Vaccine or catalyst? Christian religion and populism in Europe: A rejoinder to Inglehart's "Religion's sudden decline"

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ABSTRACT

The strength and direction of the association between Christian religion and support for radical right-wing parties is strongly debated. On the one hand, there is work that shows that in Western European countries with a strong Christian democratic party, the relationship between church attendance and voting for populist radical right (PRR) parties is *negative* (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022). Such findings contradict with the conclusions reached by Inglehart (2021), who reported that adherence to religious norms correlates *positively* with support for PRR parties. In this research note we shed light on the reasons for these contrasting conclusions, by systematically assessing the role of empirical choices in terms of the operationalizations of the dependent and the key independent variables, and how heterogeneity is dealt with.

1. Introduction

In his 2021 book "Religion's Sudden Decline: What's Causing It, and What Comes Next?" the late Ronald Inglehart offered a comprehensive analysis of changes in religiosity during the last forty years, focusing in particular on the period between 2007 and 2020. In contrast to work discussing the time period between the end of the cold war and the mid-2000s, which some have described as characterized by signals of religious revival (Thomas 2005), the most recent data suggest that religious norms are rapidly becoming less relevant (Bruce 2011).

Using large-scale comparative and longitudinal survey data, Inglehart's empirical analyses provided strong evidence of the decline of religion across the world. With the exception of Muslim and some of post-communist societies, the "public of virtually every high-income country shifted toward lower levels of religiosity" (Inglehart 2021: 80). The "tipping point", from which the rapid decline in the relevance of religion begins, has so far only been reached in some Western societies though. From this point onwards, Inglehart theorized, traditional norms, religious values and practices lose adherents at an increasing pace. Since these countries are at the avant-garde of what seem to be broad societal

changes, paying closer attention to them offers a glimpse at the political consequences of the trend towards secularization.

In terms of those consequences, previous work has drawn attention to the possibility that the decline of religion has contributed to the growing electoral success of populist radical right (PRR) parties (Mudde 2007). Inglehart (2021) examined this possibility in chapter 9 of his book. Based on two separate analyses that use data from seven[1] European countries, Inglehart (2021: 152) concluded that a backlash against cultural change and the decline of traditional values and religion is an important source for the electoral success of PRR parties. Inglehart arrived at this conclusion by relying on an indicator that captures religiosity/new cultural norms, which he found "is by far the strongest predictor" of support for the PRR parties (Inglehart 2021: 150).

Inglehart's claim that the process of secularization leads to a backlash among religious citizens who support radical right-wing parties runs counter to our own previous work (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022) as well as other research that has examined the association between religion and electoral behaviour (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015). In contrast to Inglehart (2021), we did not find evidence of a positive association between religion and voting

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[1] The seven countries are Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Austria, Poland and Hungary.

for populist radical right parties in any of the 11 Western European countries in our dataset.[2] The objective of this research note is to gain insights into the reasons for the contrasting effects reported in the literature, with specific attention to the two aforementioned studies. By doing so, we wish to clarify the nature of the relationship between religion and PRR vote in Europe.

Our systematic analysis of the impact that different conceptual and empirical choices have for the inferences that are drawn suggests that both studies have it right in some respects. On the one hand, Inglehart was right in documenting that the more religious self-report that they are more likely to vote for PRR parties (as captured through propensity-to-vote (PTV) measures). On the other, we were right to point out that when focusing on reported vote choices specifically, there is evidence of an inoculation effect whereby being more religious in fact *decreases* support for PRR parties. Such an effect, however, is conditional on the presence of a Christian Democratic party that religious citizens can vote for (see also, Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Dilling 2018).

Our research note makes three important contributions to the literature. First, our results highlight that even though specific religious attitudes and values are strongly correlated with support for PRR parties, the behavioral dimension of religiosity (Smidt 2019) – which we capture by means of church attendance – does not, by itself, have a similar effect. Second, we show that the association between religiosity and support for PRR parties is context-dependent. Specifically, our work adds to the literature that has argued that the structure of party competition, and the presence of multiple conservative or religious parties limits the extent to which religious voters are drawn to vote for PRR parties (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022; Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015). Third, the observation that conclusions differ depending on whether PTV or discrete vote choice measures are focused on has important implications for the field of electoral research. Our findings suggest that the determinants that are associated with reported PTVs are not always indicative of what is ultimately leading a voter to choose one party in particular.

