Title: Radical right populism and religion: mapping parties’ religious communication in Western Europe

Jakob Schwörer
Zentrum für Demokratieforschung (ZDEMO), Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Universitätsallee 1, C40.426, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany

Xavier Romero-Vidal
Zentrum für Demokratieforschung (ZDEMO), Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Universitätsallee 1, C40.428, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany

Biographical notes:

Jakob Schwörer is a PhD Candidate at the Center for the Study of Democracy (ZDEMO) of the Leuphana University of Lüneburg and teaches party politics and populism. His research focuses on party behaviour, populist communication, political parties and religion in a comparative perspective as well as more particularly within the Italian and German context.

Xavier Romero-Vidal is a researcher at the Center for the Study of Democracy (ZDEMO) of the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. He is currently a Georg-Christoph-Lichtenberg Doctoral Fellow, investigating the interplay between ideological preferences, nationalism and value change.

1 Corresponding author; E-Mail: jakob.schwoerer@leuphana.de; ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9081-4849
2 E-Mail: xavier.romero@leuphana.de; ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7532-485X.
Abstract

Political scientists have strongly focused on the religiosity of voters and its effects on electoral behaviour. However, religious stances of political parties have largely been neglected. Yet, some scholars argue that religion is on the rise again due to the success of populist radical right parties, which use religious references as a campaigning strategy and present themselves as defenders of Christianity against a Muslim threat. Conducting a dictionary-based quantitative content analysis of election manifestos and Facebook posts of 36 political parties in seven Western European countries, this study provides evidence that populist radical right parties frame Islam in a more negative way than other party groups while presenting Christianity in a more positive tone. However, while Islam is a salient issue for the radical right, Christianity is not addressed frequently. Thus, we do not find that religion is a core discursive strategy in party communication for radical right parties.

Keywords: Religion, radical right, political parties, Christianity, Islam, secularism
1. Introduction

Religiosity has decayed in Western Europe: we observe a decline in attendance to religious services, in church membership and people describing themselves as religious (Pickel 2013, 68-69). For most individuals, religion does not provide a ‘thick’ world-view any more (Zapf, Hidalgo, and Hildmann 2018, 22-23) and the existence of secularisation processes can hardly be denied (Norris and Inglehart 2011).

Nonetheless, some scholars argue that religion is currently on the rise again in Western Europe (Martino and Papastathis 2018; Minkenberg 2018). This observation is surprising at first glance, and seems to contradict empirical findings regarding individuals’ religiousness. However, the religious comeback is not anticipated at the individual level but rather among political parties: religion is gaining salience due to the rise of populist radical right parties that present themselves as defenders of Christianity against a threatening Muslim invasion. Forlenza (2019, 135) argues that ‘references to religion and to the defence of Europe as a Christian civilisation have become increasingly central in the narrative of European right-wing populism in the last 10–15 years, and more evidently in the last few years.’ In this respect, Arato and Cohen 2017 (283) claim that radical right parties ‘hijack religion for their own purposes.’ Thus, following these arguments, religion is becoming a more and more salient and contentious issue in party competition.

While the assumption that religion is on the rise in party competition is widespread in the literature there is little empirical evidence in this respect, since the current state of religion in party communication has scarcely been investigated from a comparative perspective. Empirical political studies on religion have mostly focused on the demand side, that is the religiosity of voters (Halman and Draulans 2006; Knutsen 2004; Norris and Inglehart 2011). In recent years, a growing body of literature has payed particular attention to the electorates of populist radical right parties (PRRP) (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Billiet 1995; Immerzeel, Jaspers, and
Lubbers 2013). However, less attention has been devoted to the role that religion plays in political parties’ discourses and programs.

This study attempts to fill this research gap by analysing religious references of 36 political parties in seven Western European democracies (Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain and Switzerland). We focus on the salience of references to specific religions and religious groups - in particular to Christianity/Christians and Islam/Muslims - as well as on the evaluation (positive or negative) of these groups. In that regard, we rely on the core measures of issue evolution theory (IET) and spatial theory of party competition (STPC), that is, the salience of specific issues and the respective positions of parties (Meijers 2017, 2).

