Sweden and religious engagement level across denomination**



## Research Methodology

### *Data*

The three studies used two different sources of survey data. Studies I and II use European Social Survey data, a comparative survey project collecting data from more than 20 European countries every two years since 2002. The sampling is representative in each country, and the data representativeness in the analysis could be adjusted by design weight and population size weights in the analysis (Kaminska, 2020). The ESS survey contains items in numerous topics, including religiosity, values, social capital, attitudes on immigration, homosexuality, and voting choice.

Study I is a comparative analysis that focuses on the impact of permissive legislation and how it varies across national contexts. Therefore, I select countries that have participated in ESS for at least four rounds and no greater gap than two rounds in between during the period 2002-2016 (European Social Survey, 2018), and also have Christians as the dominant religion and stable democracy, to rule out the spuriousness effect from time-variant country characteristics such as the role of economic development media and activism. The sample ends up in 24 countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czechia, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia, and Slovakia, with the total sample size at 290792. Beyond this, the study also deploys two other forms of data. First, I use the Lawsandfamilies database (Waldijk, 2018) and *The State-Sponsored Homophobia Report* (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2019) to track the legislation changes in the period. Ten countries have legislated approving same-sex marriage during the analysis period, and eight others have legalized civil partnerships for homosexual couples. Second, to measure the degree of party polarization on morality issues, I use Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data that quantify positions and salience of various issues for political parties, coded from election manifestos (Volkens et al., 2017). The advantage of using CMP data rather than expert surveys is that the measurement considers both the party stance and politicization of the issue for the party, by which the degree of political articulation can be operationalized.

Study II analyzes the mediators underlying the relationship between Christianity and voting for radical right parties in Europe. Therefore, countries included are Christian as the dominant religion, stable democracy, and a sizeable radical right party, which has received at least 1% of

votes in the recent election. The sample eventually includes 17 countries: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Slovenia. The sample size ranged from 1160 to 2364 across countries. As the relationship between Christianity and radical right voting varies greatly across contexts in previous studies (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Montgomery & Winter, 2015), analyses are separated for each country, and comparison is based on one round of data around the same time (European Social Survey, 2016).

In Study III, as the focus group is immigrants in Sweden, I use data from the Swedish Level of Living Survey for the Foreign Born and Their Children (LNU-UFB), conducted in 2010 (SOFI, 2010). It is the first large-scale survey focusing on immigrants in Sweden, covering their socio-economic status, family, social integration, civil engagement, political participation, etc. The data is collected stratified by seven groups of origin countries: Nordic countries, Western developed countries, Middle-East and North Africa (MENA), Sub-Saharan Africa, other Asian countries, and Latin America. The response rate is satisfactory at 63%, and weights are available to adjust for sampling bias (Carlsson, 2010; Wadensjö, 2013). Moreover, respondents' socio-economic and geographical details could be acquired by retrieving information from the register database, the Longitudinal Integration Database for Health and Labor Market Studies (SCB, 2016), which is linked to the LNU-UFB survey. The final sample size is 2388.

## ***Methods***

A wide variety of methodologies are used to serve the purpose of different studies. Study I investigates how policy effects on individual attitudes are conditioned on national contexts. To disentangle the policy effect from unmeasured confounding of time-invariant contextual factors like the country's political, cultural, and religious tradition, and overall temporal factors such as economic crisis and global LGBT movement, I deploy a two-way fixed effect (FE) regression model (Gangl, 2010) with two-way and three-way interactions to test how policy effects vary across individual and contextual characteristics. Standard errors are clustered by countries to counter variance heteroscedasticity (Stock & Watson, 2008). In addition, I have conducted a series of robustness checks, including ordered logistic models that treat the attitudes dependent variable as ordinal instead of continuous, and a model adding an aggregated lagged-dependent variable in the country to further control for unobserved confounding varying across countries

(Arellano & Bond, 1991). Other robustness checks are regarding case selection and the treatment of “Don’t Know” answers in the dependent variable.