2. Differences and similarities in data and methods

Our main goal with this research note is to explore in a systematic way the impact of conceptual and empirical choices and issues related to the operationalization of key dependent and independent variables for research that studies the connection between religion and voting. Furthermore, we pay close attention to context-level differences across Europe, which could also contribute to the differences between the work of Inglehart (2021) and our own. To inform our analysis, we start by briefly describing the main methodological aspects and empirical approach of the work of Inglehart (2021) and Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022).

Inglehart's analyses draw on the data from the 2019 European Election Study (EES) voter survey (Schmitt et al., 2020). The study was conducted in 28 EU-member states following the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections. In contrast, Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) used the data from the 2016 wave of the European Social Survey (ESS). In terms of the dependent variable – support for a PRR party – the two datasets include different measures and allow for different operationalizations of voting for a PRR party. In the ESS, the survey item capturing voting behaviour asks respondents to report what party they voted for in the most recent national level election. The EES includes a

similar item, and in addition asks respondents to report what party they voted for in the EP elections. Furthermore, the EES also includes measures that ask respondents to indicate their propensity to vote for a party. More specifically, respondents were requested to report how probable it is that they "will ever vote" for the different parties in their party system (EES, 2019: 4). While vote choice questions capture a discrete choice, these PTV items measure the self-reported probability of supporting a given party on a scale from 0 (not at all probable) to 10 (very probable) (van der Eijk 2017).

Given that the two studies use a different dataset, there are important differences between them with respect to the choice of the dependent and independent variables, controls and estimation approach. Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) used the vote in the most recent national election as a dependent variable, which was analyzed through country-specific multinomial logistic regression models. This approach was complemented by a pooled binary logistic regression model explaining whether a respondent voted for a PRR party or not. Inglehart (2021), in contrast, analyzed respondents' self-reported propensities to vote for an "authoritarian populist party" and estimated linear regression (OLS). As we show below, this difference in the operationalization of voters' party choice is of crucial importance for the results and conclusions that are drawn.[3]

The two studies also make different decisions with respect to independent variables that are used to explain support for PRR parties. To assess the role of religion, Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) used church attendance as a stand-alone variable and estimated the impact of a higher frequency of attending religious services on the likelihood to vote for a PRR party. Inglehart (2021: 150), in contrast, used church attendance as a component in a broader religiosity/individual-choice index consisting of six items (for details, see Appendix A). Inglehart's index is a combination of religious behaviour and attitudes that tap moral and traditional values, but also a measure capturing a preference for authoritarianism. Even though the items are strongly correlated and load on a single factor, as Inglehart (2021) showed, we argue that an exclusive reliance on this composite index makes it hard to disentangle the unique effect of religion from the role of correlated political attitudes. In addition, the inclusion of indicators related to same-sex marriage, or feminism in the religiosity index is based on an assumption that religiosity can be equated with holding specific right-wing attitudes. Previous work, however, has shown that religiosity "has hardly any effect at all on people's attitudes towards radical right issues" (Arzheimer and Carter 2009: 999).

To put the different ways to conceptualize the role of religion into context, scholars who study religion and its impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviour have highlighted that religion is a multi-dimensional concept. Scholars distinguish between "three Bs", referring to religious belonging, beliefs, and behaviour (Raymond 2018; Smidt 2019). Belonging refers to the religious tradition or denomination which individuals are a member of, while beliefs go deeper and tap what citizens think about religion or their belief in the supernatural. Finally, behaviour captures different actions through which individuals express their faith, such as attending church, or praying (Smidt 2019). Religiosity, the theoretical concept that we are interested in, is argued to comprise two of the three B's: beliefs and behaviours. In part because the concept is multidimensional, however, there is no consensus in the academic literature on how religiosity is best operationalized and measured empirically. Illustrating this lack of consensus, Remizova et al. (2022: 3)

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[2] The analyses of Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) include data from 15 countries, 11 from Western Europe and 4 from East-Central Europe: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Poland. It should be noted, that Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) do find a positive relationship between religion and support for PRR parties in two of the four post-communist EU member states in their dataset: Hungary and Poland.

[3] Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) reliance on recall questions referring to the most recent national elections also has some disadvantages. It is well documented that memory problems and other sources of bias lead to measurement error in reported vote choices (Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017; Van Elsas et al., 2014). This should be much less of a concern when focusing on the reported vote in European Parliament elections that just preceded the fieldwork of the EES, as we do here.

mention that "[o]ver two hundred instruments have been developed to assess various dimensions of religiosity."