This paper is structured as follows: in section 2 we describe the link between religion and PRRP as it is discussed in the literature. In the section 3, we present the theoretical aspects of the religious references we attempt to measure and why. We then present our hypotheses about which type of parties should be most prone to use specific references to religions/religious groups. In short, we assume that PRRP do so particularly often since they take a tougher stance against Muslims and we expect them to emphasise the need of defending Christian values and identity from the ‘foreign threat’. Section 4 presents the research design, including the selection of cases and sources of data. We analyse election manifestos of recent national general elections of all relevant parties in seven Western European countries as well as posts from these parties on Facebook during the election campaigns. In the methodological section, we present a mixture of dictionary-based and manual content analysis based on a category system (keyword in context). Subsequently we present our main results in section 5 whereas in section 6 we discuss their main implications.
2. Populist radical right parties and religion

As mentioned in the introduction, several scholars claim that populist radical right parties increasingly refer to Christianity, that is, Christian values or identity. Yet, very few populist parties had religious roots and those who did are located in Eastern Europe (Minkenberg 2018, 377). Parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Italian Northern League (LN) or the French National Front (FN) neither had religious roots nor did they emphasise religious issues (Minkenberg 2018, 377).

Why should we then expect radical right parties to bring religion back to the political arena? These parties share to a certain extent a combination of populism and far right stances. The main features of populism (Mudde 2004; Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018) are anti-elitism and people-centrism – i.e. juxtaposing an immoral (political) elite and a good, homogeneous people whose will should guide the political agenda. Nativism, which is often called their ‘host ideology’ is defined ‘as an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state’ (Mudde 2007, 19). Populist or nativist claims are not necessarily linked to evaluations of religions but they are based on the juxtaposition and exclusion of certain groups. While for PRRP these excluded groups have typically been the political elite and immigrants, after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Islam and Muslims became equally framed as enemies and non-natives (see also Mattes 2018): ‘since 9/11 the radical right has made a comprehensive political investment in Islamophobia, transforming it into an extreme obsessional prejudice at the heart of its discourses and political programs’ (Kallis 2018, 47).

While Minkenberg (2018) argues that this discursive change is rather due to the increasing influx of Muslim immigrants in Western European countries, both Minkenberg and Kallis agree that Islam and Muslims became one of the main target of PRRP’s exclusionary communication.
Furthermore, nativism is not only about excluding the foreign but also about defending the natives from threatening foreigners. As Tamir Bar-on (2018, 25) argues, ‘nativism can, on occasion, lead to a defence of the West, Europe, Christianity (or sometimes the Judeo-Christian tradition), humanism, or secular values when such identities, values or traditions are presented as the true native culture (Zúquete 2008).

Recent studies suggest that PRRP increasingly refer to Christianity and Christians as a native in-group in order to defend them from the non-native Muslim threat. Based on quantitative and qualitative content analyses of election manifestos and social media, Schwörer (2018) provides evidence that the Italian radical right LN does indeed refer more often to Christianity than other Italian parties and is doing so in an exclusionary context. Mattes (2018) takes a similar approach and analyses parliamentary debates in Switzerland, Austria and Germany from 1993 to 2013 using a quantitative content analysis. Her study shows that PRRP in Switzerland and Austria indeed refer more often to Islam and Muslims than any other political party. However, she exclusively measures references to Islam and Muslims and does not account for further religious references to Christianity or secularism.

Roy concludes his chapter on the French National Front by claiming that the party refers to Christianity in an instrumental way even though the party is in conflict with the Catholic Church and many of its norms (Roy 2016b). Similarly, he assumes that for PRRP, being Christian implies being against Islam: ‘religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them [PRRP] to distinguish between the good “us” and the bad “them”’ (Roy 2016a). In this respect, PRRP ‘evoke a reinvented Christian past to warn about the existential threat of its loss in the face of invading Muslims robbing it from the present’ (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178).

