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CLASS, RELIGION AND SOCIALIST PARTIES: THE UNPREDICTED EFFECT OF (A)RELIGIOUS VOTING

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Abstract

In recent years, academic literature has stressed the declining importance of social class and religion as determinants of vote. In particular, many scholars have found that the working-class vote is no longer mostly addressed to socialist parties, whereas religious people still massively support confessional and conservative parties. This article explores the actual resilience of the two cleavages with particular attention to the relationship between religion and socialist parties. Our analysis, based on European Social Survey (ESS) data covering 13 West European countries in the period 2002–2014, proves that ‘a-religiosity’– negative attitudes towards religion – has overcome social class as the determinant of a socialist vote, thanks to the emergence of a divisive ethical–moral agenda. This process is more visible in those countries where the Church and religious associations play an active role in the political arena and the ethical–moral issues have been politicized, as in Catholic and multi-faith countries.

Keywords

Cleavages, class, socialists, religion, ethical–moral issues

Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century the traditional cleavages, as stated in Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) seminal essay, and then restated by Rokkan (1970), seem to have lost much of their relevance (Van der Eijk and Franklin 2009). Starting from Inglehart's (1977) materialist/post-materialist distinction, many authors discussed the process of dealignment (Dalton and Weldon 2007) and the hypothetical emergence of new cleavages to supplant or integrate the Rokkanian ones (Bornschieer 2010; Kriesi et al. 2012).

The decline of traditional cleavages and the search for new ones – accounting for the differences and nuances of the different authors – has been connected with the societal changes that occurred in the last decades of the 20th century. These changes have been defined as post-industrialism (Bell 1973; Touraine 1969), secularization (Dobbelaere 1981), and liquidity (Bauman 2000). Indeed, all these phenomena are summarized by the process of individualization which 'has become the social structure of the modern society' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xiii).

Much work has been devoted to analysing the eventual resilience of class and religion cleavages (Franklin 2010; Evans and De Graaf 2013) and their relationship with their respective parties - socialists¹ and confessionals² - in terms of voting choice.

Until the 1970s, in line with the celebrated Lipset and Rokkan (1967) freezing hypothesis, the importance of class and religion for electoral behaviour found an (initial) empirical confirmation (Rose and Urwin 1969; Rose 1974). As far as class is concerned, in the following years it was highlighted that class was no longer the powerful driver for voting for socialist parties it used to be in the past (Franklin et al., 1992). This interpretation received a large consensus in the 1990s (see Nieuwbeerta 1995) but some recent re- search has questioned the final 'death' of class. (Evans and Carl 2017; Evans and De Graaf 2013; Evans and Northmore-Ball 2017; Houtman 2003; Jansen et al., 2013; Rennwald 2020).

On the religious side, beyond some country-specific studies (see, in particular, Michelat and Simon 1977 on France) which emphasised the importance of religion for the voting choice, only in recent times has religion returned with a vengeance in comparative analyses of electoral behaviour. The vast majority of the present literature concurs in assessing still a prominent role to religion for voting choice (see Oskarson 2005: 96, 103; Cordero 2017: 90; Elff 2007: 289, 279; Inglehart and Norris 2004: 201; Knutsen 2004, 2017). Moreover, the relationship between the religious constituency and confessional parties seems to hold, despite the secularization process (Broughton and ten Napel 2000; Duncan 2006, 2015; Minkenberg 2010; Raymond 2011; Van der Brug et al. 2009; Van Kersbergen

2008).

Apparently, class and religion continue to inspire and drive the voting choice of a large part of the electorates. This persistence, which does not imply a resilience of these cleavages as they lack one or two of the dimensions stated by Bartolini and Mair (2010: 251–252) and later by Bartolini (2011),³ has led some scholars to introduce the terms of class and religious voting.

Evans (2000: 401) has provided the most synthetic interpretation of this point arguing that ‘the idea of class voting (...) refers to the tendency for voters in a particular class to vote for a specific party (...). In other words, class voting describes a pattern of association between class and vote’. If one substitutes the term class with religion, for the same rationale we have religious voting.

The present analysis follows this approach and addresses two sets of questions. First, we intend to measure, using recent comparative data, whether blue-collar and religious people still represent the bulk of their respective parties, namely, socialists and confessionals; and which constituency (blue-collar or religious people) votes more for its respective party (socialists or confessionals). Second, we focus on the socialist side and inquire whether, in spite of a (more or less general) decline in class voting, these parties managed to retain their share of the vote (until the first decade of the 2000s) thanks to a previously unaccounted hypothesis: their *negative* relationship with religion, namely, ‘*a-religiosity*’. More specifically, we wonder whether religion has become a more powerful driver of mobilization than class for socialist voters; whether this effect is similar in countries with a different religious profile, or if inherited religious traditions still matter; and finally, whether the resilience of class voting has depressed the effect of religion.

The hypothesis that religion has acted as a strong voting driver for socialist parties is not due to an increasing adhesion of socialist voters to any religion. Rather, religion has acted as a new mobilizing factor for socialist voters, with an *a contrario* logic: the secular and permissive attitudes expressed by socialist parties on a series of ethical–moral issues since the end of the 1990s (Dobbelaere and Pe´rez- Agote 2015; Engeli et al. 2013; Euchner 2019; Rennwald 2020; Studlar and Burns 2015) which has placed them in confrontation with confessional parties and religious associations. This cultural divide (opposition to religious prescriptions on a series of liberalizing issues) might have provided socialist parties with more appeal than traditional class-related issues. Such dynamics should have enabled socialist parties either to keep part of their old constituency as it had traditionally been secular, and to attract other social components, urbanized and educated, more in tune with new political issues (Kriesi et al. 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rennwald 2020; see also Engeli et al. 2012a; Fink 2008; Ribberink et al. 2015).

Indeed, Anthony Giddens, herald of the Third Way, introducing the concept of ‘life politics’ (1994: 209–231) as an avenue for the evolution of social-democracy, stated that, in late modernity, decisions affecting self-identity would take precedence in individual choice-making (1994: 81 ff). Moral–ethical issues, such as assisted reproduction technology (ART) and stem-cell research, same-sex marriage and LGBT rights, end of life and euthanasia, fit this schema perfectly. They entered the political forum at the turn of the century and have occupied increasing room in the public sphere (Engeli et al 2012a, 2013; Fink 2008; Knill et al. 2014, 2015). The socialist parties, given their secular tradition, were the natural sponsors⁴ of such change even if they did not advance these issues vocally, and rather avoided a sharp, open confrontation (Engeli et al. 2012b: 16).