Given the multidimensionality of the concept, religiosity is often operationalized by means of an index that includes multiple items, tapping aspects of religious beliefs (e.g., belief in God), indicators of religious behaviour such as frequency of religious attendance and praying, or both. Composite indicators, however, have two important disadvantages. First, when indices include items that tap very different aspects of religion and religiosity, it becomes impossible to identify which dimensions are most influential for shaping a specific outcome variable. Second, previous work has pointed out that creating indicators of religiosity that are cross-culturally equivalent is challenging (Remizova et al., 2022) – which is of particular importance when conducting a comparative analysis as we do here. We hence prefer relying on a single item of religiosity, because it facilitates the interpretation in terms of the mechanism explaining potential effects, and because it is more straightforward to contextualize the meaning of a single item across countries.

It should be stressed that a focus on church attendance implies that only the behavioral dimension of religiosity is accounted for. As mentioned previously, however, religiosity can be conceptualized in terms of behaviour as well as religious beliefs (i.e., two of the "three B's" of religion). According to Smidt (2019), beliefs can be of different kinds; they can refer to beliefs about religion and its place in society, or they can "relate to the substance of one's faith" (p. 2). Remizova et al. (2022) for their part distinguish between personal beliefs – including belief in God – on the one hand and what they label as 'orientations', which tap views about the importance of religion in society. In contrast to Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022), Inglehart's religiosity index does complement the focus on religious behaviour with an indicator of religious beliefs. However, of the different items that were included in Inglehart's (2021) index, only the item relating to the importance of the Bible and religious guidance could be viewed as a typical item of religious beliefs. The other items, that tap citizens' traditionalist views and positions on moral issues and values, potentially muddy the waters for scholars who are interested in the effects of religiosity per se.

In line with Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022), as a main contrast to Inglehart's religiosity index we focus on an item of church attendance in this paper. The main reason why we focus on church attendance as an indicator of religiosity is theoretical. Specifically, the literature that claims that religion can sometimes function as a 'vaccine' against PRR options argues that links to institutionalized Christian churches and their role in influencing the religious are the main mechanism ensuring religious voters do not vote for PRR options (Arzheimer and Carter 2009). Church attendance is an indicator that is well suited to tap these institutionalized links, more so than more individual-focused measures like the frequency of praying.

With regard to the other variables that are included in the estimations of both studies, Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) focused mostly on socio-demographic characteristics. This includes characteristics which the literature suggests correlate with vote for PRR parties such as age, squared age, gender, income, education and urban vs. rural place of residence. In addition to these socio-demographic controls, respondents' self-placement on the left-right scale was included as a control (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022). Inglehart (2021) included five additional variables in the estimations. Two of them are socio-demographic characteristics: age and education. The other controls are attitudinal and include respondents' prospective economic evaluations (for the next 12 months), attitudes towards restrictive migration policy and an item capturing opinions about restricting privacy in order to combat crime (see Appendix A for details on the wording).

Finally, the two studies differ in terms of the coverage of the analysis and the strategies employed to deal with between-country heterogeneity. Inglehart (2021: 152) used data from seven countries that all have a strong "authoritarian populist" party.[4] His estimations were based on a pooled sample, in which country-level variation was not explicitly modeled. Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022), on the other hand, made use of a somewhat larger sample of countries and studied the relationship between religion and voting for PRR parties in 15 EU countries. To allow for the possibility that the role of religion differs between countries, as a function of context-level characteristics, Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) proceeded in two steps. The initial series of country-specific analyses was followed by a pooled analysis with country-specific intercepts.

Clearly, the two studies differ on many fronts. They use different datasets, measure support for PRR parties in a different way, use a different operationalization to capture the role of religion, use other controls, focus on a different number of countries, and contrast in the role they give to country-specific effects. Given that each of these empirical and methodological issues might explain why the authors reached divergent conclusions, we systematically assess the role of those choices on the estimations, and the inferences that can be drawn from them.

3. Empirical strategy

To systematically assess the impact that each of these different conceptual and empirical choices has on the data, we estimate a large number of vote choice models, in which we modify one element of the specification at a time. We estimate models in which the dependent variable is respondents' self-reported propensity to vote for a radical-right party (PTV) as well as discrete choice models that use voting for a radical-right party (vs. another party) as the dependent variable; we estimate models in which we rely on a single indicator of church attendance and models that include Inglehart's religiosity index; and we vary the set of control variables included in the estimation. In addition, we examine the impact of varying ways of accounting for between country heterogeneity in the dataset.

