

When the Church Votes Left: The Electoral Consequences of Progressive Religion

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Book Chapter Outline

CHAPTER 1: Doctrine and Politics: The Policy Influence of Progressive Religious Leaders

Conventional wisdom about religion's electoral influence suggests individual voters' religiosity reduces demands for economic redistribution and may lead left wing parties to moderate their economic platforms. In this chapter, I contrast these claims with the observation that religious doctrines often contain elements that align with the redistributive policies of the left, such as a strong concern for the poor, a critical view of inequality and an obligation for the rich to support the less fortunate. Rather than inherently conservative, I argue that religious leaders' influence in electoral politics in fact depends on the religious ideas that leaders advance and that these ideas vary with respect to social values and economic redistribution. This variation shapes religious leaders' policy preferences; when leaders advance doctrines that are progressive on the economic dimension they will support economic redistribution and mobilize their congregations around these issues. Under some circumstances, they may also choose to support political parties on the left as a means of furthering their preferred policies. My book develops a theory of political competition that explains when progressive religion's preferences for redistributive economic policies and socially conservative moral values translates to direct support for left wing parties and examines the consequences of this support for the electoral fortunes of the left and the policies the party advances.

CHAPTER 2: A Theory of Religious Influence in Electoral Politics

In this chapter, I advance a theory of the electoral influence of religion with a focus on church leaders and their impact on the vote choice of the members of their congregations. I study religious leaders' decision to participate in electoral politics and which party they choose to support when they do so. Drawing on existing research about religion's impact on distributive politics and theories of special interest group influence, I develop a formal model that illustrates how religious leaders' policy preferences affect their participation in the electoral arena, the strategic responses of political parties, and the types of electoral alliances that eventually form between these two actors. I emphasize that religious leaders hold preferences on both economic (redistribution, taxation) and moral (abortion, gay marriage) dimensions of policy, and these preferences may cross-cut the platforms of left and right political parties. When religious leaders have progressive preferences on the economic dimension, incentives are created for left-wing parties to collaborate with these leaders to court religious

voters effectively. However, religious leaders will only mobilize their adherents if they believe supporting the left party will not jeopardize their preferences on the moral policy dimension. When economically progressive religious organizations hold conservative preferences on the moral policy dimension, they will only ally with the left if it shares their policy position on moral issues. In cases where the fraction of religious voters that the left can gain with the church's support is larger than the voters it would lose from moving to the right on the moral policy dimension, the left party will have an incentive to moderate in order to attract the electoral support of the church. Thus, while cooperation with religious organizations may increase left wing parties' electoral support, it will come at the cost of their moral conservatism.

CHAPTER 3: Religious Leaders and Political Influence in the Catholic Church

The first section of the chapter introduces the Catholic Church and discusses the methodological advantages of studying the effects of religious ideas within a single religious denomination, rather than looking at differences across denominations. I describe two factions within the Church and outline how the doctrinal interpretation advanced by the sitting pope can shape the relative power between them. I highlight specifically the influence of a progressive interpretation of Catholic doctrine and its growth between the Second Vatican Council (1964-1965) and the appointment in 1978 of Pope John Paul II, who instead advanced a conservative interpretation of Catholicism. Finally, I document John Paul II's systematic appointment of traditionalist bishops to curb the influence of progressives in the national Churches of the three countries I study—Brazil, the United States, and Italy.

The second part of the chapter introduces the internal rules of the Church, which serve as the basis for the empirical strategy in the following chapters. I describe the administrative organization of the Catholic Church, focusing specifically on its territorial division into administrative units overseen by bishops that enjoy a high degree of autonomy. I describe their ability to shape the Church within their jurisdictions once in office and the strategies they can employ to influence electoral politics at the subnational level. I then explain the rules that govern bishop appointments and tenure in office. These directives outline the popes' freedom to select bishops of their choosing, but also guarantee that, once appointed, bishops will remain in office until they retire at the age of seventy-five. Finally, I argue that these rules generate exogenous variation in the timing of when bishops' offices become vacant and allow popes to replace bishops from previous papacies with their own appointees. I conclude the chapter by providing evidence of this claim and introducing the research design used in the empirical chapters.