Hypotheses, data, and variables

The present work tests three hypotheses. First, we wonder whether class and religion still matter for the vote of the respective parties, and which is more important. The hypothesis states that *West European voters’ decisions are shaped more by religion than by class (Hypothesis 1)*.

Second, we assume that the weakening of social class affecting socialist parties has been counteracted by a growing importance of religion, although in negative terms (a-religiosity), that is, in opposition to religious views and the intervention of Church(es) in the public sphere. In this new conflictual scenario, where religion has increased its salience also for socialist voters, the hypothesis states that *a-religiosity overcomes social class as explanation of the electoral preference for socialist parties (Hypothesis 2)*.

Third, we assume that the impact of a-religiosity changes according to the religious and class profile of the country. The hypothesis states that *a-religiosity is stronger in those countries where social class matters less and where the polarization on ethical–moral issues is more acute (Hypothesis 3)*.

The present analysis is structured around two independent variables – class and religion – and a dependent variable – voting choice. The dependent variable is provided by the voters for the political parties which are the ‘natural’ recipients of the blue-collar and of the religious constituencies, namely, socialist and confessional parties (see notes 1 and 2, and the Online Appendix for the party list). These voters correspond to 69.2% of the total number of the valid answer. The presence of third parties, including populists, is negligible and it has increased only after the 2014 ESS round; as our time span is 2002–2014, it does not affect our analysis.

Regarding the first independent variable – social class – we take into consideration two different

categorizations. The first one follows the well-established scheme introduced by Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero (hereafter EGP) (Erikson et al. 1979), and the second one the most recent proposal by Oesch (2006, 2013). From the two schemes, we have selected a similar set of blue-collar workers, namely, skilled and unskilled workers (EGP scheme), and production workers and service workers (Oesch scheme).

Regarding the second independent variable – religion – the voters' relationship with this dimension is disentangled following the standard conceptualization of religiosity introduced by Davie (1994): belonging (which religious denomination one feels part of), believing (how religious one feels oneself to be), and behaviour (how often one practises religious rites). In the present work, religious belonging is dichotomized as 'do not belong'/'belong' to any religion; the intensity of self-declared religion (believing) is coded on a scale 0–10 (no belief–strong belief); and the frequency of church attendance (behaviour) is coded 1–7 (never–every day). A synthetic index of religiosity is built on the basis of the three dimensions, resulting in the categories of low, medium and high religiosity.

Data are derived from the European Social Survey (ESS) datasets and cover the whole period from 2002 to 2014 (rounds 1–7). Countries selected for the analysis ($n=13$) are those in which data are available for the entire period:⁵ Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. The most recent waves conducted in 2016 and 2018 are not included because of the variation in the countries surveyed.

Class and religious voting: A different degree of decline

This section offers an insight into the question of the decline versus persistence of both class and religious voting. The tables and graphs below shed light, at a descriptive level, on a number of questions raised in the previous section: Are social class and religion still strongly related to the vote for the respective parties? Is there a clear trend over time? Which of the two factors – class or religion – influences the respective electorate to a greater degree?

The first step in the analysis provides the evolution of class and religious voting in the period 2002–2014 (Figure 1). Regarding class, both measurements (EGP and Oesch schemes) present the same pattern: blue-collars still vote socialist parties to a high degree, but with a declining trend. Following the EGP scheme, the percentage of manual workers among socialist voters oscillates around one-third, with a maximum in 2002 (35.3%) and a slightly lower level at the end of the period, 2012 and 2014 (30.0%). When social class is calculated using the Oesch scheme, the incidence of production workers and service workers – the two categories of blue-collars – is higher compared to the EGP

scheme, 12 points more in 2002; however, the decline is steeper, from 47.8% (2002) to 35.6% (2014) (Figure 1). Both measures indicate that blue-collar workers are still concentrated among the socialist voters more than in the whole population, even though this overrepresentation has been reducing in 2012 and 2014, suggesting that the socialist vote is losing its peculiar class structure.

Similar to social class, we should expect a decline in the component of highly religious voters among the confessional parties due to the ongoing secularization process. Figure 2 shows that the percentages of religious voters for confessional parties largely exceed those registered in the electorate and have remained rather stable over time with two peaks in 2002 (50.5%) and 2006 (48.4%). Comparing the religious and blue-collar constituencies, the two profiles and trends diverge: first, the quota of religious voters among confessional voters is higher than the quota of blue-collar voters among socialist voters; second, the religious component has declined comparatively less (—11.1%) than the blue-collar component (—14.4%/—30.0%). These findings suggest that the socialist parties have further enfeebled the already weak linkage with their *classe gardée*, while the confessionals have retained more firmly the already stronger relationship with their religious constituency.

To provide more strength to this interpretation, the relationship between party choice, and social class and religion, is analysed by contrasting the distribution of votes for socialist and confessional parties within the respective social reference groups (blue-collar/highly religious people).⁶ The results in Table 1 confirm that the relationship between social class and voting has weakened. Even if the share of socialist voters among blue-collar workers (under either the EGP or Oesch scheme) is always greater than the corresponding percentage among the other classes, the difference has reduced over time: the log-odds ratio changed from 0.37 in 2002 to 0.28 in 2014 (EGP) and from 0.69 to 0.48 (Oesch). Trends in both cases indicate that *socialist voters are less disproportionally concentrated in their traditional constituency*.

The study of the association between religion and vote suggests a partially different story as the relationship appears stronger overall. The preference of highly religious voters (those in the third tertile in the index of religiosity) for the confessional parties is much higher than among the other groups of voters with medium (second tertile) and low (first tertile) levels of religiosity. Compared to the blue-collar relationship with socialist parties, highly religious people are more loyal to the confessional parties. The log-odds ratio was very high in 2002 (0.98) and it did not collapse over time as it rested at 0.78 in 2014 (Table 2).