To ensure that the results are not driven by the choice of a different dataset, all the estimations make use of the 2019 EES voter survey. We can rely on this single dataset because it includes both PTV measures and discrete measures of the vote choice (here, we focus on the reported vote for the European Parliament elections). Furthermore, using the 2019 EES it is fairly straightforward to operationalize the control variables in a similar way as Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) did based on the 2016 ESS survey.[5]

It should be noted that respondents who self-identify with a non-Christian religion are not included in the analyses. On the one hand, the theoretical arguments that earlier work relies on for studying the association between religiosity and PRR parties are specific to Christian religions (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Inglehart 2021; Montgomery and Winter 2015). On the other, even if we wanted to explore the connection between religiosity and support for PRR parties for other religious groups, their low numbers in European survey samples prevent a meaningful analysis of heterogeneity in the effects of religiosity across a variety of religious denominations.

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[4] The Alternative for Germany (AfD), the National Rally (RN), the Brexit Party, the Northern League (Lega), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Law and Justice (PiS), and Fidesz.

[5] Most importantly, church attendance is measured similarly in the two datasets. In the EES, the scale consists of eight levels, while it was five levels in the ESS. The direction of the scale was reversed, so that higher values stand for higher frequency of church attendance. For details on the operationalization of the control variables, see Appendix A.

To systematize the analysis and to examine the impact of different conceptual and analytical choices on the results, we visualize the estimates in the form of specification curve plots (Simonsohn et al., 2020). These plots show the point estimate of a variable of interest, and confidence intervals, across a range of specifications. This approach allows us to assess in a straightforward way whether findings are robust or whether significance levels and directions of the effect vary as a function of the specification. We present two specification curves: one showing the estimated coefficients of religion on PTVs for radical-right parties, and a second curve showing the average marginal effects of religion on the reported vote choices (in the EP elections).

Finally, to interpret variation in the effects between the two main independent variables, it is important to consider their range. Inglehart's religiosity index is operationalized as the saved component score from a principal component analysis based on the six items listed previously. In the estimation sample, the measure ranges between -3.5 and $+3.5$, with higher values reflecting a higher level of religiosity. Church attendance ranges between 1 and 8, with 1 signifying the respondent never attends religious services (apart from weddings and funerals) and 8 reflecting that the respondent attends religious services more than once a week.

4. Results

To assess how conceptual and empirical choices affect conclusions with regard to the connection between religion and support for populist radical-right parties, we start by examining the association between indicators of religiosity and populist radical-right support with a focus on PTV measures.

Fig. 1 summarizes the results of 40 different OLS models, in which the dependent variable is the PTV to vote for a populist radical-right party. The top part of Fig. 1 shows the average marginal effect of a one unit increase in measures of religiosity on the PTV to vote for a populist radical-right party. The graph also includes 90% and 95% confidence intervals. The models either focus on the effect of Inglehart's religiosity index or on the effect of a single item of church attendance. The estimations also vary by whether they are based on models that include the covariates that Inglehart used as controls, or the set of covariates that are used in Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022). Furthermore, the estimates differ in terms of whether they are obtained

from country-specific models or from pooled models and (for the latter category) whether models account for country-level heterogeneity by means of the inclusion of country fixed effects and the interaction between these country fixed effects and the measures of religiosity, or not. The bottom part of Fig. 1 clarifies the relevant model specification for each estimate.

We start by assessing variation in the overall effect of religiosity on the PTV to vote for a PRR party. Specifically, we focus on the AME of measures of religiosity across countries, which are indicated as estimates for 'All countries' in Fig. 1. Comparing these estimates across specification clarifies that the effect of religion is consistently positive and significant. However, it can also be noted that the effects of the religiosity index are systematically larger than those of church attendance. More precisely, focusing on the effect of the religiosity index in a model with Inglehart's covariates and no country fixed effects, a one unit increase on the religiosity index – which ranges roughly between -3.5 and $+3.5$ in the estimation sample – increases the PTV for a populist radical-right party by 0.9 points. Using an equivalent estimation to assess the effect of church attendance, which is scaled to range between 1 (never attend church) and 8 (attend more than weekly), shows that a one-unit increase on this independent variable is only associated with a 0.3 point increase in the PTV to vote for a populist radical-right party. It can also be noted that effects are somewhat more muted when the covariates are those used in Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) compared to the set of covariates included in the work of Inglehart (2021).