Martino and Papastathis (2018) illustrate some examples of religious references of PRRP in Italy, Sweden and Greece. The authors find substantive differences between parties’ religious
discourses: while the Italian LN focuses on immigration scepticism and Islamophobia, the Independent Greeks (ANEL) emphasises nationalism. However, the Greek party uses orthodox religion ‘for serving the party’s Islamophobia and immigration scepticism’ (Martino and Papastathis 2018, 267). Minkenberg (2018, 366) illustrates this trend with Tea Party claims on preserving ‘the “Judeo-Christian” identity’ of the United States, as well as with statements from the German Pegida movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) claiming ‘the protection of “Occident” against alleged Islamization’.

Thus, while there is a wide range of religious discourses among PRRP, previous research seem to suggest that they share two key aspects: high salience of religious discourses and a positive framing of Christianity in order to exclude foreign others (Muslims). This paper aims to measure such religious communication strategies.

3. Religious communication strategies and party competition

We expect PRRP to refer increasingly to Christians and Christianity in order to exclude cultural and religious outgroups from the native people. We provide a comprehensive account of religious discourses of both radical parties and other party families in Europe and assess the salience and quality of references to Christianity/Christians and to Islam/Muslims, as well as to issues related to the more traditional secular-religious cleavage.

The salience of issues refers to the Issue Evolution Theory (IET), which defines political parties as rational vote-seekers (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Petrocik 1996; Schattschneider 1960). Roughly speaking, it measures how frequently political parties refer to specific issues. Parties engage increasingly in issues that are salient among the population and in public debates in order to increase their vote intention. The main issues political actors address in a party system
is referred to as the ‘party system agenda’ and depends on the ‘perceptions across all parties that certain issues are more important than others’ (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015, 749).

Like IET, Spatial Theory of Party Competition assumes that political parties are rational vote-seekers (Downs 1957; Meguid 2005). However, the main question is not how often parties refer to certain issues in order to increase their vote share, but in which way they position themselves in relation to these issues. Classically, scholars have measured if parties move their policy positions in the left-right spectrum when public opinions change or in reaction to ‘positional shifts and electoral gains of their competitors’ (Meijers 2017, 414).³

For the purpose of this paper, we refer to these approaches not because we are interested in what causes party behaviour changes, but because we rely on the core measures of both approaches. We measure salience of religion in party communication as a way to assess to what extent parties try to make of religion a relevant axis of competition. We measure the parties’ positioning regarding religious issues by distinguishing between positive and negative evaluations of our items (Christianity, Islam, secularism).

We attempt to measure what we call, ‘religious communication strategies’, which include salience as well as evaluations and can be considered ‘statements by an actor toward other actors’ (Wirth et al. 2017, 2). In our case, it means that we measure the frequency of evaluations of certain actors or targets – Christians and Muslims or aspects deriving from the respective religion itself – by political parties. The main advantage of measuring communication strategies is that it includes both direct evaluations (positive/negative) as well as claims for or against actors and targets (religious groups and religions) as it is shown in Annex 1.

Since Islam and Muslims are main targets of PRRP’s communication (Kallis 2018) we expect these parties to refer to either Islam or Muslims significantly more often than other parties.

Thus, the salience of this type of messages should be higher among PRRP. Moreover, we expect that PRRP evaluate Islam and Muslims in a negative way, presenting them as a threat for the country and native groups. Therefore, the first two hypotheses expect that:

**H1a:** The salience of religious communication strategies including references to Islam and Muslims is higher among PRRP.

**H1b:** Islam and Muslims are evaluated in a negative way by PRRP.

In line with previous arguments (Martino and Papastathis 2018; Minkenberg 2018; Montgomery and Winter 2015, 380) we further expect that PRRP refer more often to Christian religion and Christians and in a more positive way than other parties do:

**H2a:** The salience of religious communication strategies including references to Christianity and Christians is higher among PRRP.