In conclusion, it can be assumed that socialist parties have largely lost appeal in their traditional

electoral stronghold contrary to confessional parties as religion has proved to be a more resilient factor compared to class: This outcome is consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Socialist voters and religion: A reframed relationship

In the previous paragraph, we illustrated a declining trend of the blue-collar constituency in the socialist parties. Thus, given the shrinking in size of this class and the decline of its linkage with socialist parties, on which ground did they find their electoral support in the first years of this century? If class has become so weak in mobilizing voters towards the socialist parties, how could they have maintained an important share of the vote?

The standard answer to this question – already advanced by Otto Kirchheimer (1966) with his lament for the embourgeoisement of the working class and the socialist parties' diluting of its *classe gardée* – points to the latter's final embracing of some pro-market policies in order to gain the middle- and upper-middle-class vote. Following this track, one could conclude that socialist parties were able to attract other social constituencies thanks to a more or less partial *revirement* of their socio-economic agenda. However, this hypothesis neglects other avenues of change.

The present analysis rather states that socialist parties resisted electorally (until recently) thanks to their voters' mobilization on ethical–moral issues. Religion matters for socialist parties, but in an inverted relation, as their voters are mobilized by issues antagonized by Church(es) and the confessional world (Engeli et al. 2012a, 2013; Fink 2008; Halman and Van Ingen 2015; Knill 2014) (see section *Religion over class, with exceptions*). In a sentence, class has been replaced by religion, but in '*negative terms*' (in a similar vein, see Ribberink et al. 2015, 2018).

In order to disentangle the question of the (negative) relationship between religion and socialist vote, Table 3 reports the distinctiveness of party preferences in the electorate by level of religiosity, measured in terms of belonging, believing or behaviour, and with an additive index of religiosity. Unlike Table 2, where the voters with high religiosity stand alone, here the voters with the lower score stand alone and are contrasted with voters with medium and high levels of religiosity combined.

Results confirm that *the more voters are distant from religion, the more they vote for socialist parties*. Around two-thirds of those with a low level of religiosity support socialist parties;⁷ conversely, those with a medium or high level of religiosity vote less for socialist parties, almost 20 points below the low religious voters. Finally, the log-odds ratio of the index of religiosity confirms this picture: the coefficient reaches 0.78.

These data show that a-religiosity (a negative attitude towards religion) is a good predictor of a

socialist vote. Hypothesis 2 is thus confirmed.

Religion over class, with exceptions

In the following, the relationship between religion and class, on the one hand, and the vote for socialist parties, on the other, is scrutinized through a comparison between countries.

Table 4 reports the log-odds ratios of social class⁸ and religion (in negative, as a-religiosity) for each country included in the analysis. The results are striking: the average log-odds of a-religiosity is almost three times those of social class (0.90 vs. 0.35) and in 11 out of 13 countries *a-religiosity outperforms social class*.

This outcome is linked to a precise relationship between social class, a-religiosity and vote: the relationship between class and socialist vote is lower in those countries where the corresponding relationship between a-religiosity and socialist vote is higher. In other words, *a-religiosity keeps class at a distance as a predictor of the socialist vote*. Hypothesis 3 holds true.

It could finally be argued that this pattern shows a mechanism of substitution in action: as traditional blue-collar voters fade away, they are replaced by other social components mobilized by religion, in terms of a conflicting attitude vis-à-vis religious issues.

Country group analysis

A further finding emerging from Table 4 concerns the country variation of the magnitude of this change. In this respect, the 13 countries are divided into three different categories according to their respective religious profile: Catholic, Protestant and mixed-faith (Kriesi et al., 2012; Madeley, 2003). Catholic countries include Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium and Austria; the mixed-faith group comprises Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands; and the Protestant bloc incorporates Great Britain,⁹ Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland.

The relationship between class and a-religiosity displays its importance particularly in the Catholic and mixed-faith countries: in Catholic countries, the effect of a-religiosity is higher than class, as the respective log-odds is 0.94 versus 0.34, and in mixed-faith countries the effect dramatically increases: 1.36 versus —0.05. In Protestant countries, instead, a-religiosity is either at the same level as class, or even less important: the log-odds coefficient is 0.46 versus 0.52.

A multivariate analysis provides more strength to the socialist voters' negative relation with religion. Table 5 presents two logistic regression models with 'vote for socialist versus confessional parties' as dependent variable. 'A-religiosity' is constructed as an index (0–10), while social class is

dichotomized into non-manual versus manual workers (EGP scheme). Control variables include age (continuous), sex, education (continuous), year (survey round) and type of country. We also include the left-right self-placement (L–R: 0 left–10 right) and party identification (PID: not close, quite close, very close). The presence of such dimensions in the regression model prevents overstatement of the cleavage effect on the vote (Franklin 2010: 655) and may contribute to improving the explained variance.¹⁰ Model 1 reports the effect of a-religiosity and class without any interaction. The beta coefficient for a-religiosity is definitely higher (1.254) than the one for class (0.311). In Model 2, we have added the interaction between a-religiosity and type of country, to see whether the strength of association changes significantly according to the religious characteristics of national contexts. In this case, the differences among countries discussed above are confirmed: the strongest effect is found in mixed-faith countries (1.523) followed by Catholic countries (0.668) (with Protestant countries as a reference category).

As a final step, we show the predicted values of socialist vote with respect to the level of a-religiosity for each group of countries (Figure 3). In general, a higher level of a-religiosity increases the probability of voting for socialist parties. Regardless of country differences, the overall estimated percentage of vote for socialist parties rises from 40.4% with a score of 0 on the a-religiosity scale, to 58.8% with a score of 10. The magnitude of this effect is larger in Catholic and mixed-faith countries than in Protestant countries. In mixed-faith countries, the expected percentages of vote boost from a minimum of 30.4% to 62.1% and in Catholic countries from 38.7% to 58.2%. In Protestant countries, it changes to a markedly lesser extent, from 48.2% to 57.6%. Here, the level of religiosity does not particularly account for the socialist vote, as the slope is only slightly upturn: this picture provides evidence of the historical low salience of state–Church cleavage in these countries.