In Study II, I test the mediation effects of values, attitudes, and social capital under the relationship between religiosity and voting separately for each country. As the dependent variable is binary and highly skewed in distribution, logistic regression models will be the ideal choice of model. However, conventional mediation analysis by coefficient comparison between models will run into a rescaling problem in the context of non-linear models (Mood, 2010). To address this, I use the KHB method to adjust the coefficients in logistic models for comparison (Kohler et al., 2011). Another issue is the amount of missing data regarding anti-immigrant attitudes and voting choice in the ESS data, which is serious in countries like Italy and Hungary, approaching 50%. It could be worsened as such missing answers are likely missing-not-at-random (MNAR) that missing depends on unobserved information, such as social desirability bias (Schafer, 1997). To counter this threat, I use multiple imputations by chained equations (MICE) to impute missing information based on other information, which could not entirely solve the problem but provide the most unbiased and efficient estimation (van Ginkel et al., 2020). I have also conducted a robustness analysis using list-wise deletion. Other robustness analyses include causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2011) to address the limitation of statistical power and multinomial logistic models taking voting for different parties into account simultaneously.

In Study III, as the dependent variables are political participation, which is again binary and skewed, logistic regression models are used. Four different indicators for types of political participation are examined separately. Robustness checks are performed using a combined index for electoral participation and continuous measurement for religiosity.

For all three studies, religiosity is operationalized by categorizing the sample into three groups: core members who belong to a religion and attend religious services at least once a month; marginal members who belong to religion but do not have frequent attendance or take religion merely as identity; and non-members who are completely secular without religious affiliation. The rationale for using this classification is, first, the function of religion is multifaceted. As discussed previously, the religious influence on attitudes and behaviors includes both normative institutions by teaching and organizational institutions by community engagement. Therefore, active attendance will play an additional role. Second, empirical evidence supports the multidimensional effect of religiosity, and nominal religiosity is more strongly associated with ethnocentrism (Doebler, 2014; Storm, 2011b), possibly due to the signaling effect of religious

identity. Even the effect of attendance is suggested as non-linear (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Billiet et al., 1995) on attitudes.

### ***Ethical Issues***

All survey programs used in the studies were conducted upon the approval of ethical reviews, with the aims of protecting individual privacy and keeping anonymity. Therefore, confidentiality was provided in the fieldwork, and all data will be stored, distributed and analyzed as anonymous so individual participants are not possible to be identified. Further, terms of agreement are approved when accessing the data so that the researcher will not use them out of academic purposes. All studies were conducted under the supervision of Department of Sociology, Stockholm University, in accordance to the ethical regulations and guidelines of Stockholm University.



## Summary of Studies

### *Study I*

In Study I, the impact of permissive legislation of same-sex marriage and partnership on public attitudes towards homosexuality was examined. Previous studies have shown different models and evidence regarding the relationship between permissive legislation and attitude change (Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019; Flores & Barclay, 2016; M. Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Redman, 2018; van den Akker et al., 2013), but have largely neglected the moderation of contexts. This study investigates the role of national contexts related to religion from two dimensions. First, the impact of legislation on attitudes is expected to be more positive in more secular societies (Adamczyk & Liao, 2019), but could also be more divided due to religious defense under secularization (Achterberg et al., 2009; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2016). Second, party polarization on morality politics is likely to undermine the expected positive legislation impact or make it diverging (Engeli et al., 2012; McCarty et al., 2016). Using eight rounds of European Social Survey data with two-way fixed-effect models, the results show that both factors have influence. First, the impact of partnership legislation is more divided in more secular contexts, with core religious members becoming more negative, diverging away from others. It shows a similar pattern for marriage legislation but very marginal in size. Second, in the context of higher party polarization on morality issues, the partnership legislation would be more negative, and the marriage legislation impact becomes more diverging as the core religion turns more negative. The study suggests that secularization and party polarization on morality enhance religious-secular boundaries and undermine the expected positive outcomes of permissive legislation institutions, but only for the short term.