The contrast between the effects of the two main independent variables – the index of religiosity and church attendance – is more pronounced when assessing the country-specific effects of these variables on the PTV for a populist radical-right party. These country-specific average marginal effects are either obtained from a pooled model that includes interactions between country fixed effects and the indicators of religion or from country-specific estimations (as clarified in the bottom part of the graph). As can be seen in Fig. 1, when focusing on the effect of the religiosity index, the conclusion is that religion is positively and significantly associated with the PTV for a populist radical-right party in all countries. However, the estimates that rely on church attendance as a measure of religiosity show more differentiation. For church attendance, the average marginal effect is consistently negative in Austria, is close to zero in France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy, and is only consistently
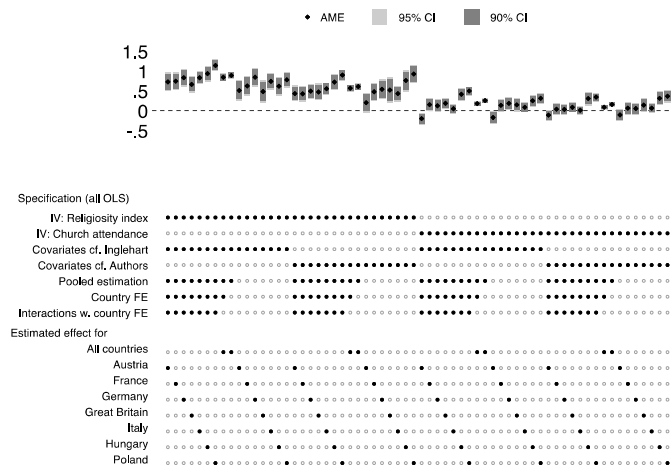
Note: Estimates in the graph indicate the AME of the indicator of religiosity (either the index or church attendance) on the reported propensity to vote for a PRR party. Confidence intervals are indicated by the grey bars. All models are estimated using OLS, but specifications and control variables vary as shown in the bottom part of the graph.

Fig. 1. Specification curve showing the average marginal effect (AME) of religion on the reported propensity to vote for a PRR party (OLS models).

positive and significant in Hungary and Poland.

This pattern of differentiation in the effect of religiosity between countries is in line with the findings of Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022). They interpret the substantive positive effect of church attendance in the two East-Central European countries in the sample (Hungary and Poland) as a result of the merger of nativism and religiosity and close cooperation between the main Christian Churches and PRR parties (Stanley 2016, 2016d, 2016a, 2016m and Bozóki 2016). This contrasts to the patterns in Western Europe, where the presence of Christian Democratic parties has been argued to inhibit a connection between religion and support for PRR parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2009). By showing that there are important country-level differences in the effect of religiosity on the PTV for a populist radical right party, Fig. 1 underlines the importance of taking into account contextual factors. The heterogeneity between countries points to a first source of bias in Inglehart's study – whose pooled estimation strategy implicitly assumed that the effect of religiosity would be similar in all seven member states of the European Union included in his empirical analyses.

The main take-aways of Fig. 1 are that (1) pooled analyses consistently show a positive and significant association between indicators of religiosity and the PTV for a populist radical-right party, (2) that this does not hold for each of the countries and (3) that effects are substantively less important for church attendance than for the religiosity index. Fig. 1 thus highlights that how religiosity is conceived and operationalized, as well as whether one accounts for between-country heterogeneity in effects lead to different conclusions about the connection between religion and support for populist radical-right parties. While Fig. 1 illustrates how effects vary across a range of estimations, the role of one important difference between the analyses of Inglehart (2021) and Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) is not accounted for in this specification curve: the choice to analyze PTVs instead of a discrete measure of the vote. To examine how effects vary under discrete choice estimations of support for PRR parties, Fig. 2 shows a second specification curve – visualizing the average marginal effect of the religiosity index or church attendance on having voted for a populist radical-right party. Across specifications, the dependent variable captures the vote choice in European Parliament elections.

The top part of Fig. 2 shows the average marginal effect estimates, as well as 90% and 95% confidence intervals. The bottom part of the graph provides details on the estimation, including the choice of the main

independent variable, the set of control variables that is included, whether estimates are from country-specific estimations or obtained from a pooled estimation across countries, and which estimation approach was relied on (multinominal logit or a binary logistic regression model).