Country by country analysis

This general picture shows a clear distinction between the three groups of countries: a) Catholic; b) mixed-faith, c) Protestant.¹¹ The analysis uses secondary literature to trace the salience of conflicts on ethical–moral issues between socialist parties and religious institutions and actors for each country. The descriptive overview of this pattern of relationship is implemented by an analysis of the log-odds ratio of class and religion. Therefore, we test the respective contribution of class and religion in determining the county-specific relationship; and whether countries follow a similar pattern on the basis of their religious tradition and grouping.

a) Catholic countries

In Spain, the deep-seated religious cleavage (Linz 1980) was soft-pedalled in the first decades after the recovery of democracy to avoid a comeback of the civil war memories (Gunther and Montero 2009: 190; Montero et al. 2008). In the mid-2000s, when the Zapatero socialist government promoted a gender equality agenda and a series of permissive policies (on abortion and same-sex marriage in particular), the conflict with the Catholic Church, supported by the Popular Party, suddenly rose to unprecedented levels (Bonafont and Roque 2012; Fernandez 2012). The confrontation was not settled in the following years as other issues entered the political agenda, from stem-cell research to euthanasia (Knill et al. 2014). The difference in the log-odds ratio confirms the relevance of religion rather than class for the socialist voter: 1.37 versus 0.27.

France comes second. The Socialist Party (PS) and its allies, both during the Jospin government (1997–2002), and later under the Holland presidency (2012–2017), promoted, first, a soft form of gay marriage – the *Pacs* – and later a more radical provision of same-sex marriage (*marriage pour tous*). These options and similar liberalizing ones on the same ethical–moral field, exacerbated the Church–state cleavage to the point that religion was the most explicative factor of the vote in the 2012 elections, and the post-Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) presidential candidate obtained 79% of the Catholic vote (Dargent and Michelat, 2012). If one adds the low relevance of the blue-collar constituency among the PS rank-and-file (Rey 2004; Sawicki 2006), and the present irrelevance of the once heavily working-class French Communist Party (PCF), the gap between the log-odds of class and religion is quite large (1.17 for religion and 0.14 for class).

In Austria, the persistence of the traditional secular–religious conflict, that pitted the two socialist and nationalist *lager* versus the Catholic one (Wandruska 1954), and the deep political-ideological rift between socialists and the heirs of the nationalist *lager* (FPO and BZO) delayed the introduction of liberalizing regulations in the moral–ethical domain. Whereas the Social Democratic Party (SPO) has favoured same-sex marriage since 1998, and subsequently other provisions of a similar nature, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) engaged in a 'lengthy resistance to reform', profiting from its continuous presence in government (Knill et al. 2014: 859–60). The fissure on these issues was inevitably underscored during the ÖVP–SPO government coalitions in the 1990s and mid-2000s, but socialist voters proved quite sensitive to these questions, to the point that the log-odds ratio for religion is higher than that for class (1.02 vs. 0.31).

In Belgium, religion 'has been returning to Belgian politics since the late 1990s' (Van Haute et al. 2012: 163). This is connected with the early introduction of euthanasia and a series of rights for

lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans- gender people. Belgium passed a law on euthanasia as early as 2002 and was the second country in Europe to authorize marriage between same-sex partners in 2003, as well as opening up access to parenthood to LGBT in 2006 (Dobbelaere and Voyè 2015). Reaction by the Church has polarized the conflict and this seems to have enhanced a- religiosity among socialist voters, as the log-odds ratio is 0.98 against 0.28 for class.

Among the Catholic countries, Portugal is an exception in terms of religious conflict: although religion is an important predictor of electoral behaviour (Freire and Santana-Pereira 2012), it has not become an issue of political confrontation between the two main parties, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social Democratic Party (PSD) (Montero et al. 2008). Even in late 2000, when two referenda were called on abortion and same-sex marriage, these issues did not produce a sharp conflict, as the PS was internally di- vided on the question, and the Church campaigned without excessive fervour (Freire and Baum 2003). Even further provisions on LGBT and artificial reproductive technology were not harshly politicized (Moniz 2019: 13; Resende and Hennig 2015: 157). As a result of this context, the difference between the class and religion log-odds ratio values is more limited compared to the other Catholic countries (0.81 vs. 0.41).

b) Mixed-faith countries

In the case of mixed-faith countries, the intensity of the religious conflict intersects with the plurality of the de- nominations, with a potential effect of competition among the Churches (Iannaccone 1992). In the Netherlands, the ethical–cultural dimension of conflict, after a long period of ‘appeasement’ (Jansen et al. 2012), triggered a polarization at the turn of the century when the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) verged towards a strong ‘anti-permissivism’ (Engeli et al. 2013: 345; Van Kersbergen 2008: 272). Indeed this was a reaction to the introduction of permissive norms on sensitive ethical issues by the socialist and secular parties, and the delaying/boycotting attitude by the CDA when it was in office reflects its attitude (Timmermans and Breeman 2012: 59). The consequent polarization is reflected in the very high level of the religious log-odds, the highest among all countries (thanks also to the very low salience of class for the socialists): 2.12 versus 0.01.

In Switzerland, religious values still inform politics: they ‘exert a significant positive influence on the preference to vote for the CVP [Christian Democratic People’s Party]’ (Goldberg 2014: 322) and, at the same time, they have further heightened the secular–confessional divide precisely on ethical–moral issues. In fact, the regulation of abortion, already agreed upon for decades in most countries, was resolved only in 2002 (Engeli and Varrone 2012). Even if most of the ethical–moral issues were

‘diverted’ towards the referendum procedure to avoid excessive polarization, the socialist front confronted the confessional bloc in promoting liberalizing positions in this domain. The huge gap between the log-odds of class and religion (1.89 vs. —0.49) confirms the prominence of religion over class for Swiss socialist voters.

In Germany, the discussion on morality policies has highlighted the persistence and salience of the conflict between the coalition (Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Christian Social Union (CSU)) and secular parties (Euchner and Preidel 2018: 243). While the participation of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the grand coalition together with the CDU–CSU for most of the last 20 years has favoured a de-radicalization of the conflict on this domain, nevertheless the log-odds value shows a greater weight of religion vis-a`-vis class: 0.94 versus 0.03.

c) Protestant countries

In comparison with the above-mentioned national cases, Protestant countries are much less affected by the potential impact of morality questions on voting choice. The absence of Catholic parties and the tradition of a low profile adopted by national Churches, plus the more liberal and permissive attitudes of civil society, have downplayed the conflict on ethical–moral questions. Moreover, in these countries, class still plays quite a role in affecting the voting choice, more than in other countries (Evans and De Graaf 2013).