### *Study II*

In this study, the underlying mediators between Christianity and voting for radical right parties were investigated. Radical right parties in Europe are increasingly using Christian rhetoric for their anti-immigrant discourse but have not received much support from the religious community (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Immerzeel et al., 2013; Montgomery & Winter, 2015). Some of the proposed mechanisms are pro-social values (Saroglou et al., 2004), social capital (Rydgren, 2009, 2011), and tolerance towards immigrants (Siegers & Jedinger, 2020). Using the 8<sup>th</sup> round of European Social Survey data, I examine these mechanisms in 17 European

countries, facilitated by KHB methods for mediation analysis (Kohler et al., 2011). The results show that these factors are rarely the mediator explaining the underrepresentation of Christians in radical right supporters. Meanwhile, Christians have high similarities with radical right supporters in terms of authoritarian and socially conservative values, which do not support the radical right parties. The study suggests that the enduring Christian cleavage may still be the reason that Christians would not vote for radical right parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009; Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2021), but such a “vaccine effect” may not be continuously effective as the cleavage erodes or Christian democratic/conservative parties themselves radicalize.

### ***Study III***

In this study, the role of religious engagement in immigrant political polarization in Sweden was explored. There have been many theoretical reasons that religion would help immigrants engage in politics in the host country and counter the low participation rate of immigrants. First, as a form of civic engagement, the religious organization could foster trust, democratic norms, resources, and networks for participation (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Second, the major religious denominations for immigrants, Islam and Christianity, are world religions that can mobilize transnational resources and networks (Kastoryano & Schader, 2014). Third, for Muslims, being the oppressed group worldwide could provide extra motivation to participate in politics (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). The results of the representative LNU-UFB data in Sweden show contrasting evidence to previous research in other contexts (Dana et al., 2011; Just et al., 2014; Moutselos, 2020). In Sweden, religiosity is generally negatively associated with levels of political engagement. The demobilization of religion is stronger for women, first-generation immigrants. Those who have experienced societal discrimination based on religion also have lower levels of political participation, especially Muslims. However, second-generation Muslim immigrants have higher levels of participation in demonstrations, possibly due to their higher levels of perceived discrimination. The study suggests that religion lacks the influence on mobilizing immigrants into politics and creating immigrant cleavage in the case of Sweden.

## **Concluding Remarks**

The impacts of religions on political attitudes and behaviors are still enduring and profound in secularizing European societies, as much of the previous scholarship has suggested (Halman & Gelissen, 2019; Halman & van Ingen, 2015; van der Brug et al., 2009). This dissertation further investigates several crucial questions in the field from the perspectives of political cleavages, political institutions, and political articulations related to religion. In this final section, I will discuss the implications of the studies under the theoretical framework.

As shown in Study II on Christianity and voting for radical right parties across Europe, the religious cleavage is still robust in most European countries; thus, in most cases, the radical right parties have not been substantially supported by the Christian community. In countries where the radical right parties have received considerable support from Christians, the Christian democratic/conservative parties are either weak, such as in Poland, or have radicalized themselves, which are the cases of Hungary and Slovenia. However, the Christian cleavage may not ensure that Christianity is serving the “antidote” to right-wing radicalism, as the mediations of religious influence as social normative and organizational institutions are examined. On the one hand, as the most powerful predictor of radical right voting (Arzheimer, 2018; Rydgren, 2007, 2008), anti-immigrant attitudes show a mixed relationship with religiosity, as Christians are more anti-immigrant in some countries like France and Poland, while less so in other countries such as Germany. Differences between core church members and marginal members are common. Only in a few cases are anti-immigrant attitudes the mediators between Christianity and radical right voting.

On the other hand, similarly, for pro-social values and social capital, as most proposed mechanisms explain the underrepresentation of Christians in radical right supporters, there is no general rule how normative and organizational religiosity affect these factors and further radical right voting. In addition, consistent with previous findings, religiosity is strongly related to cultural conservative and authoritarian values, but those are not translated into radical right supports. In sum, the persistence of political cleavage works quite independently from the influence of religion’s normative and organizational institutions in facilitating the voting choice of Christians, possibly through strong identification with Christian democratic/conservative parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009). However, the impact of religious cleavage in “vaccinating” Christians from radical right parties could be limited, as the effect is only strong on core church members, which have decreased in size over the past three decades due to secularization. Even

though the radical right parties may not infringe on this cleavage by politicizing traditional religious morality, their growing strength could push the Christian cleavage to adapt to their nationalism and anti-immigration sentiment agenda. Which political articulation approach would benefit the radical right parties should be addressed in future research.

