Politicisation Without Party Discipline. A New Perspective on Christian Democracy in Modern Times

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Scholars of morality politics have argued that while secular parties politicise value-driven issues, Christian Democrats are more reluctant to do so. By investigating the individual cosponsoring of proposals on conscience issues in the German Bundestag between 2005 and 2009, we show that Christian Democrats use their freedom in this context and engage more frequently in politicising moral issues than deputies of secular parties. However, MP's engagement is also shaped by their religious denomination and the policy-specific issue salience. These findings enrich our understanding of the 'Christian-Democratic Phoenix' in modern times and shed new light on the motives that drive agenda setting of morality issues in the parliamentary arena.

Keywords: Agenda setting, Christian Democracy, Conscience Issues, Morality Politics, Social Identities

Morality issues have received an increasing amount of political attention in Western Europe. Because they concern fundamental value conflicts, such issues represent a thorny challenge for policymakers (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998; Mooney, 2001; Knill *et al.*, 2015). Christian Democratic parties are particularly negatively affected by these developments. Ever larger segments of society demand more permissive regulations, while only a shrinking religious voter base supports the relatively restrictive regulatory *status quo* and, thus, the Christian Democratic party line. As a result, it has become common practice for secular parties to adopt the otherwise risky strategy of drawing attention to morality policy issues, precisely in order to increase the dilemma for Christian Democrats; meanwhile, Christian Democratic parties abstain from placing value-driven issues on the agenda (Engeli *et al.*, 2012). Previous scholars have examined these

patterns from the perspective of issue competition among parties (e.g. Euchner, 2015). In contrast to the broad US-American research on individual legislative co-sponsorship (Tatalovich, 1997; Oldmixon, 2005; Burden, 2007), these studies of European scholars have ignored, the individual behaviour of parliamentarians (MPs) and, especially, their handling of so-called 'conscience issues'. The primary characteristic of such issues is that party discipline is suspended when they are discussed. In other words, when it comes to conscience issues, MPs are (at least theoretically) free to vote according to their own beliefs. Yet we know little about the patterns of agenda setting when parties do not define a common party line in parliamentary systems. To what extent do individual Christian Democratic MPs adhere to the collective strategy of generally avoiding morality issues? Alternately, to what extent do other factors, such as religion and gender, replace the influence of party identification?

These research questions respond to two research gaps in two different literature streams. First, the study speaks to the investigation of the so-called 'Christian Democratic Phoenix' in modern times (Van Kersbergen, 2008; Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010). By exploring the behaviour and motives of single Christian Democratic MPs when dealing with conscience issues, we uncover how the Christian Democratic struggle between religious values and 'unsecular behaviour' plays out at the individual level. Secondly, we contribute to the agenda-setting research by shedding light on the behaviour of single MPs, something that has been largely disregarded so far (cf. Brouard *et al.*, 2013). Agenda-setting scholars have traditionally focused on institutional and external factors, such as public opinion, focusing events or media attention (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), only recently taking up the role of political parties in shaping the parliamentary agenda (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010). As a result, little research has examined how individual parliamentarians use the agenda-setting stage in parliamentary systems to enhance their own profile and promote personal policy aims, independently of their party affiliation (Bowler, 2010; Saalfeld and Bischof, 2013; Bäck *et al.*, 2014)—an issue that is of particular interest in the specific situation of conscience issues, when parliamentary party groups even suspend party discipline as intra-party heterogeneity hampers the internal decision-making process (Cowley, 1998; Plumb, 2015; Baumann, 2015).

We argue that when party discipline is suspended in morality politics, MPs' social identities are the driving forces of issue politicisation. Untethered from party line, MPs align with the social groups and categories that convey their identity and moral values (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1991; Russell, 2014). For conscience issues, religious communities and gender are particularly salient social identities. At the same time, however, although parties in such situations have less capacity to exert material or social pressures, they can still influence the behaviour of parliamentarians as party membership also provides a social identity. When

presented with this scenario, we argue that Christian Democratic MPs set aside the tactical considerations that usually lead them to avoid morality issues and instead actively initiate their politicisation and debate.

By investigating the individual engagement of MPs in co-sponsoring policy proposals on conscience issues in the 16th legislative period of the German Bundestag (2005–09), we find empirical evidence for this argument. The probability of supporting an initiative increases with affiliation to the Catholic and Protestant Church and with the membership in one of the Christian Democratic parties. Under these specific conditions, Christian Democratic MPs deviate from a strict 'unsecular approach' and instead engage actively in the politicisation of issues related to religion. Furthermore, the empirical results underline the added value of examining the individual level. This lens enhances our understanding of the mechanisms and driving forces of agenda setting in morality politics. In contrast to the dominating assumptions of the agenda-setting literature, MPs are not only agents of their parties and voters or actors that just respond to exogenous factors, such as the media or focusing events, they should also be captured as individuals with their personal interests and social identities.

The article is structured as follows: In Section 1, we review gaps in the literature on agenda setting, and discuss the role of social identities when dealing with conscience issues. Section 2 outlines our theoretical framework and central hypotheses, while Section 3 describes the research design. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis and discussion of findings and Section 5 concludes by summarising the study's contribution and pointing out avenues for future research.

1. Research on Christian Democracy and political attention: Underrating the individual level

Many scholars have discussed the crisis of Christian Democracy in modern times (Duncan, 2006). Christian Democratic parties lost electoral support in many European countries due to strong secularisation trends and a decreasing religious voter base. The Netherlands is a popular example. The Dutch Christian Democrats had to tackle serious electoral defeats in the early 1990s, resulting in a loss of government participation for the first time in many years. In addition, Christian Democrats are challenged by morality policy questions as party members tend to prefer restrictive regulations that are largely unpopular or they remain internally divided regarding such issues (Inglehart and Baker, 2000; Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Engeli *et al.*, 2012). These conflicts also relate to the 'catch-all' profile developed after the Second World War by many Christian Democratic parties in Western Europe (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010). They accommodated heterogeneous groups and sectors, ranging from 'farmers and fishermen, entrepreneurs and employers, the religious section of the working class and broad sections

of the white collar middle class' (Bale and Krouwel, 2013). As such, Frey (2009) argues such parties developed an ideology that aims at conflict accommodation.