Indeed, New Labour in Great Britain promoted a series of reforms which modified long-seated moral issues, ‘extending the rights of gays and lesbians, [more] than any party at any time during the 20th century’ (Brooke 2011: 254). Later, New Labour espoused other permissive issues, for example, on stem-cell research, but this did not encounter open opposition from the Conservatives, internally quite split on these topics (Engeli et al. 2013; Larsen et al. 2012). The reduced salience of religious conflict and the persistence of a class voting tradition is manifested by the log-odds value where class prevails over religion: 0.35 versus 0.73.

Scandinavian Protestant countries share similar traits, from strict alliance between Church and state to a tradition of non-intervention in the public sphere by the Church (the ‘distant church’), to a highly secularized society (Lindberg 2013; Madeley 2000). This does not mean absence of disagreement on ethical–moral issues (Lovheim et al., 2018): the moderate-conservative parties opposed or resisted liberalizing policies of the secular parties, especially the socialist ones (Albæk et al., 2012; Knill et al., 2015), but the emphasis is not comparable to Catholic countries.

In sum, in the UK and in Scandinavia (with the significant exception of Norway which differently

from the other countries has an important confessional party), where class voting is still relevant and there is no (tradition of) confrontation between state and Church, it is not surprising that the log-odds of religion are lower than those of class.

This overview of the different loading of religion vis-a'-vis class for socialist voters provides substance to the hypothesis of a growing importance of morality issues for socialist voters, and thus of the major role of (opposition to) religion in driving their vote. The data show that where polarization is high, and class is overwhelmed by religion (the Catholic and mixed-faith countries), the negative relation with religiosity (a-religiosity) positively mobilizes the socialist voters. Instead, where class still plays a role, as in Protestant countries, and religious conflict has a very low intensity, socialist voters remain more mobilized by socio-economic concerns rather than by permissive positions on ethical-moral issues in opposition to the confessional world.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to test the role of religion and class in affecting the vote for confessional and socialist parties, to compare the relative strength of their impact on the respective constituency, and to gauge the effect of religion for the socialist voting. The study has involved 13 West European countries during the period 2002–2014. Results show that class and religion still count as aggregators of vote for both socialist and confessional parties, although with a crucial difference: religion is a more resilient factor for confessional parties rather than social class for socialist parties. The resilience of religion has led us to inquire whether it plays a role also for socialist voters, given the demise of class voting. We thus hypothesized that the determinant of vote for socialist parties shifted from traditional socio-economic interests to cultural factors. This hypothesis is not at all a novel one. What is original here is that socialist voting has been heavily influenced by religion, or better, by the socialist voters' *distance from religion*. We have argued that socialist voting has been increasingly mobilized since the beginning of the century by socialist parties' opposition to religious views and Churches' intervention in the public sphere over a series of salient ethical-moral issues, from same-sex marriage to ART, from stem-cell research to euthanasia. The attitude towards the religious world has not been assessed in our analysis on the basis of specific ethical-moral issues, but rather with reference to the traditional indicators of religiosity (belief, belonging and behaviour). This strategy of analysis implies a preference for the group identification of religious people according to their membership of the religious community, rather than their attitude on specific issues. This approach is less subject to policy fluctuations in different countries, as some issues may have become salient

in a country at a certain time and then faded when it may have potentially emerged in another country at a later time.

The outcome of the empirical analysis has confirmed all the hypotheses: *religion is a more powerful driver than class for voting; a negative relationship with religion (a-religiosity) is more important – in some cases much more important – than class as explanans of the electoral preference for socialist parties in 11 out of 13 countries; a-religiosity is stronger in those countries where social class matters less and where the polarization on ethical–moral issues is more acute.*

The comparative analysis has highlighted that the religious profile of the country and the dynamics linked to the process of secularization and liberalization in the ethical–moral domain explain, to a large extent, the between-countries variation. The impact of a-religiosity is impressive in Catholic and mixed-faith countries. Conversely, in Protestant countries, a-religiosity as a determinant of socialist vote is weaker or absent because of the low profile of the national Church, and its traditional alignment with the state. Moreover, a-religiosity is also related to class voting: where it is still strong, as in the Protestant countries, differently to the Catholic and mixed-faith countries, it depresses the already modest relevance of the religious factor. This means that high class voting still dampens the impact of religion.

The revamping of a secular–religious conflict centred on moral–ethical issues provided an important and unexpected opportunity for socialist parties to resist the shrinking of the class vote. It could be advanced that the relevance of these issues in mobilizing a socialist vote has reinforced the ‘substitution’ of constituencies, already underway in these parties: that is, their more bourgeoisie profile, as the most attentive voters to ethical-moral issues are usually highly educated and middle class. But this point is merely speculative and would need further research to be assessed.

Notes

1. In this paper, socialist party is used as an umbrella term comprising not only the social-democratic parties which represent the bulk of the political family, but also other class-related variants, such as communists and left-socialists; on the other hand, the new, post-material ecological parties have been excluded because of their weak linkage with the working-class constituency and its traditional ideological references. However, for sake of simplicity, the term socialist is employed throughout the paper.
2. Confessional and conservative parties are pooled together (see Engeli et al., 2013: 339; Minkenberg 2002, 2003, 2010). The rationale for this choice rests in two, instrumental and substantial, motives.