**H2b:** Christianity and Christians are evaluated in a positive way by PRRP.

It has been argued that references to Christian values or traditions are made for strategic reasons by PRRP (Martino and Papastathis 2018). According to Minkenberg (2018, 387) ‘it is a strategic adjustment, not the soul of the radical right, which remains its anti-plural ultranationalism.’ Therefore we suggest that positive evaluations of Christianity or Christians are instrumental in nature and are made in order to exclude others, especially Muslims that – according to the nativist ideology – do not fit in the concept of the PRRP’s people. Accordingly, we assume that positive evaluations of Christianity and Christians can mostly be observed within the direct context of negative evaluations of Muslims or other minorities. Thus, Hypothesis 3 states:

**H3:** Positive evaluations of Christianity and Christians appear in the same context as negative evaluations of Muslims or other minority groups within PRRP’s messages.
Additionally, we focus on a more classical dimension of religion in party competition and scrutinise the role the traditional secular-religious cleavage plays in contemporary politics. Western European countries are (mostly) secular states based on the sovereignty of the people and not on religious principles. None of the relevant political parties in Western Europe would still claim that religious principles should substitute constitutional law. In fact, the relevance of this dimension of religious cleavages already decreased in a substantial way (Ozzano 2019). That is not to say, however, that according to certain parties religion should not play an institutional role in national politics. To name only two examples, politicians from the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) recently claimed that there should be a crucifix on every public agency in the region (Prantl 2018), and the Italian Northern League demanded the introduction of ‘the Christian roots into the EU Treaties’ in its program conclusions for the 2014 European elections.

We assume that left, green and liberal parties speak out against the implementation of such religious principles and are in favour of secular norms since these party families ‘have traditionally been the main antagonists of the church, religious individuals and Christian political interests’ (Knutsen 2004, 100). Conversely, centre-right parties such as conservatives and particularly Christian democrats articulate religious orientations (Knutsen 2004, 100) and we therefore expect them to advocate the enforcement of Christian values. The same is expected for PRRP even though the literature provides conflicting expectations. On the one hand, radical right parties use secularism to attack ethnic diversity. By opposing the ‘Judeo-Christian roots’ with Muslim values, they accuse the latter of being incompatible with European secular principles (Pickel 2013). On the other hand, certain PRRP are in line with Catholic authorities and use ‘ethno-religious discourses’ to defend traditional values (e.g. against the so-called gender mainstreaming (Hennig 2018, 196)). We therefore expect:
**H4:** Left, green and liberal parties support secular principles, whereas conservative and Christian democratic parties as well as PRRP advocate religious principles.

*Table 1* summarises the categories of religious communication strategies we measure in order to test our hypothesis.

**Table 1: Religious communication strategies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Evaluated target / issue</th>
<th>Type of evaluation</th>
<th>Salience of evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Groups / affiliated persons</td>
<td>Muslims / Islam</td>
<td>Positive / negative</td>
<td>High / low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christians / Christianity</td>
<td>Positive / negative</td>
<td>High / low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jews / Judaism</td>
<td>Positive / negative</td>
<td>High / low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular-religious Cleavage</td>
<td>Secularism; rule of non-religious law and principles</td>
<td>For / against</td>
<td>High / low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Data and Methods

We focus our research on seven Western European democracies. We exclude Eastern Europe because religion plays a different role in this region due to ‘revitalization’ or ‘normalization’ tendencies in former communist states (Pickel 2013, 69). In six of the seven selected countries - Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Great Britain - a PRRP is in parliament (Rooduijn et al. 2019). We additionally include Spain, which remained until very recently one of the few Western European countries without a PRRP in Parliament in order to account for the religious communication strategies of mainstream political parties lacking a PRR competitor. Our analysis partially rely on a manual content analysis. Accordingly, our methodological approach requires a deep knowledge of the languages in which the texts are produced. This need limits our availability to include other Western European countries.

We rely on a sample of party manifests of the most recent national elections (2015-2018, as detailed in *Annex 2*). Election manifests contain the main political path parties want to follow rather than statements directed towards a larger audience. Some scholars assume that their
appeal might be ‘not particularly great and voters are often not aware of their content’ (Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014, 571). However, election programs remain one main text source for measuring party positions or communication strategies because they are comparable and available across countries. They are considered as ‘the only documents in regionally fragmented party organizations that offer a univocal position’ (Manucci and Weber 2017, 4).