Although religion is an important element unifying large numbers of party members and voters, Christian Democratic parties also have a considerable amount of support from secular members, who challenge restrictive stances in terms of religious policies and thus create internal conflicts. According to Kalyvas and Kersbergen (2010), the survival strategy of Christian Democrats has been to develop an 'unsecular' profile by avoiding such value-driven issues or other topics strongly related to religion. Van Kersbergen (2008) identified this strategy as the main reason for the 'Christian Democratic Phoenix' in the Netherlands. Engeli *et al.* (2012) similarly find that Christian Democratic parties in other Western European states (besides the Netherlands) avoid value-driven issues, while secular parties deliberately put such issues on the political agenda in order to challenge their main opponent. Studies on German Christian Democracy show that with this hands-off policy the party actively distanced itself from the voter segments of Catholics. For instance, Debus and Müller (2013) analyse Christian Democratic party manifestos at the state level over time and show that the parties do not follow their traditional Catholic voter base, but align instead with a more moderate position when it comes to sociopolitical questions. The current party chair, Angela Merkel, is a woman, Protestant and Eastern German, thus diverging strongly from the traditional profile of a German Christian Democrat. Under Merkel's leadership the Christian Democratic party has adopted a new political course at the state and national level, particularly in regard to social policy, family policy and morality-charged questions such as life-and-death issues (Debus and Müller, 2013; Preidel, 2016).

So, we know much about how Christian Democratic parties behave as collective actors with regard to morality issues, but little about the behaviour of single Christian Democratic MPs and how these patterns contribute to the recovery of the party family. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to examine agenda-setting dynamics at the individual level as here party discipline is low. This allows us to carefully trace how individuals manage the struggle between religious values and an 'unsecular strategy'(cf. Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010).

Yet, despite the merits of this approach, even scholars of agenda setting fail to take individual behaviour during this phase into account. To the extent that individual MPs and their behaviour or speeches are examined, individual contributions are aggregated and conceptualised as constituting the party or executive agenda (Jennings *et al.*, 2011). Most agenda-setting scholars explore the agenda-setting capacity of political parties and external actors or draw attention to the institutional set-up determining agenda-setting processes (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011; Euchner, 2015). One exception in this regard is the young study of Brouard *et al.* (2013).

US-American research on individual co-sponsorship (Tatalovich, 1997; Oldmixon, 2005; Burden, 2007) as well as recent studies on legislative behaviour in parliamentary systems show, however, that shifting the analytical perspective to the individual level is fruitful for understanding the influence and role of parties during the agenda-setting phase. By exercising the right to pose questions, interpellations and give speeches, deputies in parliamentary systems can use this phase to send signals to their constituency or specific electoral clientele or to promote their personal policy interests (Carey, 2007; Bowler, 2010; Baumann *et al.*, 2015). The findings within this strand of literature reveal, for instance, differences between male and female deputies (Celis, 2006; Bäck *et al.*, 2014). Celis (2006) discovers a positive relationship between women and women-friendly interventions in the Belgian parliament. Bäck *et al.* (2014) similarly find that female MPs in the Swedish *Riksdag* give less speeches in parliament, particularly when discussing 'harder' policy issues.

The question regarding the decisiveness of micro-level factors for explaining agenda-setting behaviour gains even more relevance in circumstances when topics turn into conscience issues and party discipline is abandoned. Under such circumstances, explanations related to party competition in general (Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011) or institutional settings lose explanatory power (e.g. Breunig, 2014). Instead, it can be expected that other factors on the individual level drive politicisation dynamics in parliaments. For instance, Baumann *et al.* (2015) analysed the initiative behaviour of German MPs during the debate on the regulation of pre-genetic diagnosis, an issue which was discussed across party lines. Their results show that besides gender, MPs' denomination is a significant factor here: Catholic deputies are more likely to support restrictive policy proposals, but passive when it comes to permissive reform initiatives.

These findings raise the question of whether these personal influences replace the impact of party affiliation on legislative behaviour when party discipline is suspended, and whether the reluctance of Christian Democrats to engage in issue politicisation on ethical issues holds true under such circumstances. By examining these questions, the article makes two contributions. First, we speak to a central puzzle in the literature on Christian Democracy, namely, how this party family can survive in times of strong secularisation. Secondly, by looking at the policy formulation process at the micro level, we shed light on the actual process of agenda setting (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014, p. 4) which is an aggregate decision of multiple individuals to politicise an issue.

2. The driving forces of MPs' politicisation behaviour

This study argues that, in addition to parties and voters, other salient social groups shape deputies' politicisation behaviour when conscience issues are

discussed on the parliamentary agenda. Thereby, parties, voters and social groups do not only act as principals, but also as social identities (Carey, 2007; Russell, 2014; Preidel, 2016). Conscience issues are a specific type of policies that are driven by value conflicts and do not align with existing party lines. Because they go hand-in-hand with high intra-party heterogeneity, such issues generally compel party leaders to suspend party discipline. MPs are formally free to follow their moral beliefs and to disregard other obligations and the interests of their principals (Cowley, 1998). In this way, and following recent literature on legislative voting (Russell, 2014; Preidel, 2016), salient social groups accomplish parties and voters in determining the legislative behavior during the agenda-setting stage. From classical perspective in parliamentary research, all three type of actors present, on the one hand, principals which provide incentives for the deputies in order to enforce their interests even though MPs are free in voting (Burden, 2007; Carey, 2007; Baumann *et al.*, 2015). On the other hand, they also present social identities in social psychological terms (Tajfel, 1974; Russell, 2014).