On the instrumental side, this strategy would increase the number of cases in our sample and therefore allow more robust empirical analyses. On the substantial side, history shows that, in many countries, conservatives have aligned themselves more and more stringently with confessionals. In the nineteenth century, they converged in opposition to the European liberal elites' secular turn of the 1870s–80s (Gould 1999; Kalyvas 1996), and later for taming the rise of socialism (Ziblatt 2017). More recently, the convergence has increased, and empirical analyses have shown a very high communality between conservatives and confessionals (see Van der Brug et al., 2009: 1280). Moreover, where explicitly religious parties are absent, conservative forces act as a substitute. This occurs in France with the *droite* (in its different configurations) (Dargant 2010; Michelat and Simon 1977), in Spain with the Popular Party (Montero et al., 2008), in Portugal with the PSD (Moniz 2019; Montero et al., 2008), in Great Britain with the Conservatives – ‘the party at prayer’ (Bale 2012; Tilley 2015), and in Scandinavia with the moderate-conservatives (with the partial exception of Norway) (Furseth 2018; Madeley 2000; Minkenberg 2010). In this category, populist parties are not included along the lines of Madeley's analysis who argues that their approach to Christianity substantially differs from that of confessional and conservative parties (Madeley 2000).

3. Bartolini and Mair (1990: 215) assessed that a cleavage has ‘an empirical element, (...) defined in social-structural terms; a normative element, that is the set of values and beliefs which provides a sense of identity and role to the empirical element, and which reflect the self-consciousness of the social group(s) involved; and an organizational/behavioral element, (...), such as political parties, which develop as part of the cleavage’. In particular, they argued that ‘a cleavage has therefore to be considered primarily as a *form of closure of social relationships*’ (216, our emphasis). Following this point, further stressed by Bartolini (2011) where he argued that ‘the interest orientations need to become somehow “universal”, through an ideational production, the mechanism creates a boundary which separate the “we” by the “others”’. We consider that today the missing element for a cleavage is precisely the group solidarity and cohesiveness of the communities related to a cleavage. In the same vein, Marks et al. (2021) when they state that ‘the closed social milieus that bonded voters to parties have fragmented. The decline of religion, the diversification of working life, and greater occupational and spatial mobility *have weakened the social ties that bind individuals to traditional social strata*. Individuals lead lives that are only tenuously encased by durable and homogenous social groupings’.
4. Even in a nuanced way, the political party agency, advocated in particular by Evans and de Graaf (2013: viii) on class, and by Jansen et al. (2012) on religion, is present in this context.

5. Ireland has not been included for a combination of two reasons: (a) class politics and the Labour Party has always been a marginal factor (see Mair 1992, spec. 393) and Labour was considered for a large part of this history tainted by 'Christian socialism' (see); (b) as already argued by Gallanger (1985), 'neither of the two major parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael) have organized linkages to religion' (Manza and Wright 2003), even if both could be considered representative of religious interests. Therefore, a comparative effect of class and religion on the respective political interpreters is quite problematic (Mair and Weeks 2005).
6. The strength of the relationship is measured using the log-odds ratio instead of the percentage difference index (PDI), because of its insensitivity to changes in the overall support for parties (Evans 2000).
7. More particularly, 61.8% among the non-belonging, 62.3% among the non-believers, and 63.4% among the non-churchgoers.
8. For the sake of parsimony, we discuss here only one log odd of the EGP scheme.
9. Contrary to the authoritative interpretation by Madeley (2003), we include Britain among the Protestant countries for the ample majority of citizens belonging to this confession and the institutional role of the Church of England. We acknowledge that England is only a part of the United Kingdom, and Scotland has a different confessional landscape, but the role of the Queen – monarch of the entire United Kingdom – as head of the Church provides a Protestant imprint on the country that surpasses the other mixed-faith countries.
10. We concur with Mark Franklin when he wrote that 'social cleavages are relevant components of more general models ...but cleavage research that omits variables required for a properly specified model [left right and party-id, we presume] overstate cleavage effects and fails to evaluate alternative explanations for observed phenomena' (2010: 655). At the same time, we also agree with Geoffrey Evans when he states that 'multivariate analysis should preferably start with reduced models that contain only structural characteristics' and that more elaborate models can be preferable introduced 'in a path-analytic framework that allows explicit tests of the role of perceptions and attitudes in connecting structural positions and political preferences'. Following both suggestions, our regression model incorporates together with the socio-demographic control variables L-R and PID. The beta coefficient for a-religiosity, in an unmediated model without L-R and PID (not reported), is 1.838; when ideological placement and closeness to a party are included, the beta coefficient diminishes to 1.254. As a consequence, the indirect effect produced by L-R and PID is equivalent to 0.584. Therefore a-religiosity has a much higher direct impact on socialist vote than through the mediation

of L-R and PID.

11. We performed a one-way ANOVA test on an aggregate distribution of cases grouped by countries and ESS round ($n=87$) and we found a confirmation that intergroup variance is higher than intra-group variance.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Tab.1 Percentage of voters of socialist parties by social class and measures of class voting (2002-2014)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
EGP class scheme							
Manual workers	58,7	59,6	59,2	62,7	56,0	54,8	52,9
Non-manual workers	49,5	51,5	50,8	51,3	46,7	48,9	45,9
Log-odds ratios Index (manual vs non-manual)	0,37	0,33	0,34	0,47	0,37	0,24	0,28
Oesch class scheme							
Working classes	61,4	63,5	62,1	63,8	57,8	55,5	51,7
Other classes	44,4	45,8	46,1	46,2	42,4	44,1	39,8
Log-odds ratios Index (working classes vs non-working classes)	0,69	0,72	0,65	0,72	0,62	0,46	0,48
N	9,758	10,950	11,747	10,773	9,740	10,152	10,024

Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

Note: The log-odds ratio (or Thomsen index) can be regarded as the log-odds of manual workers (working classes) voting for socialist parties rather than confessional parties, minus the corresponding log-odds for members of the non-manual class (non-working classes).

Tab.2 Percentages of voters of confessional parties by level of religiosity and measures of religious voting (2002-2014)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
High religiosity	63,2	58,2	59,7	56,9	60,0	61,3	64,4
Low + medium religiosity	39,3	39,6	39,1	39,3	45,4	43,5	45,4
Log-odds ratios Index (high vs non-high religious)	0,98	0,75	0,84	0,71	0,59	0,72	0,78
N	10505	11710	12333	11482	10280	10499	9593

Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

Note: Low and medium categories correspond to the 1st and 2nd tertile in the index of religiosity, while high religious includes voters in the 3rd tertile.

Tab.3 Party choice by level of religiosity (2002-2014).