For the impact of political institutions related to religion, more complicated patterns are shown in Study I on how national contexts related to religion shape the outcome of permissive legislation on same-sex marriage and partnership on attitudes towards homosexuality. Here, the social and political normative institutions interact with legal institutions, enhanced by political articulation. The impacts of legal institutions on attitudes are shaped by the interaction between normative institutions from two aspects. First, although individual religiosity is not significantly bifurcating the legislation impact, unlike in previous studies, such an effect could be facilitated in combination with contextual religiosity. Although the effect size is marginal, it is shown that the diverging effect of partnership legislation on attitudes would be enlarged in contexts that are more secular, supporting the religious defense theory. Second, the normative political institution and political articulation in the country also play an important role. In contexts with high party polarization on morality issues, the effect of partnership legislation on attitudes is more negative across religious and partisan lines, and the effect of marriage legislation diverges more between core members and others. Therefore, it is again shown that the religious divide is persistent in moral values, and it could be enhanced when the issue has higher salience. Higher salience could be promoted through political articulations based on normative institutions, symbolic boundary making under secular contexts, and politicization under party polarization. However, it is also shown that the enhancement effects of political articulation are limited, as it becomes much weaker when marriage legislation is made. By this time, the social norm could be already shifted to be more favorable to liberal moral values. In sum, divisive political articulation in the short term could damage the legislation efforts for changing the public norm strongly, but not in the long run.

From the perspective of immigrants, the role of religion would be a different story. In Study III, I test the impact of religion's organizational institution on the political participation of immigrants in Sweden, which could shed light on the potential cleavage for immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants in the future. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that being engaged in religious organizations fosters political participation among immigrants in Sweden, in contrast to findings from other contexts (Dana et al., 2011; Moutselos, 2020; Vergani et al., 2017). There are several explanations for the lack of religious mobilization in immigrant

political participation in Sweden. First, one should notice that Sweden's immigrant political participation rate is already at a high level compared to other countries. Second, just as differences among ethnic groups have been found in previous literature (Fleischmann et al., 2016; Myrberg, 2011), the discrepancy of findings suggests that how religion mobilizes immigrants into politics and the potential for a cleavage for immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants could also be context-dependence, which should be focused on in future research.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Finally, I would like to discuss the major limitations of the studies in the dissertation, which would point to directions for future research. The first limitation is methodological, as all three studies use survey methodology. Response rate and missing values are major drawbacks of using survey data, especially when the non-response is not random, e.g., associated with demographic characteristics and socioeconomic status. In this case, data will not be representative and will lead to bias in estimation. Missingness is a critical issue the current study encounters, such as the considerable number of respondents not answering the dependent variable of attitudes towards homosexuality in Study I voting choice in Study II. In the current dissertation, different imputation methods and robustness checks are implemented to deal with missing data. However, it could still be difficult to address the issue fully. The high missing rate indicates a potentially social desirability bias that those who have answered these sensitive questions may not be giving genuine answers. Field experiments could be one way to address this problem.

Second, the studies in the dissertation could not provide strong support for causalities of the effect found, even in the case of Study I, where methodology to approximately reaches causality to the most extent is used. The difficulty in disentangling causality is due to the nature of cross-sectional surveys used in the current studies, which should be improved by using panel data or experimental methods in future research.

Third, the studies in the dissertation have limitations in being unable to distinguish the mechanisms behind the statistical findings. Taking Study III as an example, theoretically, the mechanisms under the effect of religious engagement on political participation could be democratic norms and mutual trust, political resources, and political networks, which are unfortunately not adequately addressed by the survey data. A similar limitation applies to Study I in that it is impossible to differentiate different approaches to political articulation, including

party cues and political campaigns. Inquiry for mechanisms would require using other methodological approaches, such as qualitative methods or using computational data.

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