According to the social psychological concept of social identities, social categories and groups influence individual behaviour when they are salient for the issue at stake (Tajfel, 1974). Turner (1991) outlines that individuals undergo a process of depersonalisation, adapting to the positions, values and behaviour of the social groups to which they belong, in order to define their personal identity. Transferring this concept to parliamentary behaviour, Russell (2014) argues that the concept of social identity can be used to explain why parties still exert influence on MPs' behaviour even when the parties' lack or have only diminished capacity to 'whip' or in some way sanction their members. The reason for this enduring party influence is that political parties are social groups which serve as social identities for their members. Therefore, even when deputies are not formally bound to a party line, they might still act in compliance with other party members due to informal pressures and their investment in a shared identity (and its implied shared interests and moral values).

Taking several studies on individual legislative behaviour into account (Cowley, 1998; Saalfeld and Bischof, 2013; Bäck *et al.*, 2014), it can be expected that not only parties function as social identity for MPs when dealing with conscience issues, but also other social categories and groups as long as they are salient for the topic at stake. Morality policies are regularly treated as conscience issues because they provoke strong value conflicts. Following Mooney (2001), when such issues arise, it is likely that primary identities such as the actors' religious faith and gender will shape the positions of decision makers. Therefore, this study expects that besides individual party affiliation (Russell, 2014), religious affiliation and gender will influence the initiative behaviour of individual deputies in conscience issues when party discipline is suspended.

It is important to state that conscience issues do not imply that parties, as strongest principals in the parliamentary arena, lose power and control completely; competitive concerns still matter. In the case of conscience issues, roll call votes are very prominent, allowing MPs to send signals to their parties. Following empirical studies, this implies that parties keep supervising their MPs, while MPs use the exceptional situation to comply with their party leadership (Cowley, 1998; Burden, 2007; Baumann *et al.*, 2015). The same holds for the electorate and religious groups, even though the latter lack broad facilities to provide incentives for MPs (Carey, 2007). In consequence, we argue that parties, religious groups and gender influence deputies' politicisation behaviour. In doing so, they exert influence as principal or social identity.

In general, issue politicisation is not only a way of highlighting policy preferences and initiating preferred policy reforms, it is also a competitive strategy for single MPs. Deputies intentionally select and emphasise topics from which they expect a competitive advance (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Engeli *et al.*, 2012). Single MPs or groups of MPs may increase political attention on issues by putting forward legislative proposals or other parliamentary instruments such as motions and interpellations. Reversely, non-politicisation means that individual MPs or parliamentary groups ignore certain issues because any increase in political attention would risk competitive disadvantages.

Drawing on Engeli *et al.*'s (2012) contribution to the agenda setting of morality policies, we expect that Christian Democrats generally avoid the politicisation of conscience issues, while members of secular parties tend to support initiatives that aim to reform the *status quo*. This is based on Kalyvas and Kersbergen's (2010) argument that religious parties and particularly Christian Democrats survive best in times of secularisation by developing an 'unsecular' profile. In doing so, they are able to gain support from (new) non-religious voters, but also preserve their religious voter base. The strategy thus avoids internal conflicts that could negatively affect the party's prestige. At the same time, however, it becomes rewarding for secular parties to politicise morality issues and pressure religious parties to respond.

For instance, in the 1970s, many secular parties in Western Europe asked for reforms in abortion policy, whereas related religious opponents referred to the topic very seldom or not at all in their electoral programmes. The Social Democrats in Germany mentioned the issue already in 1972, the Liberal Party (FDP) in Austria in 1971 and the Leftist Party (PCE/IU) in Spain in 1979 (Engeli *et al.*, 2012; Preidel, 2016). In Germany, this pattern is particularly evident when focusing on same-sex partnership rights and prostitution policy. During the last decades, the Green Party was a primary agent with regard to the politicisation of these morality issues. Already in the national elections in 1994, the party prioritised first both topics and intended to increase political attention. The

Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), by contrast, ignored the regulation of same-sex partnership rights until 2002 and avoided any positioning on the regulation of voluntary prostitution until very recently (Euchner, 2015).

We expect that this logic also holds at the micro level. Despite the suspension of party discipline, competitive concerns prevail and party leader still control deputies' behaviour regarding conscience issues. Acting as principal, MPs tend to comply with the general and strategic aims of their parliamentary party group. Therefore, we hypothesise:

> *Hypothesis 1a:* In comparison to Christian Democrats, MPs of secular parties engage more intensively in the politicisation of conscience issues in parliament.

Conversely form a social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1974; Russell, 2014), one might also argue that, especially, Christian Democrats engage in the politicisation of conscience issues in parliament. Once formally freed of competitive concerns when party discipline is suspended, MPs can actively formulate policy propositions that no longer have to be in line with the party's fundamental principles. In such situations, individual Christian Democrats do not need to take the views of their secular counterparts into consideration, accordingly they are able to treat morally charged conflicts without party-related tactical consideration (Engeli *et al.*, 2012). These circumstances compel Christian Democrats to cease being relatively passive in morality politics, and to engage actively instead in the policymaking process on issues that touch the very heart of Christian values. Therefore, we propose:

> *Hypothesis 1b:* In comparison to MPs of secular parties, Christian Democrats engage more intensively in the politicisation of conscience issues in parliament.

Besides party affiliation we also expect religious affiliation to matter. Catholic MPs—so our suggestion—have no interest in politicising morality issues in parliament, while Protestant deputies engage actively in the agenda setting of conscience issues. This proposition bases on the following argumentation. Morally charged policies tend to provoke steps towards more permissive reforms (Knill *et al.*, 2015) and thus, stand often much more in conflict to the Catholic than the Protestant doctrine. This follows from the fact that in contrast to the Catholic Church, Protestantism fails from having a hierarchical and authoritarian structure and does not hold the magisterium in matters of faith and, hence, morals. Rather, it is characterised by a decentralised institutional design and ethical pluralism (Fink, 2009). In consequence, Protestant MPs do not hold a common value system in morality questions that guides them (cf. Preidel, 2016). They prefer to enhance individual freedom and autonomous decision-making when it comes to questions of what is 'right' or 'wrong' and thus politicise conscience

issues within parliament. In this way, they differ from deputies affiliated with the Catholic Church. We expect that Catholic MPs tend, in correspondence to the traditional church's creeds, to avoid politicising morality issues as political debates end in more permissive policy outputs most of the time. In accordance to that, we hypothesise:

> *Hypothesis 2:* In comparison to Catholics, Protestant MPs engage more intensively in the politicisation of conscience issues in parliament.