Like we did for Fig. 1, we first assess variation in the pooled estimates – identified as 'All countries'. These estimates are all obtained through a logistic regression estimation, where the dependent variable captures whether an individual voted for a PRR party in the EP elections (coded 1) or for another party (coded 0). Fig. 2 shows substantial variation in these pooled AMEs. Notably, when the religiosity index is focused on, the AMEs show a significant and a substantively large positive effect, signifying that a one-unit increase on the religiosity index increases the likelihood to vote for PRR parties by roughly 5 percentage points. In contrast, when church attendance is focused on, the effect is consistently close to zero. Fig. 2 furthermore shows, in line with the results presented in Fig. 1, that effects are somewhat reduced when relying on the set of covariates used in Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022) instead of the controls relied on by Inglehart (2021).

Fig. 2 not only includes effects that capture the average effect of religiosity or church attendance across the range of countries, but also shows how the AMEs vary between countries. These country-specific estimates are retrieved from country-specific multinominal logistic regression models (to the left of the curve) or from pooled binary logistic regression models that include country fixed effects and interactions between the country fixed effects and the main independent variable, in which the dependent variable captures whether or not an individual voted for a PRR party. The results show that in many countries, the association between the indicators of religiosity and support for PRR parties is *negative*.

The pattern that emerges from our analyses is that religiosity, especially when captured by Inglehart's index and to a lesser extent when captured as church attendance only, is positively correlated with the reported propensity to vote for PRR parties in most countries. As soon as the dependent variable is changed for a discrete measure of citizens' reported vote choice, rather than their self-reported PTV, the 'vaccine' effect of religion that much previous work describes (e.g. Inglehart, 2021; Arzheimer and Berning 2019) becomes visible. When such a discrete measure of the vote choice is focused on, the positive association between religiosity and support for PRR parties appears to be
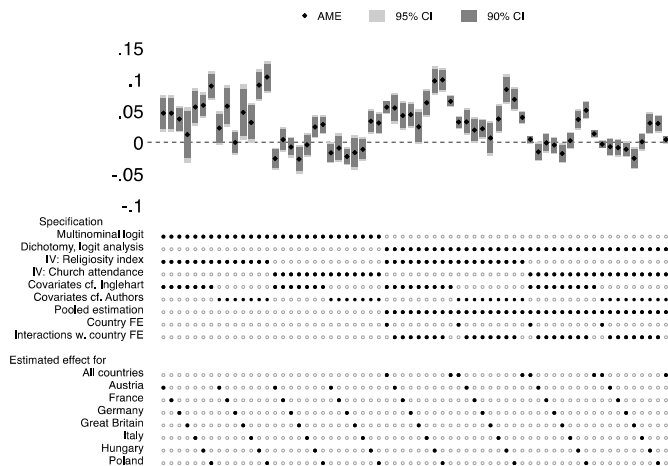
Note: Estimates in the graph indicate the AME of the indicator of religiosity (either the index or church attendance) on the reported discrete vote choice. Confidence intervals are indicated by the grey bars. Models are estimated using logit or multinominal logit, and specifications and control variables vary as shown in the bottom part of the graph.

Fig. 2. Specification curve showing the average marginal effect of religion on the likelihood of voting for a PRR party (discrete choice analyses).

limited to countries in East-Central Europe. What this suggests is that religiosity is associated with more affinity with PRR parties (which is captured by means of the PTV measures in Fig. 1), but this affinity only translates into effectively voting for such parties when there are no moderate alternatives that also appeal to religious voters.

This intuition is clarified in Fig. 3, where we show the predicted PTVs for a PRR party (dashed line) and for the main conservative alternative to a radical-right option (solid line) in each of the seven European countries included in the analyses, as a function of the religiosity index. The mainstream conservative alternative included in the analysis is