CHAPTER 4: How Doctrinal Interpretation Shapes the Electoral Influence of the Church: Evidence from Brazil

What are the electoral effects of progressive religion in contexts where religious leaders exert influence over a large fraction of the population? Leveraging the natural experiment introduced in chapter 3 and additional data from Brazil—the country with the largest Catholic population in the world—I find that the left's electoral prospects suffered significantly between 1978 and Brazil's first democratic elections in places where progressive bishops were replaced with conservative ones. I then combine archival data from the Catholic Church with local level electoral data to show that the

party's stronger performance in progressive dioceses can be explained in part by its access to religious networks, which allowed it to develop an organizational presence that delivered an advantage at the polls. Finally, analysis of the types of dioceses where these effects were present provides support for this interpretation—the left benefited from progressive support in less developed and rural dioceses where the absence of labor unions prevented it from making inroads among poor voters.

CHAPTER 5: The Consequences of Party Moderation on the Moral Dimension

Political parties' moderation to attract the support of religious leaders determines which groups of voters benefit from the policies the parties enact once they are in office. Research on the conservative bias of religion's electoral influence highlights the dilemma of poor religious voters, who must choose between prioritizing their moral values or their material interests. I underscore an alternative phenomenon—alliances between progressive religious leaders and the left hurt morally progressive, nonreligious voters whose preferences on the moral dimension will no longer be represented by left wing parties. In practice, those most negatively affected by this alliance are groups advocating for women's rights, church-state separation, and other progressive social issues. I support this claim with data from Brazil, demonstrating that the support of progressive bishops required the left to moderate on the moral dimension and marginalized the political demands of the party's feminist faction. I first support this claim through a descriptive analysis of a survey of Brazilian legislators, which asked representatives about their policy positions with regard to moral issues. I find that left party legislators from regions with a larger portion of progressive dioceses are less likely to favor abortion and gay marriage. I then provide causal evidence that in progressive dioceses, the left decreased women's access to party tickets and curbed the implementation of policies that favored gender equality, such as police offices to protect women from domestic violence.

CHAPTER 6: The Political Failure of Progressive Religion: The Church and Electoral Politics in Italy and the United States

In this chapter, I extend my research design to the study of the United States and Italy. In the US, Catholics represent the largest Christian denomination but are a minority of the general population. This gave the left little incentive to moderate on the moral dimension to attract the Catholic vote. In Italy, although the majority of the country was Catholic, the Church had its own party (Christian Democracy) and there were multiple parties on the left from which to choose an ally. As a result, the Catholic Church had incentives to form legislative, rather than electoral, alliances with left wing parties. In both cases, these features of the religious and political makeup of society blocked the progressive faction of the church from forming an electoral alliance with the left. I provide evidence of this claim by analyzing detailed data from the Catholic Church, as well as disaggregated electoral data for both countries. For the case of Italy, I have also collected an original dataset with the disaggregated results from the divorce and abortion referenda which took place in 1974 and 1981, respectively.

CHAPTER 7: Religious Organizations and Electoral Politics in Contemporary Perspective

I conclude by reexamining the cases of Brazil, Italy, and the United States within the framework of my theory of religion's electoral influence. While scholars have long pondered religion's influence on politics, establishing the effect of religious ideas has proven elusive. Applying my theory to

these three cases sheds light on when we should expect the church to endorse the left and the policy consequences of their alliance. Analysis of the progressive influence of the Catholic Church in dioceses led by progressive bishops demonstrates that religious ideas matter; they determine both church leaders' decision to participate in electoral politics and the vote choice of their parishioners. Church leaders that hold progressive preferences on the economic dimension will have incentives to mobilize their adherents in support of the political left, as long as doing so does not advance policies that contradict their conservative moral agenda. When these conditions are met, the church is likely to collaborate with the left and support its electoral efforts. While this may increase support for the left, it will do so at the cost of progressive moral policies.