Finally, we argue that gender—conceived both broadly (e.g., as organised interests) as well as narrowly (e.g., the representation of women in the political arena) (Bäck *et al.*, 2014; Baumann *et al.*, 2015)—appears to be relevant for politicisation intensity, as well. Gender serves as an important primary identity influencing one's value system and, thus, the search for common allies (Mooney, 2001). This phenomenon seems particularly reasonable when speaking about morality issues such as abortion, artificial reproduction or stem cell research (Tatalovich and Daynes, 1998; Baumann *et al.*, 2015), all of which are closely related to women's rights and their freedom to organise their private lives. Single studies focusing on parliamentary speeches detect considerable differences between female and male MPs at the agenda-setting stage (Celis, 2006; Bäck *et al.*, 2014). In consequence, we expect:

> *Hypothesis 3:* If a MP is female, she engages more intensively in the politicisation of conscience issues in parliament.

In line with the social identity concept, we expect that the effect of every social group varies across conscience issues (Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1991). Here, the policy-specific issue salience is the key factor. As Tajfel (1974) argues, the decisiveness of a social category or group varies with the context. The policy issue at stake must be associated to a strong extent with similarities within the social group and with intergroup differences, respectively. This is the case when the issue touches the key values of the group's belief system and disposes consequently of a certain salience and group attention. Therefore, we suggest that a social group's issue salience moderates the extent to which an MP identifies with the group and behaves in line with other group members when the issue is high on the political agenda.

> *Hypothesis 4:* The more attention a group pays for the issue at stake, the larger the social groups' effect on the politicisation behaviour.

3. Research design

In order to test the theoretical hypotheses elaborated in Section 2, the study takes a closer look at the German Bundestag and investigates the individual

politicisation behaviour of German MPs on conscience issues during the 16th legislative term. It draws on the comprehensive dataset BioVote (Preidel, 2016). The case selection requires precise justification. The German Bundestag is not the only parliament that suspends party discipline in relation to ethical questions; there are many other examples (e.g., the Netherlands, Switzerland and Denmark, as well as Westminster democracies) (Plumb, 2015; Preidel, 2016). The theoretical hypotheses of the study require that we analyse a parliament that includes secular as well as strong Christian Democratic parties. The German Bundestag meets this criterion, but so too do the Dutch and Swiss national parliaments. However, in contrast to these countries, the German case allows us to further distinguish between Catholics and Protestants—denominations that differ in their positions on conscience issues and thus constitute two different social identities which cannot be subsumed under one frame of Christianity (Fink, 2009). In comparison to Switzerland or the Netherlands, which are also characterised by a mixed-Christian society, both confessions are represented to a similar extent of around 30% in the German Bundestag.

Germany also offers an ideal case with regard to our third variable of interest—gender. With women representing 32% of German MPs, the German Bundestag lies much closer to the Western European average of female representation (about 26%) than the Netherlands, where about 40% of all deputies are female (IPU, 2014). Switzerland also comes close to the European average in terms of female representation, but the Swiss political system has many particularities given its different institutional venues and consensual tradition. This limits the ability to generalise from any study looking at parliamentary affairs in Switzerland where the existence of a parliamentary opposition is debated. A last advance is that the German Bundestag offers broad data availability with regard to the social identities of the MPs. While all parliaments provide information on the gender of their members, information regarding MPs' religious affiliation is rare.

Regarding the time period, we focus on the 16th legislative term (2005–09) as this was the period with the highest number of conscience issues arising on the parliamentarian agenda in the last two decades. In the earlier and later legislative terms, two topics at most were framed as ethical questions. In the 16th legislative period, however, party discipline was suspended for decisions relations to three issues: regulation of embryonic stem cell research, late-term abortion and advanced directives for passive euthanasia. All three policy topics have in common that their regulation built on a restrictive *status quo* at that point in time.[1] On

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[1] Regarding abortion policy, paragraph 218ff. of the German Penal Code generally banned and sanctioned abortion. It was only admitted to abort during the first three months. In the debate of the 16th legislative period, deputies discussed the issue of late-term abortions (abortions after the 23rd week)

top, this recent legislative term can uncover best the response strategy of Christian Democratic MPs to the steadily increasing number of morality issues on the parliamentary agenda in modern times.

We investigate the influence of social identities on the rate of individual initiative support by means of regression analysis. Table 1 subsumes the key variables for the regression analysis. The main dependent variable constitutes a count variable. It covers the number of initiatives that a MP co-sponsored with regard to the three conscience issues discussed in the 16th legislative term. The variable subsumes exclusively those MPs who were members of the German Bundestag during all three debates in order to maintain comparability. In total, we consider 604 deputies and at maximum four initiatives across all issues. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the dependent variable. It shows that most of the MPs, about 250, supported two initiatives across the three morally charged issues. About 100 deputies co-sponsored one proposal per policy debate, while only 73 deputies remained passive in all three debates. For testing issue-specific effects, we build three additional dependent variables with a binary structure. Each measures whether an individual MP co-sponsored at least one initiative with respect to the considered policy issues.

The biographical data of the MPs published on the homepage of the German Bundestag serves as data source for the three independent variables. The first variable 'party affiliation' is gathered by a categorical variable differentiating between 'Christian Democrat', 'Social Democrat', 'Liberal', 'Green' and 'Left'. Thereby, five parliamentary groups of the German Bundestag are considered: The group of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU) and the Christlich Soziale Union (CSU), the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP), the Bündnis90/Die Grünen, and Die Linke. The second independent variable is the 'religious denomination' of MPs, measured as Catholic, Protestant, unaffiliated or making no statement on the religious affiliation. If we would not consider the last category 'affiliation not specified', a third of German MPs will be excluded from the statistical analysis.