Additionally, we scrutinise Facebook posts during the campaign of these elections by gathering all published posts in the eight weeks prior to the voting day using the application ‘Facepager’ (Jünger and Keyling 2018). Social networks have become major campaigning tools, allowing direct communication from parties and candidates to voters without the mediation role of mass media. Mainly, Facebook and Twitter are the larger social networks in political campaigning. However, we focus on Facebook posts for two reasons. First, Facebook allows longer texts and therefore we expect to find more developed messages there. Second, Twitter changed the restriction of characters in 2017 from 140 to 280. Since our sample includes election campaigns before and after this change, the different lengths of tweets would mean that cross-country comparisons would hardly be possible, particularly because our units of measurements are the single posts/tweets. For the sake of a consistent data gathering method, we opt for official party Facebook pages. Whereas candidates’ pages would add valuable sources of information, the different levels of campaign personalization across countries and elections suggests that party pages are more comparable (for example, the AfD did not have single charismatic leader during our period of study). Furthermore, as shown by previous research, religious references are more common in party pages than among candidate ones (Schwörer 2018).

Political parties might use different religious communication strategies in different channels. While posts on Facebook might contain statements with a higher mobilising effect, election manifestos also refer to issues that are part of the broader party agenda. As regards Facebook
posts, we collect and analyse 2,542 posts of 36 political parties, including all parties with a vote share of at least 5 per cent in the last national elections.\footnote{Exceptions are the Italian far-right party ‘Brothers of Italy’, the Austrian ‘NOW – List Pilz’ and ‘La France Insoumise’ which did not reach 5 per cent or did not exist in previous elections.} We exclude posts containing only announcements of events or lacking political statements. As for election manifests, our sample is reduced to 33 parties. Manifestos for the Swiss Liberals and the Austrian List Pilz were not published. Furthermore, while the Christian Social Union in Bavaria and the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) are two independent parties with their own Facebook profiles, they form a coalition in national elections and therefore share a single election manifesto.

Methodologically, we rely on a mixture of a computer-based and a classical content analysis (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). In a first step, we create a dictionary including keywords that might refer to religion related issues (see Annex 3). We build on the dictionary used in a previous single country study (Schwörer 2018) and develop a keywords list based on theoretical reasoning and explorative pre-tests. We use the computer-based approach to identify the passages in the text in which our keywords appear (see also Mattes 2018).

Notwithstanding, capturing the actual meaning of the occurrence (which could be a merely metaphorical use of a religious word) or the type of evaluation of a target or issue by simply counting words is not always feasible (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Thus, in a second step, we code every reference manually relying on a category system as described in detail in Annex 1 that also contains example sentences for every subcategory.\footnote{Already existing category systems were helpful in creating our codes (Ernst et al. 2019; Manucci and Weber 2017).} We do not only code references to a religion or religious group as a whole but also to individuals whose religious affiliation is named (example from AfD’s FB page: ‘A woman in a burka beats a lingerie saleswoman because lingerie is not “haram”’). While we distinguish between references to religions and
institutions, our corpus only contains one explicit negative reference to Christian dignitaries. Therefore, our analysis mainly reflects discourses on religious groups rather than specific religious institutions.\(^6\)

Sentences are the unit of measurement for election manifestos, so our indices express the percentage of sentences including each item. Regarding Facebook, the structure of published posts is rather irregular and does not follow a typical text structure. Therefore, we opt for the single post as unit of measurement. That means that the final score illustrates the percentage of posts addressing religious issues.

5. Findings

We start our analysis by assessing religious communication strategies of Western European parties regarding Islam and Muslims. Figure 1 shows the frequency of references to each of these concepts in both party manifestos and Facebook posts. In party manifestos, we find a large difference in the salience to Islam between radical right parties, which refer to it in 1.94 per cent of their manifesto sentences (SD=1.55) and other parties, that on average only refer to Islam in 0.27 per cent (SD=.37) of them. An independent samples t-test comparing the salience of Islam for PRRP and non-PRRP suggests that this difference is statistically significant (conditions; t(31)= -5.17, p = 0.000). Similarly, PRRP refer significantly more often to Islam on Facebook (Mean=5.48, SD=5.16) than other parties do (M=0.13, SD=.41; conditions; t(34)= -5.17, p = 0.000). These results suggest that PRRP talk much more about Islam and Muslims,

\(^6\) It is surprising that, against some expectations drawn from the literature, negative references about Christian dignitaries or the pope were not found within the corpus, even when they might have expressed support for refugees. The PRRP might refrain from criticising Christian institutions in order to avoid appearing as opposed to Christianity.
as expected in Hypothesis 1a. Among other parties, the centre-right mentions Islam/Muslims the most, yet the percentage of references is very low.