usually the largest national party that is a member of the European People's Party (EPP) in a given country. The results in Fig. 3 suggest that the index measures a certain affinity to conservatism in general (or rejection of "new norms"). The index that Inglehart proposed clearly is a powerful predictor to explain support for right of the center parties, but the estimates in Fig. 3 clarify that it is not necessarily helpful in explaining the PRR vote in multi-party systems, because countries with such systems usually have several parties in this area of the policy space. In all Western European countries included in the analysis, higher values of Inglehart's index are associated with higher propensity to vote *both*
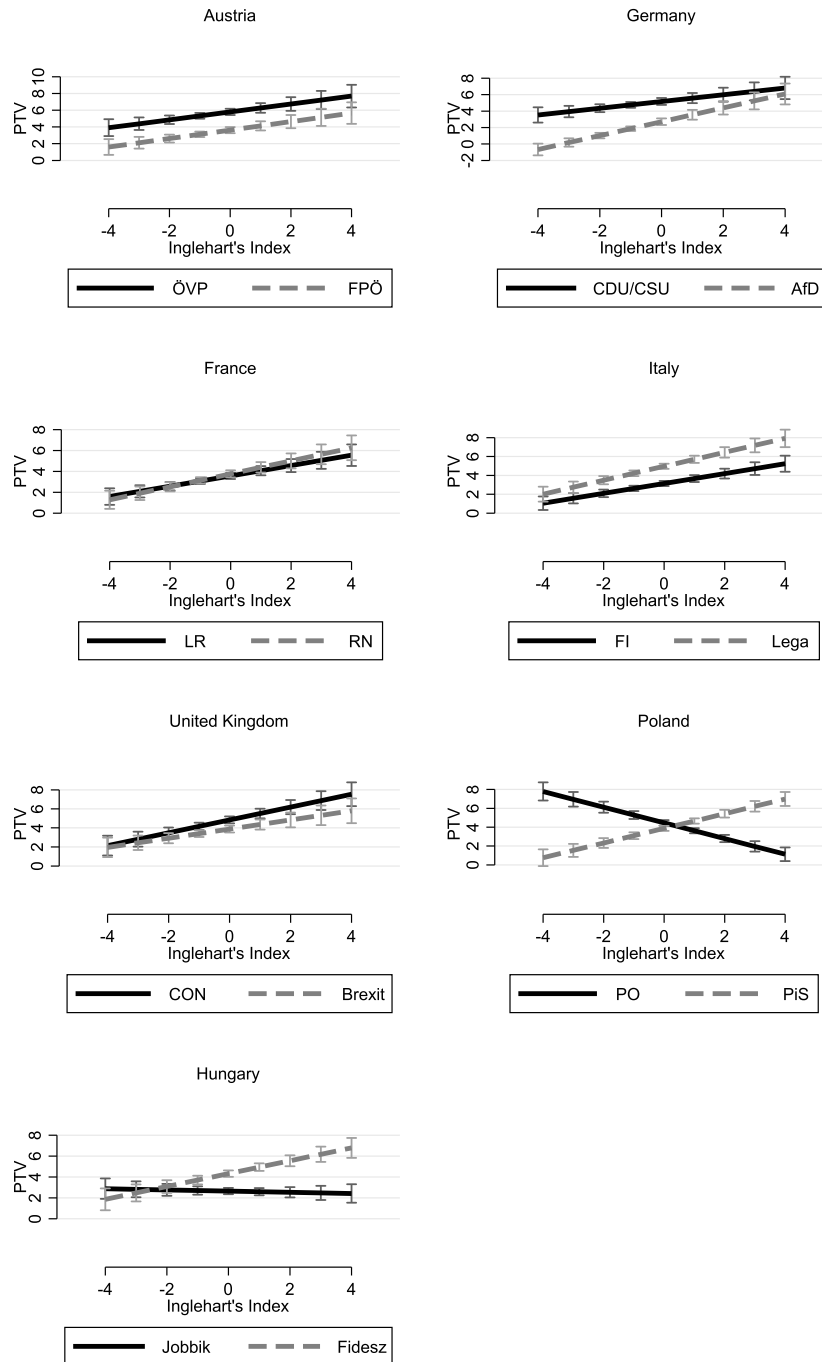

Fig. 3. Average marginal effects (AME) of Inglehart's Index on propensity to vote (PTV) for two parties per country, a main PRR party and a main center-right (or in Hungary right-wing) alternative.

for the PRR parties and for moderately conservative alternatives. The pattern is different only in Hungary and Poland. In Hungary, the most viable conservative alternative for Fidesz is Jobbik, which is also considered a PRR party. In Poland, the Civic Platform (PO) is the largest Polish party represented in the EPP. A higher reported PTV for this party, that can be considered center-right by Western European standards, is in fact associated with lower values of Inglehart's index. This in turn reflects the fact that it is considered as a liberal and secular party as opposed to the more conservative and religiously oriented PiS in Poland.