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which was only allowed due to a medical indication. Comparable to abortion policy, the German Penal Code prohibited active and passive euthanasia. The latter issue was debated during the 16th legislative period. German MPs discussed whether passive euthanasia (the ending of life-prolonging medical treatment) should be allowed when a written or oral living will of a patient exists. Finally, German stem cell policy was regulated almost equally restrictive as the other two issues. The '*Embryonenschutzgesetz*' of 1990 prohibited any research with embryonic stem cells. In 2002, the government permitted the research with imported stem cells produced before 1 January 2002. However, at the time of parliamentary debate, no cells were offered on the market anymore. Therefore, the research on embryonic stem cell was impossible at that time. The parliamentary debate addressed this restrictive *status quo* and MPs put forward initiatives which targeted to remain the restrictive regulation, a new cut-off date or a full permission (Knill *et al.*, 2015).

Table 1 Key variables

|		n	Modus	Min	Max
Initiative rate	Interval scaled	Total: 608	2	0	4
Initiative in embryonic stem cell policy	0 none	Total: 617	1	0	1
	1 at least one				
Initiative in abortion policy	0 none	Total: 614	1	0	1
	1 at least one				
Initiative in euthanasia policy	0 none	Total: 619	1	0	1
	1 at least one				
Party affiliation	1 Christian Democrat	236	1	1	5
	2 Social Democrat	64			
	3 Liberal	228			
	4 Green	56			
	5 Left	56			
		Total: 640			
Religious denomination	0 Unaffiliated	25	2	0	3
	1 Catholic	192			
	2 Protestant	218			
	3 No statement	203			
		Total: 638			
Female	0 Male	443	0	0	1
	1 Female	198			
		Total: 641			

Data Source: BioVote.
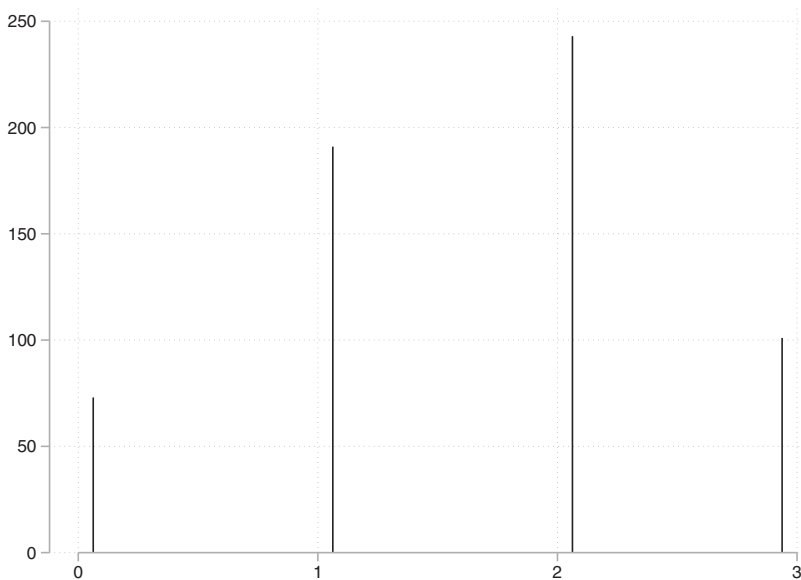
Figure 1. Distribution of MP's individual engagement in cosponsoring bills on conscience issues, German Bundestag (2005–09). *Data source*: BioVote.

Moreover, in line with Tajfel (1974), we assume that these MPs intentionally not state their denominational status in order to distance themselves from one of the Christian Churches and to underline their non-Christian identity. The third dichotomous variable, 'gender' differentiates between female and male deputies.

The moderating factor of issue salience is gathered by a document analysis. For capturing the issue salience across parliamentary party groups, one option would be to investigate the party manifestos of the 16th legislative period (Engeli *et al.*, 2012). However, we rely on the parliamentary questions of parliamentary party groups and its single members during the 16th legislative period. While party manifestos stick to the issue attention on party level inside and outside the parliament, parliamentary questions consider the individual level within the parliament. This consideration of the individual level is necessary in the context of analysing conscience issues. Being characterized by intra-party conflicts, conscience issues are generally ignored in party manifestos. Nevertheless, they are discussed to different extents within the parliamentary party groups (Knill *et al.*, 2015). Following the literature on agenda setting (Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011), issue attention at this level is best captured by parliamentary questions. They are free of intra-party collaboration and decision proceedings which already apply for the formulation of policy initiatives (Rozenberg and Martin, 2011). Due to this different setting compared to the behaviour of co-sponsorship, a problem of endogeneity between the dependent variable and our indicator for issue salience can be excluded.

In detail, we gather the number of proposed questions between 2005 and 2009 on the three policy issues. The website of the German Bundestag serves as data source. In order to measure the issue salience across religious denominations and women, we conduct a media analysis, drawing on the publications of the nationwide German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung between the years 2005 and 2009. Thereby, we follow previous studies which prove that the selected newspaper guarantees a broad coverage of interest groups' activities independently of their political ideology and positions (Euchner, 2015). In detail, we capture the relative number of articles on the three policy issues, in which the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church in Germany and the women's movement are named in connection to the three issues at stake. Concerning the women's movement, we focus on the organisation Terre de Femmes and the most popular German feminist, Alice Schwarzer.[2]

Investigating the influence of Christian Democratic Party affiliation in the German case requires to also taking into account that the Christian Democratic group in the German Bundestag consists of two parties, the CDU and the Bavarian CSU. In line with previous studies, we control whether MPs of the CDU

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[2]The description of the variable follows in the empirical section.

differ significantly from deputies of the CSU. In addition, we control on the individual level for the MP's age (younger than 46 years, 46–60 years old, older than 60 years), education (academic or not), place of residence (East or West Germany), the type of mandate (list or direct mandate) and the number of relevant committee assignments. For the chosen conscience issues, three committees were relevant: the family, the elderly, women and youth committee, the justice committee, and the education, science and technology committee. The assignments are merged into a count variable. The more assignments a MP has to one of the relevant committees, the more he/she politicizes one of the conscience issues. In accordance to previous empirical studies (Cowley, 1998; Plumb, 2015; Baumann *et al.*, 2015; Preidel, 2016), it can be expected that all of these mentioned factors correlate with the legislative behaviour in morality policies as well as with the explanatory determinants.