Regarding the evaluation of Islam and Muslims, we find that PRRP indeed frame them negatively. We create an index including both references to radical and terrorist Islam/Muslims as well as negative evaluations of Muslims not explicitly portrayed as radical. One could argue that criticising radical Islam is not a negative evaluation of Islam as a whole. However, mentioning Islam and terror constantly in the same context could give the impression that these two issues are necessarily connected. By creating a second index including only evaluations of Islam and Muslims not explicitly described as radical or terrorist, we can see to what extent we find different patterns in party communication when referring to Islam. Figure 2 shows the score of Islam’s net evaluation in election manifests. We create this score by subtracting negative references to Islam from positive ones. Therefore, positive values indicate a generally
positive discourse about Muslims whereas negative scores indicate the contrary. Most parties have very limited (or rather balanced) references to these religious groups. The results show some regularity in the way in which parties address Islam: those who evaluate moderate Islam more negatively, also tend to refer to radical Islam more often. Therefore, the means showed by the two bars are quite similar.

As expected in H1b, PRRP accentuate negative evaluations of moderate Islam ($M=-0.87$, $SD=.40$), whereas the rest of parties have a mildly positive framing of Islam ($M=.06$, $SD=.14$; a significant difference under conditions; $t(31)= 4.50$, $p = 0.000$). While centre-right parties also speak out against radical Islam more often than left-wing parties, PRRP are the only ones portraying very negatively both moderate and radical Muslims. Facebook results (not displayed here but available in Annex 4), show a very similar pattern.

Figure 2. Net evaluations of Islam and Muslims (election manifestos)
We move on now to the salience and evaluations of Christianity (or Christians), illustrated in Figure 3. Interestingly, references to Christianity are far less common than references to Islam among both PRRP and the other groups of parties. In their election manifestos, PRRP refer to Christianity in a broader sense in 0.49 per cent of their sentences (SD=.71) while among other parties references are almost inexisten (M=0.09, SD=.17; these means are significantly different; t(31)= -2.72, p= 0.01). Interestingly enough, Christian democratic parties refer positively to Christianity just as often as the radical right within election programs. Accordingly, all three Christian democratic parties’ manifestos contain a positive reference to Christianity, with 0.45 per cent of sentences referring positively to Christianity. It should be further noticed that the large standard deviation among PRRP reflects that references to Christianity are concentrated among only three of the seven parties included in this study (AfD; Brothers of Italy (FdI); Swiss People’s Party (SVP)). The low amount of absolute references to Christianity concentrated in an also narrow subgroup of PRRP should prevent us from overestimating the meaning of these findings. On Facebook, differences between PRRP (M=1.10, SD=1.26) and other parties (M=0.14, SD=.43) are even larger and again statistically significant (t(34)= -3.46, p= 0.002). Four out of seven PRRP address Christianity in a positive way whereas only two out of eight centre-right parties do so.

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7 According to ParlGov: Austrian People's Party (ÖVP); Christian Democratic Swiss People’s Party (SVP); Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU); Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU).
Figure 4 illustrates the index of net evaluations of Christianity, created by subtracting the negative Christians’ evaluation score from the positive one. In contrast to evaluations of Islam, Christianity is generally framed in a positive manner, with the exception of a slightly negative framing among some left-wing manifestos. On average, PRRP evaluate Christians and Christianity in a positive way in their party manifestos (M=0.46, SD=.72), whereas the mean score of all other parties is M=0.06 (SD=.17), indicating a rather neutral framing of it. The difference between radical right and the rest of parties is statistically significant (t(31)=-2.70, p=0.011). Since all references to Christianity on Facebook are positive, we cannot subtract negative evaluations to positive ones. Therefore, our index of evaluation of Christianity has the same score as the salience, which as discussed above, is significantly higher among PRRP, and therefore, significantly more positive. Accordingly, there is some evidence for Hypothesis 2b, but since the absolute numbers of references to Christianity are low, we should refrain from
taking these results as conclusive. *Annex 5* shows the individual scores for parties in each country regarding both the evaluations of Christianity and Islam.