In summary, respondents who are more religious – captured by Inglehart's index or by means of a single measure of church attendance – have a (somewhat) higher likelihood to consider voting for PRR parties. Despite this effect of religion on the reported PTVs for PRR parties, religious respondents from Western European countries are often substantively *less* inclined to actually vote for PRR parties than their secular counterparts. The effects of religion thus differ meaningfully depending on whether one studies reported PTVs or actual voting behaviour. These contrasting results suggest that while Christian religiosity is still preventing religious voters from effectively voting for PRR parties, it does not impede them from considering or eventually voting for these parties.

The results of our analyses also highlight important between-country variation in the electoral effects of religiosity. Religious respondents from East-Central Europe are substantively different from those in Western Europe. Their behaviour corresponds perfectly with Inglehart's expectations. All models that we estimate for these countries, regardless of the specification, suggest that the more religious report that they are more likely to vote for PRR parties than seculars and are also observed to be more willing to vote for them. Pooling all countries and assuming that the association of religiosity and support for PRR parties is the same across Europe, hence, leads to inferences that do not reflect the empirical reality across the European continent.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our goal was to clarify why recent publications arrive at different conclusions regarding the association between religion and support for PRR parties. Based on our analyses, we conclude that how religiosity is conceived and operationalized as well as the choice of the dependent variable influence the results – and the conclusions that are drawn. By systematically analyzing how different approaches to estimating the connection between religion and support for PRR parties influence results, we make three important contributions.

First, we contribute to the literature that examines the influence of religion on political attitudes and behaviours by showing that results can differ substantially depending on how religiosity is conceptualized and operationalized. Even though the multi-dimensional character of religion is well established (Raymond 2018; Smidt 2019), our results highlight that the associations between these different dimensions on the one hand and support for PRR parties on the other vary substantially. If one conceives of religiosity as taking conservative positions on traditional and moral issues, there is evidence of a strong association between religiosity and support for radical right-wing parties. However, the evidence is much weaker when the focus is on a behavioral measure of religiosity, such as church attendance. This observation is not entirely surprising, as it has been argued that religiosity can be associated with very different views and attitudes, some – such as anti-immigrant views – that could increase support for PRR parties and others – such as altruism and tolerance – that contrast with the discourse of PRR parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2009). Given these very different possibilities, it is essential that work that wishes to isolate the effect of religiosity separates it from its downstream political attitudes.

Second, our research note brings additional empirical evidence that supports the view that the effects of religiosity on the vote are context-dependent and notably vary as a function of party competition. The argument that is made in this strand of the literature is that when religious voters have developed an identification with a mainstream

conservative or Christian-democratic party, this loyalty makes them 'immune' to the appeal of PRR parties (Arzheimer and Carter 2009). The country-level differences that we document in this note are broadly in line with this argument, with positive effects of church attendance on voting for a PRR party being limited to countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where PRR parties are not facing the competition of a mainstream conservative party.

Third, our systematic analysis of the association between religiosity and support for PRR parties exposes a sharp contrast in the direction of this association depending on how support is operationalized. When the focus is on citizens' self-reported propensity to vote for a PRR party, indicators of religiosity are generally positively correlated with the support for PRR parties. However, when the focus is more specifically on the party an individual voted for, the association flips signs in many specifications and contexts – suggesting that religiosity *reduces* support for PRR parties. We interpret this contrast to signify that even though higher levels of religiosity increase citizens' utility of voting for a PRR party, in many cases other parties are even more preferred by religious voters or are ultimately more convincing – and draw the votes of the most religious in the electorate. Studying support for PRR parties in both ways results in a more complete picture of the complex ways in which religiosity shapes support for radical right-wing parties and brings nuance to conclusions that would be reached if only PTVs or only reported votes were analyzed. We have merely uncovered these contrasting findings, but more work is needed to understand its origins and the reasons that explain why and how religiosity simultaneously increases individuals' self-reported likelihood to vote for PRR parties and decreases the chances that they actually end up voting for such parties.

Inglehart (2021: 149) argued that the "shift from religion to individual-choice norms is playing a major role in the emergence of xenophobic authoritarian movements". This statement is plausible, but the way in which support for PRR parties and religiosity are related is not the same everywhere. In Western Europe, active participation in religious services can even reduce respondents' likelihood to support populist radical right parties. This may be an exception in the global context (Hirsch-Hoefler et al., 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010), but is a norm in many Western European democracies. This finding implies that backlash against rapid cultural change is not always religiously motivated.

Data availability

The data and code will be stored in Harvard Dataverse and hence made available for replication.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102593.

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