As the main dependent variable is a count variable, which follows a Poisson distribution, the data are modelled by Poisson regression models. A likelihood-ratio test, comparing the modelling of the data through Poisson regression or negative binominal regression, reveals that the distribution is not characterised by overdispersion.[3] Three main models are estimated. Model I includes the main explanatory factors: MP's religious denominations, gender and party affiliation. Model II controls for MP's age, education, residence, committee assignments and mandate type, while Model III checks additionally for the CSU effect.

In a second step, we check whether the results are driven by one of the three conscience issues by estimating separated binary logistic regression models for each policy (Model IV-VI). This regression analysis is complemented by a descriptive analysis of the issue salience across groups.

4. Empirical analysis

Table 2 gives a detailed overview of the results of the estimated Poisson regression models. Generally, we find evidence that the party affiliation still matters for MPs' politicisation behaviour on conscience issues. Despite the freedom afforded to MPs once party discipline is suspended, common values and interests within the Christian Democratic parliamentary party group seem to increase the intensity of politicising conscience issues (cf. Russell, 2014), besides religious identity. Thereby, classical principal–agent mechanisms and competitive concerns do not motivate MPs behaviour, but their identification with the key values of their party. The results thus contradict Hypothesis 1a that Christian Democrats politicise conscience issues less intensively than members of secular parties. Instead,

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[3]Additional goodness-of-fit test statistics reveal that the *Poisson* model form best fits the distribution of the dependent variable.

Table 2 Individual politicisation of German MPs on conscience issues, 2005–09

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IIIa
Party affiliation[a]				
Social Democrats	−0.384**	−0.381**	−0.362**	−0.369**
	[0.681]	[0.683]	[0.696]	[0.692]
	(0.086)	(0.087)	(0.092)	(0.090)
Liberals	0.083	0.117	0.209	0.204
	[1.086]	[1.124]	[1.232]	[1.226]
	(0.106)	(0.117)	(0.120)	(0.119)
Greens	−0.649**	−0.616**	−0.542**	−0.547**
	[0.522]	[0.540]	[0.581]	[0.579]
	(0.162)	(0.168)	(0.175)	(0.175)
The Left	−0.616**	−0.591**	−0.511**	−0.510**
	[0.540]	[0.554]	[0.600]	[0.601]
	(0.164)	(0.170)	(0.171)	(0.171)
Christian Social Union			−0.198	−0.191
			[0.821]	[0.825]
			(0.103)	(0.103)
Religious denomination[b]				
Affiliation not specified	−0.145	−0.146	−0.216*	
	[0.865]	[0.865]	[0.805]	
	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.101)	
Protestant	0.008	0.010	−0.031	
	[1.008]	[1.010]	[0.970]	
	(0.078)	(0.080)	(0.080)	
Unaffiliated	−0.085	−0.064	−0.143	
	[0.919]	[0.938]	[0.867]	
	(0.201)	(0.207)	(0.204)	
Christian identity				0.1897*
				[1.209]
				(0.086)
Female	0.132	0.123	0.118	0.118
	[1.141]	[1.131]	[1.126]	[1.125]
	(0.070)	(0.073)	(0.072)	(0.072)
Age[c]				
46–60 years		0.036	0.026	0.026
		(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.078)
>60 years		−0.006	−0.011	−0.012
		(0.099)	(0.099)	(0.099)
Academic education		0.001	−0.009	−0.011
		(0.087)	(0.087)	(0.087)
East German		−0.006	−0.013	−0.013
		(0.090)	(0.090)	(0.088)
Direct mandate		0.050	0.112	0.114
		(0.077)	(0.077)	(0.077)

Table 2 Continued

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IIIa
Number of committee assignments		0.077	0.077	0.075
		(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Constant	0.545	0.616	0.625	0.423
	(0.102)	(0.126)	(0.130)	(0.148)
Log-likelihood	−821.879	−820.620	−822.401	−822.557
n	604	604	604	604

Notes: Non-standardised coefficients estimated by Poisson regression of the count of supported initiatives by the individual MPs in conscience issues. Incident ratio rate of the key variables in squared brackets [x]. Standard errors in parentheses. a) Reference category: model I + II 'Christian Democrats' (CDU/CSU), model III 'Member of the Christian Democratic Union' (CDU), b) Reference category: 'Catholic', c) Reference category: '<46 years'. Two-sided significance test: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. *Data Source:* BioVote.

the data confirms the reverse relationship formulated in Hypothesis 1b. In comparison to MPs of secular parties, Christian Democrats tend to engage more intensively in the politicisation of conscience issues. MPs affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, the Greens, and the Left co-sponsored policy proposals in debates on conscience issues less frequently than did Christian Democrats. Furthermore, this effect is highly significant ($p < 0.01$). The coefficients of the Poisson regression are non-standardised estimates, the size of which cannot directly be interpreted. Therefore, incident-rate ratios are calculated which report the strength of the effect size while all other effects are held constant. The standardisation shows that, *ceteris paribus*, the engagement rate of Social Democrats is about 30% lower than that of Christian Democrats; the rate for Green and Left deputies is even smaller, at about 40% (see squared brackets in Table 2). As model III shows, this effect holds for Christian Democrats who are affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union, as well as for the deputies of the Bavarian Christian Social Union. The members of this regional party do not differ significantly in their politicisation behavior from their colleagues of the same party family.