![Figure 4. Net evaluations of Christianity.](image)

So far, we have provided some evidence that PRRP try to push forward religion as an axis of competition or, at least, that they emphasise negative evaluations of Islam while occasionally portraying Christianity in a positive way. This provides some first hints that PRRP indeed present themselves as defenders of Christianity against a supposed Muslim threat. However, we focus on this assumption in more detail and expect that these two evaluation types are linked and should be found in the same context (same or previous/subsequent unit of measurement regarding election programs) (H3). Nonetheless, this is hardly ever the case. In total, we only encounter two passages in election manifestos and three in posts on Facebook in which a defence of Christianity is juxtaposed to a critique of Islam. In every case, this juxtaposition
comes from radical right parties. Two passages from the AfD can be considered representative in this respect:

‘Minaret and muezzin shouts are at odds with a tolerant coexistence of religions that Christian churches, Jewish communities, and other religious communities practice in the modern age.’\(^8\) (AfD, election program 2017).

‘That the SPD is more inclined to Islam than to Christianity or Judaism is no secret.’\(^9\) (AfD, Facebook post from 30/7/2017)

These examples illustrate that not only Christians but also Jews and Judaism are opposed to Islam. However, as already mentioned, naming Islam and Christianity in the same context cannot be observed frequently and most of the references to Christianity and Islam appear independently from each other. Thus, taking this approach we would only find very limited support for H3. If we relax our restrictions and consider the correlation between the mean values of pro-Christian and anti-Islam statements for each party family in their manifestos, we find a significant negative correlation \((r=-.95, p=0.001)\) as illustrated in Figure 5. This correlation suggests a general link between anti-Islam and pro-Christian messages among different party types. It further illustrates that this is particularly true for the PRRP group, which combines the most negative framing of Islam with the most positive framing of Christianity, providing some support for H3.

\(^8\) Original text in German: *Minaret und Muezzin-Ruf stehen im Widerspruch zu einem toleranten Nebeneinander der Religionen, das die christlichen Kirchen, jüdischen Gemeinden und andere religiöse Gemeinschaften in der Moderne praktizieren.*

\(^9\) Original text in German: *Dass die SPD mehr dem Islam als dem Christen- oder Judentum zugeneigt ist, ist kein Geheimnis.*
Figure 5. Correlation between Christianity and Islam evaluations (Facebook posts)

We see that for most party families the antagonism of these groups is rather absent in their communication, whereas for centre-right parties, and to a greater extent for PRRP, opposite evaluations of Christianity and Islam are more common. It is worth keeping in mind that this is the correlation between averages, and therefore should not be interpreted as a pervasive correlation for each party. Yet, if we assess the totality of parties’ religious communication strategies, we find the expected combination of anti-Islam and pro-Christian references among PRRP (H3).

As mentioned in section 4, our sample also includes Spain, a country without any PRRP within the period of analysis. This specific case allows us to assess to what extent the presence of a radical right party may affect other parties in the way they refer to religious groups. The comparison between Spanish and other Western European mainstream (centre-left and centre-
right) parties’ manifestos reveals that the presence of a PRRP does not necessarily change their religious messages. We find that the average amount of anti-Islam messages among mainstream parties in Spain is the same as in the other countries where the far right is established in national parliaments. Yet, taking the average evaluations of all parties including PRRP (that is the totality of party messages of each national corpus), we find the least negative average evaluation of Islam and together with France, the least positive evaluation of Christianity (see Annex 6).

Finally, we analyse a different category of religious messages that is not directly linked to the evaluation of specific religious groups but to the traditional secular-religious cleavage. We expect left, green and liberal parties to be in favour of secular principles while we assume conservative and Christian democratic parties as well as PRRP to emphasise religious principles and regulations (H4). Only the manifestos of three parties advocate for the implementation of religious norms over secular values: the centre-right ÖVP, and two radical right parties: AfD and FdI. However, our net measure of support for secularism shows that none of the party groups evaluates secularism negatively. Against our expectation in H4, PRRP do not systematically prioritise Christian values over secularism.