	A-religious voters	Religious voters	Tot
<i>Religious belonging</i>			
Socialists	61,8	44,5	51,7
Confessionals	38,2	55,5	48,3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0
Log odds-ratio	0,70		
<i>Religious believing</i>			
Socialists	62,3	45,9	51,7
Confessionals	37,7	54,1	48,3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0
Log odds-ratio	0,67		
<i>Church attendance</i>			
Socialists	63,4	45,0	51,7
Confessionals	36,6	55,0	48,3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100.0
Log odds-ratio	0,75		
<i>Index (belonging +believing+ attendance)</i>			
Socialists	65,2	46,3	51,7
Confessionals	34,8	53,7	48,3
Tot	100.0	100.0	100,0
Log odds-ratio	0,78		
N	21868	55605	77473

Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

Note: Values reported in the tables indicate the percentages of votes for socialist and confessional parties in the two different groups of non-religious vs religious voters. A-religious: non-belonging, non-believers (less than 6 on believing scale), irregular church goers (less than one a week). Religious: belonging, believers (more than 5 on believing scale), regular church goers (one a week or more). The index of religiosity is a combination of religious belonging, believing, and church attendance. For the calculus of log-odds ratio see Tab.1.

Tab.4 Level of class voting and (a-)religious voting for socialist parties by countries, log-odds ratio indexes (2002-2014).

	Social class (EGP scheme)	(A-)Religiosity
In total	.35	.90
<i>Catholic countries</i>	.34	.94
France	.14	1.17
Spain	.37	1.27
Austria	.31	1.02
Belgium	.28	.98
Portugal	.41	.81
<i>Mixed-religion countries</i>	-.05	1.36
Switzerland	-.49	1.89
Netherlands	.01	2.12
Germany	.03	.94
<i>Protestant countries</i>	.52	.46
Sweden	.82	.25
UK	.73	.35
Finland	.71	.74
Denmark	.35	.39
Norway	.13	.58

Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7

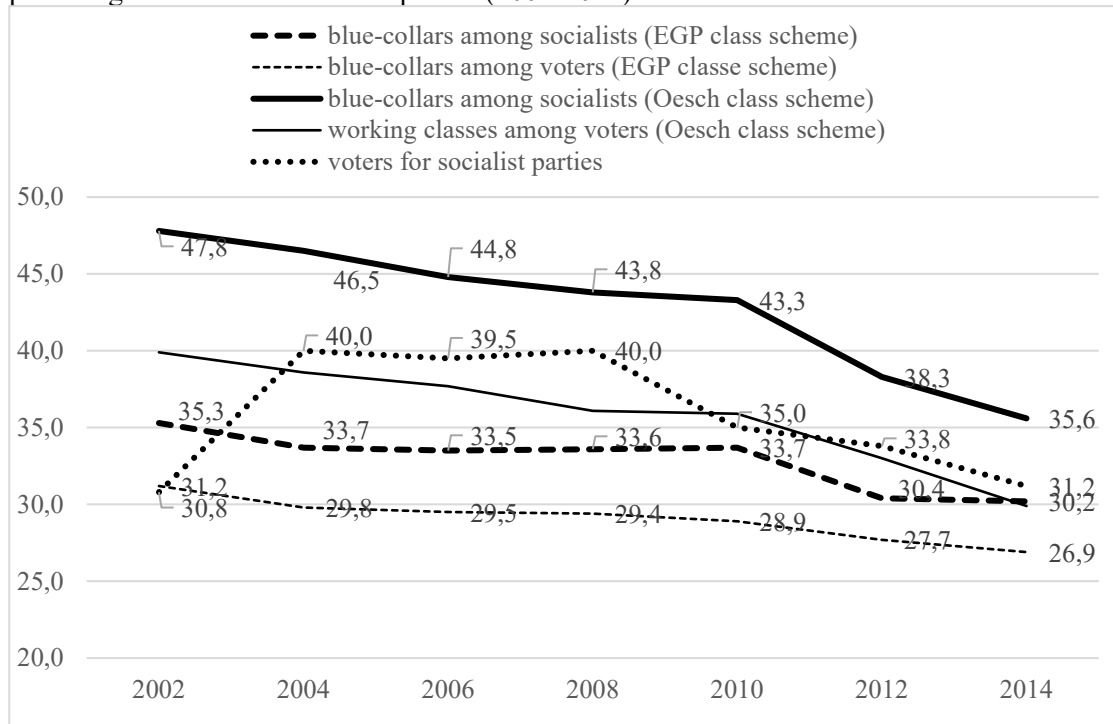
Note: We use EGP schema for social class. For log odds-ratio index of a-religiosity, see comments in the text and Tab.3. Countries are ranked, within the country-type, from the higher to the lower difference between a-religiosity and social class.

Tab. 5 Regression models for socialist vote (2002-2014).

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta (sig.)	s.e.	Beta (sig.)	s.e.
Gender (female)	+.185***	.021	+.176***	.016
Age	+.001	.001	+.001	.001
Education, in years	-.049***	.003	-.050*	.002
Type of country (ref. Protestant countries)	+.000		+.000	
Catholic countries	+.228***	.025	-.632***	.055
Mixed countries	+.327***	.027	-1.219***	.063
Year (ref. 2002)	+.000		+.000	
2004	-.076*	.039	-.056	.039
2006	+.032	.037	+.037	.037
2008	+.062	.038	+.073	.038
2010	-.184***	.039	-.176***	.039
2012	-.028	.039	-.018	.039
2014	-.211***	.039	-.212***	.039
Party identification (min-max)	+.072***	.014	+.077***	.014
Left-right scale (scale, 0-10)	-.888***	.008	-.885***	.008
Social class (manual worker)	+.311***	.024	+.299***	.025
A-religiosity (scale, 0-1)	+1.254***	.039	+0.619***	.061
A-religiosity *Type of countries (ref. Protestant countries)			+0.00	.000
A-religiosity *Catholic countries			+.668***	.088
A-religiosity *Mixed countries			+1.523***	.097
Constant	+4.024***	.108	+4.442***	.113
LR Chi ²	29948.46		30198.37	
R ²	.3444		.3743	
N. obs.	62,735		62,735	

Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

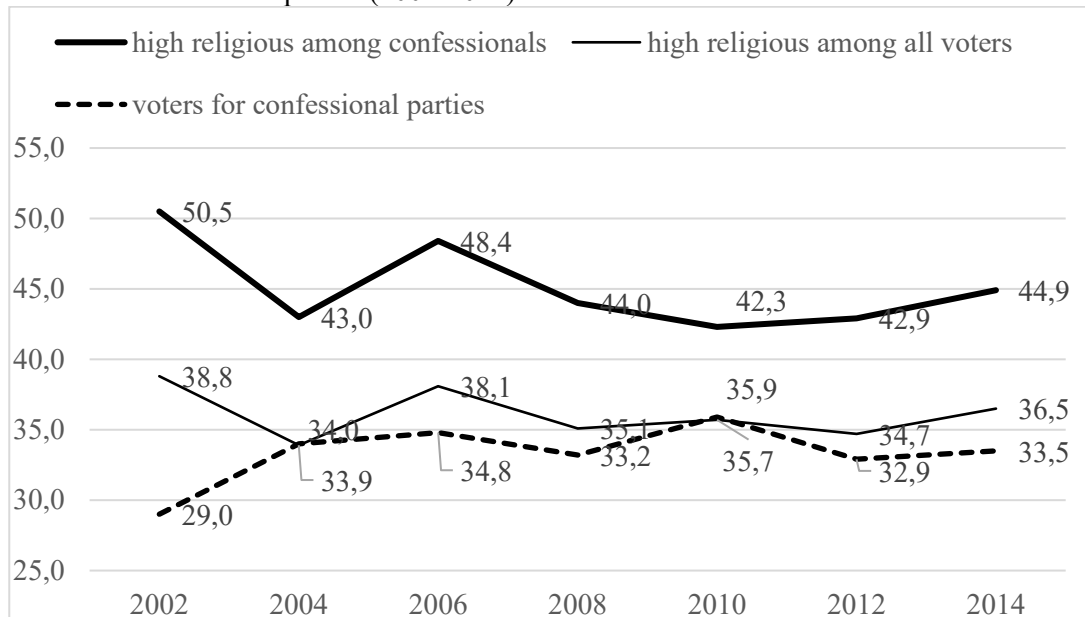
Fig.1 Percentages of blue-collars (EGP and Oesch class scheme) among socialist parties and all voters; and percentage of voters for socialist parties (2002-2014)



Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

Note: The information on the vote in each ESS round refers to the “party voted in the latest national election”.

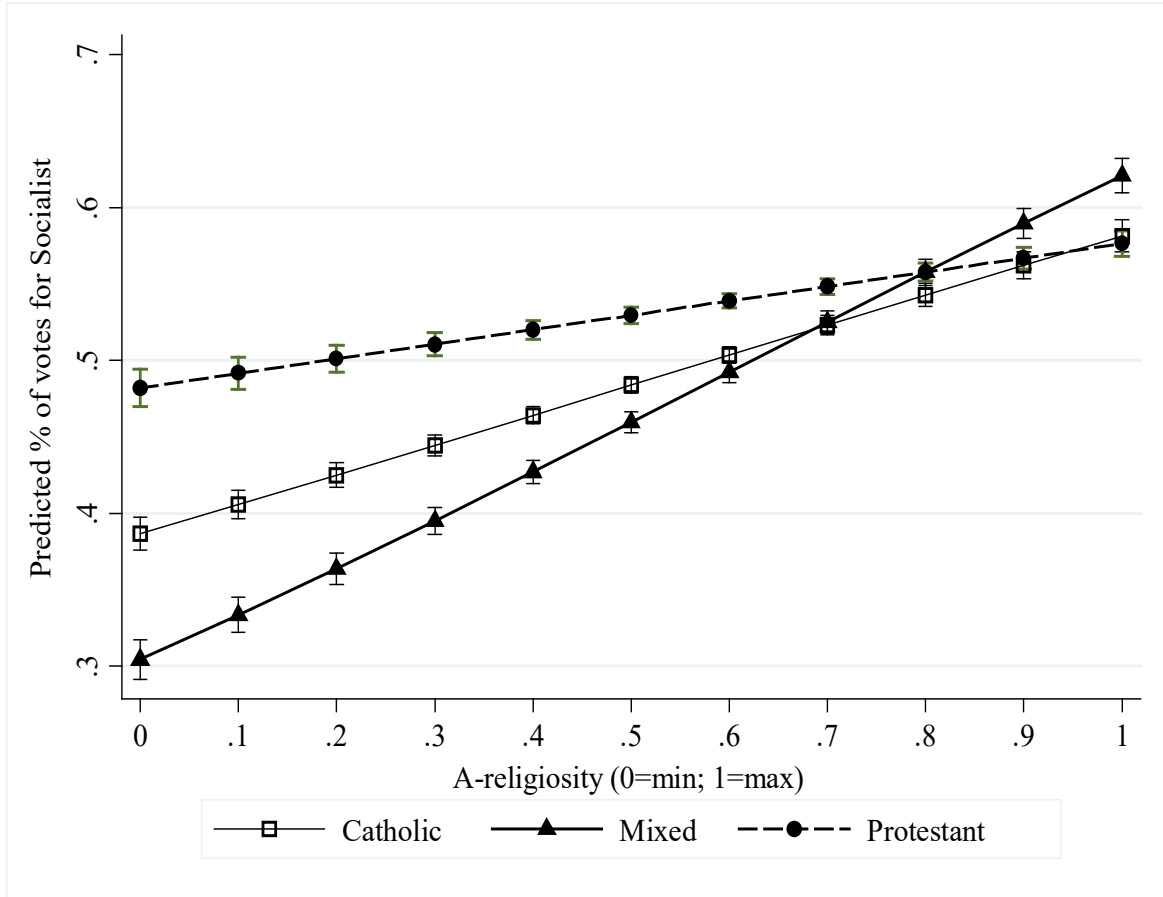
Fig.2 Percentages of high religious voter among confessional parties and all the voters; and percentage of voters for confessional parties (2002-2014)



Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.

Note: The “high religious” category includes voters in the third tertile of the religiosity.

Fig. 3 Predicted vote for socialist parties by level of (a-)religiosity in Catholic, Protestant, and mixed-religion countries (2002-2014).



Source: European Social Survey, round 1-7.