In a next step, we check whether the positive effect of being Christian Democrat varies across the three policy issues. Table 3 displays the results of the binary logistic regression analyses. Each time the dependent variable measures whether the individual MP co-sponsors at least one initiative in the policy field or none. The results show that most of the evidence for Hypothesis 1b is produced by the fields of stem cell policy and abortion policy. In euthanasia policy, by contrast, the estimates support Hypothesis 1a. Is this variance affected by the attention which a party group draws on the issue at stake, as Hypothesis 4 expects? Table 4 displays the total number of questions proposed by each party group. We

Table 3 Individual politicisation of German MPs on distinct conscience issues, 2005–09

	Model IV Stem cell policy	Model V Abortion policy	Model VI Euthanasia policy
Party affiliation[a]			
Social Democrats	−0.175	−3.900**	0.302
	(0.244)	(0.415)	(0.242)
Liberals	1.096*	−0.536	0.966**
	(0.427)	(0.503)	(0.370)
Greens	−2.422**	−3.073**	0.974*
	(0.510)	(0.557)	(0.412)
The Left	−1.163**	−19.016**	0.929*
	(0.404)	(0.583)	(0.403)
Christian Social Union	−0.745**	−2.435**	0.705*
	(0.280)	(0.415)	(0.288)
Religious denomination[b]			
Affiliation not specified	−0.043	−2.101	−0.170*
	(0.267)	(0.374)	(0.262)
Protestant	0.211	−0.922**	0.004
	(0.228)	(0.316)	(0.225)
Unaffiliated	0.007	−0.257**	−0.538
	(0.505)	(0.729)	(0.481)
Female	0.201	0.218	0.581**
	(0.199)	(0.288)	(0.198)
Age[c]			
46–60 years	−0.095	−0.142	0.363
	(0.215)	(0.298)	(0.206)
>60 years	−0.003	−0.556	0.194
	(0.263)	(0.356)	(0.255)
Academic education	−0.220	0.062	0.015
	(0.232)	(0.282)	(0.230)
East German	0.160	−0.125	−0.272
	(0.242)	(0.361)	(0.230)
Direct mandate	−0.150	1.222**	0.288
	(0.203)	(0.338)	(0.203)
Assignment to family, elderly, women and youth committee		0.449	
		(0.357)	
Assignment to education, research and technology committee	1.053**		
	(0.315)		
Assignment to judicial committee			0.672*
			(0.323)
Constant	0.519	0.459	−0.494
	(0.353)	(0.154)	(0.339)
Log-likelihood	−380.748	−223.760	−394.766
n	611	610	613

Notes: Non-standardised coefficients estimated by binary logistic regression. Standard errors in parentheses. In the case of abortion policy, the robust standard errors are displayed aReference category: 'Christian Democratic Union (CDU)', bReference category: 'Catholic', cReference category: '<46 years'. Two-sided significance test: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. *Data Source:* BioVote.

Table 4 Issue attention in parliament by questions

Parliamentary party group	Embryonic stem cell research	Abortion	Euthanasia
Christian Democrats	2	2	0
Social Democrats	0	0	0
Liberals	0	0	2
Greens	2	1	1
The Left	0	2	1

Note: The table displays whether the parliamentary party group or a member proposes questions on the issue at stake in the German Bundestag during the 16th legislative period (2005–09). *Data Source:* German Bundestag.

observe a clear pattern. While in euthanasia policy, no Christian Democrat draws attention to the issue by proposing questions, they are more active in abortion policy and regarding the regulation of embryonic stem cell research. Hence, we find evidence for Hypothesis 4 that issue salience mitigates the effect of social groups.

However, as expected, party affiliation is not the only factor that determines the politicisation behaviour of MPs on conscience issues. Indeed, looking at religious denomination, we find no evidence for Hypothesis 2. In contrast to the theoretical expectation, we discover that Protestant deputies do not politicise morality issues significantly more often than Catholics. However, the estimates of Model III show that Catholics and Protestants in common are more active than parliamentarians who make no statement on their religious affiliation. The engagement rate for these MPs is, *ceteris paribus*, 20% lower than that of Catholics and 17% lower than the one for Protestants as an additional control estimation shows. These findings point to a divide between Christians and non-Christians, contrary to the suggested denominational divide. As stated above, in accordance to Tajfel (1974) it can be assumed that the MPs who intentionally avoid any specification of their religious affiliation do not identify with any religious group. Together with denominational MPs they build a common group of non-Christians.[4] In consequence, Christian identity matters and increases the politicisation of conscience issues. This unexpected result might be related to the fact that, on conscience issues, Catholics tend to propose initiatives demanding more restrictive policy steps (Baumann *et al.*, 2015). Once party discipline has been

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[4]An extra control model (Model IIIa) displayed in Table 2 underlines this finding. Here, Model III is estimated a second time, using a dummy variable of stating Christian identity not instead of the fine-grained variable of religious denomination with four categories. The empirical results show that Christian MPs are significantly more engaged in politicising conscience issues than non-Christians. The affiliation to one of the Christian Churches increases the engagement rate by 21%.

suspended, some Catholic deputies might seize the opportunity to defend their values and the positions of their Catholic electorate, thus reducing the difference in the engagement rate to Protestant MPs.

Turning to the binary regression analyses in Table 3, we see that the effect of being Christian is not consistent across all policy fields under study. In the cases of euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research, we see the divide between active Christians and passive non-Christians, while in abortion policy the picture turns. Here, we observe that Catholics are more engaged in politicising the issue. They do so not only in comparison to Protestants, but also in comparison to the MPs which give no statement on their denomination and those who are unaffiliated. This raises the question of whether the issue attention on the group level accounts for the cross-policy variance as proposed in Hypothesis 4.

Table 5 displays the results of a media analysis on the relative salience of each policy issues for the Christian Churches. It shows that the Catholic Church is in general more often mentioned in the newspaper articles on morality issues than the Protestant Church. This implies that the Catholic Church draws overall more attention to these topics and shows a stronger political involvement. Major differences come up in the field of abortion policy. Here, the Catholic Church is named in about 8% of all newspaper articles, while the Protestant Church is only mentioned in 1%. This finding goes in line with the empirical results of the binary logistic regression analyses that point to a divide between active Catholics and passive non-Catholics in abortion policy, in contrast to the prevailing divide of active Christians and passive non-Christians concerning the regulation of euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research. These patterns underline the relevance of issue salience for the influence of social groups on the MPs' initiative behavior, as Hypothesis 4 argues.