Left, centre-left and liberal parties stress the importance of secularism (M=0.42, SD=.10) more than centre-right and PRRP, that rarely refer to it (M=0.19, SD=.60), but these differences are not statistically significant (t(30)=0.78, p=0.443). Moreover, the large standard deviations suggest that ideology is not a good predictor of secularism in party communication. Rather, country-specific traditions seem to shape secular communication. Figure 6 groups party manifestos’ secularism scores per country, showing both the country mean and the variation among parties within each country. France is clearly an outlier: the average score in secularism is much higher than in any other country, despite the extreme variance within the country. Interestingly enough, the radical right National Front preaches secularism more than the liberal En Marche, further suggesting that there is no systematic link between ideology and pro-
secularism content. Messages about secular values can potentially be used against religious minorities, and therefore these scores should not be interpreted naively. Previous research has already identified that PRRP emphasise the ‘secularity as the starting point for the criticism of Islam’ (Schwörer 2018, 389). As for party communication on Facebook, both references for or against secularism are inexistent. This suggests that parties indeed use different religious messages in their manifestos and Facebook. Claims for secular or religious norms do not seem to be a mobilising strategy and therefore are missing in social networks, whereas negative references to Islam are frequent in both, PRRP’s manifestos and Facebook pages.

Figure 6. Country-mean evaluation of secularism (election manifests). Dots indicate individual parties’ values.
6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper puts forward a comprehensive comparison of religious communication strategies of political parties in Western European countries, paying particular attention to those of populist radical right parties. We find evidence that PRRP refer to Islam and Muslims much more often than other parties using a very negative framing. Furthermore, they also refer to Christianity more often and in a more positive tone. These results provide empirical evidence for the widespread assumption found in the literature that PRRP portray themselves as defenders of Christianity against a Muslim threat. In this respect, PRRP do not only frame negatively radical Islam but are the only party group that criticises also moderate Islam and Muslims. We do not find that negative evaluations of Islam do appear in the same passage as positive evaluations of Christianity, but there is a strong association between anti-Islam and pro-Christianity references in PRRP’s election manifestos.

Since PRRP blame Islam and Muslim immigrants of being a threat for Christians and the Christian culture of Europe, scholars have assumed that religion regained relevance in party politics. It is undisputable that PRRP refer to Christianity in a positive way, yet this happens rather rarely. Thus, referring to Christianity, Christian values and identity does not seem to be a main vote-seeking strategy of PRRP. The same is true for references to secularism or to religious principles. This cleavage does not seem to be a very significant one anymore. However, there is variation between Facebook and manifesto content, as well as variation related to country-specific dynamics. In French election manifestos, parties are more prone to address secular principles, suggesting that specific national debates or cultural traditions push this issue more often in their national political agenda. However, on Facebook such claims are absent across all studied countries and parties. Thus, secular and religious principles are not perceived by political parties as a promising campaigning strategy and as having the potential to mobilise the masses via social media.
In sum, and as expected, we provide evidence that anti-Islam communication is very frequent among PRRP. Yet, these statements alone should not be interpreted only in religious terms, but as a core feature of PRRP deriving from anti-immigration stances and their nationalist and nativist ideology, which are not necessarily linked to religious ideologies (Kallis 2018). In fact, while we find a link between negative evaluations of Islam and positive framings of Christianity, radical right parties still devote much more time deprecating Islam than they do preaching Christianity. Consequently, constructing religious outgroups seems to be much more important to PRRP than creating a Christian ingroup.

The cross-sectional nature of our study does not allow us to assess to what extent ‘religion is on the rise again’ as some scholars argue (Minkenberg 2018, 366; similar: Martino and Papastathis 2018, 261-262). However, the small amount of references to Christianity and secularism suggests that, as regards PRRP, only anti-Islam messages are on the rise. Further research with a longitudinal perspective could shed light on the over-time variation of religious references in party communication.

7. References