Turning, finally, to the effect of gender, we do not find broad evidence for hypothesis 3—female MPs are not clearly more engaged in politicising conscience issues. In comparison to men, they co-sponsor conscience issue-related proposals, *ceteris paribus*, at a 13% higher rate than male MPs. However, thereby their behaviour does not differ highly significantly from male agenda-setting activity. The significance level is at 0.10. Taking a detailed look at the co-sponsorship for each policy issue separately, it turns out that this result is mainly driven by euthanasia policy. In line with Hypothesis 4, we would expect that this cross-policy variance is accounted by a higher salience of euthanasia for women. However, the media analysis whose results are displayed in Table 5 shows that end-of-life decisions do not seem to be a gender issue.

This result aligns with the mixed findings of other studies (Bäck *et al.*, 2014; Baumann *et al.*, 2015). Particularly with regard to policy outputs, it is questioned whether there is a direct relationship between female representation and the adoption of women-friendly policies. It is difficult to detect a uniform interest among

Table 5 Issue attention across social groups

Social group	Embryonic stem cell research (%)	Abortion (%)	Euthanasia (%)
Catholic Church	4.76	7.53	3.27
Protestant Church	0.00	0.91	0.97
Women's movement	0.00	1.30	0.00

Note: The table displays the results of the media analysis. The percentages in the tables indicate the relative number of articles which were published in the Süddeutsche Zeitung between 2005 and 2009 and which mention the policy issue in connection to each social group. The base for calculating the relative number is always the total number of articles published on the policy issue during the 15 whole time period. *Data Source*: Süddeutsche Zeitung.

all female members. Instead, it is argued that women's representation only influences output decisions indirectly by shaping policy framing (Meier, 2008).

5. Conclusion

By investigating the individual co-sponsoring of policy proposals on conscience issues in the 16th legislative period of the German Bundestag (2005–09), we find that, even when party discipline is suspended, party identification still matters for deputies' engagement in issue politicisation. Deputies affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party tend to politicise conscience issues more frequently than their secular counterparts. However therefore, the competitive, respectively, principal–agent logics seem not to matter. Instead, the influence of party groups works via a social identity mechanism (supporting Hypothesis 1b). Similarly, MPs' engagement in such politicisation is also influenced by another social identity, namely, the affiliation with a Christian Church. Thereby, it is decisive for the party as well as the religious effect that the issue at stake is salient for the social group.

At first glance, one could argue that these findings contradict a popular argument regarding the 'Christian-Democratic Phoenix' in modern times, namely, that Christian-Democrats adopt an 'unsecular approach' and avoid issues related to religion (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010; Engeli *et al.*, 2012). However, this would be an overly far-reaching interpretation of our results. What we observe is that Christian Democratic MPs are more engaged than members of secular parties in the agenda setting of morality issues when party discipline is abandoned. The circumstances afforded by conscience issues enable Christian Democrats to set their usual tactical strategy of 'non-politicisation' aside and engage actively in policymaking of issues that touch the very heart of Christian values.

This significantly increased engagement of Christian Democrats should not be misinterpreted as a sign of enhanced party unity since the engagement rate and not any definite position presents the dependent variable in the empirical study.

Indeed, German Christian Democratic parties are characterised by high intra-party heterogeneity in morality policies, not only due to their originally heterogeneous party base (Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen, 2010), but also as a result of the alignments in their party profile over recent last decades. The results suggest that in those instances when party discipline is suspended intra-party conflict might be transmitted to the parliamentary arena and cause increased engagement rates, as Christian Democrats support a diverse spectrum of initiatives ranging from restrictive to more permissive proposals (Baumann *et al.*, 2015; Preidel, 2016).

In addition to contributing to the scientific discussion on Christian Democracy in modern times, the present article brings a new perspective into the literature on parliamentary agenda setting. While more recent contributions in the agenda-setting research depart from a focus on the macro-level (political agenda) by analysing the meso-level via political parties' agendas (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2011), the micro-level and, thus, the agenda of the individual MPs remain widely disregarded (but see the work of Brouard *et al.*, 2013 as well as the studies of Oldmixon, 2005 and Tatalovich, 1997 for the US context). However, as we show with our study, the analysis of the motives and incentives of single MPs to politicise (or not politicise) an issue is essential for understanding the process of agenda setting and addresses an important research gap. It highlights that MPs do not only react to exogenous pressures, party strategic concerns, or electoral considerations by cosponsoring bills, especially in the context of conscience issues, their behaviour is also driven by their personal policy aims and social identities.

Besides these important contributions, the study offers new avenues for future research. One interesting question is of whether considerations of electoral competition underlie individuals' behaviour? Might Christian Democrats use the freedom of suspended party discipline to send signals to their multifaceted electorate regarding morally charged questions? Or is it primarily their social identity that shapes their politicisation behaviour vis-à-vis conscience issues? We need more studies that analyse this interplay between MPs and their electorate in relation to conscience issues. Qualitative interviews with MPs would be the most appropriate research method.

Furthermore, the German Bundestag is one, very specific setting, characterized by strong party discipline and coordination among parties within the parliamentary arena. Law proposals require, for instance, the support of at least 30 MPs before they can be presented in parliament. Individual deputies are not able to table law proposals like, for instance, deputies in the UK (e.g. Private Members' Bill). Therefore, the analysis of legislative co-sponsoring in the German parliament offers a very hard test of the underlying determinants. Only when party coordination does not work out anymore and conflicts within parties are extremely strong, individual co-sponsorship across party lines is an option. Despite this

promising characteristic of German parliamentary affairs, it would be interesting to reinvestigate the present hypotheses in other countries with strong Christian Democratic parties and similar practices of suspending party discipline (e.g. the Netherlands). Another promising analytical direction would be to shift the focus to the actual framing and policy positions of individuals. This would provide a more detailed picture of the extent and form of Christian Democrats' 'unsecular strategies' in relation to conscience issues.

Funding

Acknowledgements

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