Comparing Policy Agendas in Europe and North America

Introduction

Aside from core topics on political agendas such as economic affairs, welfare state reforms, or environmental issues, a growing set of atypical issues from time to time find their way into political agendas across Western Europe: the so-called morality issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and stem cell research. Such issues relate to fundamental questions about societal organization: Who has the right to make decisions about the beginning of life? Does one have the right to choose one’s own time of death? Sometimes morality issues rank among top political issues on political agendas. In the Netherlands, questions relating to euthanasia constituted a major obstacle to the formation of the coalition government with the Christian Democrats in the 1980s. In Spain, 1 million people gathered in a massive protest against liberalization of abortion in Madrid in 2009. In contrast, morality issues have always been considered a non-political issue in Denmark and the United Kingdom and have never assumed a prominent position in party competition.

The Politics of Morality in Western Europe

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question is why, how, and under which conditions morality issues become politicized and integrated in party competition and when are they left outside political struggles. Further, what are the policy implications of such differences? Does politicization lead to more permissive policies such as legalizing euthanasia?

This short article presents the core findings of a comparative research project on morality politics in Western Europe, which investigates the dynamics of the political conflict over abortion, reproductive technology, stem cell research, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage in five Western European countries—Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) (Engeli et al. 2012; Engeli et al. 2013). We argue that to understand why and how morality issues rise on and drop off political agendas, we need to focus on the conflict definition of morality issues. Based on the policy agenda-setting theory (Baumgartner et al. 2006), the concept of conflict definition is an attempt to offer a more operational understanding of the extent to which morality issues receive attention from political actors. Equally important are the configuration of actors involved in the political conflict concerning morality issues and the distribution of positions across the political spectrum. This research project on morality issues thus also represents an attempt to develop ideas from policy agenda-setting theory into a comparative framework explaining comparative differences in issue conflicts and their effects on public policy.

The two worlds of morality politics

We analyze the politics of morality issues through a typology with “two worlds of morality politics” (Engeli et al. 2012)—what we label the religious and the secular world. The two worlds do not refer to a specific level of secularization in a society or the preeminence of one religious confession over others. In other terms, the distinction between the religious and the secular world is thus not the same as between Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. The notion of the religious vs. the secular world refers to whether or not a conflict between religiously based and secular political parties exists in the party system. The religious world comprises countries where the party system embodies a significant conflict between secular and confessional parties—either Christian Democratic or Conservative parties with a confessional orientation. In the religious world, morality issues often play a significant role in party competition; they become politicized and receive considerable political attention. Examples are euthanasia in the Netherlands and abortion in Spain. In the religious world, politics thus matters for morality issues in the sense that permissive regulation may be passed when confessional parties are not in government, whereas this is unlikely to happen when they are in government. Furthermore, the varying degrees of secularization can explain cross-national differences in permissiveness here, since it provides secular parties with electoral support for increasingly permissive regulation.

In the secular world, there is no important conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties, and the conflict definition concerning morality issues is characterized by the fact that these issues only receive very little political attention. As there is no significant religious conflict in the party system, morality issues cannot be framed in the usual political conflict lines and are thus often seen as being essentially non-political or ethical questions that do not belong in the realm of politics. In turn, the composition of parties in government is not central for understanding policy decisions on morality issues, which depend on issue-specific coalitions with no unifying tendency toward permissive regulation across all issues.

Among our cases, the Netherlands and Spain exemplify the religious world due to the significant conflict between secular and confessional parties in their respective party systems. Switzerland also exemplifies the religious world, but is more complicated due to its political system and is therefore left out of this presentation. Denmark and the UK both exemplify the secular world because there is no religious base underneath party conflicts, and morality issues have never played an important role in party competition.
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The religious world: Spain and the Netherlands

The Netherlands and Spain are examples of countries belonging to the religious world where there is a conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties. In the Netherlands, the conflict in the party system between Christian Democratic parties, primarily the CDA, and secular parties (PvdA (Social Democrats), VVD (Liberals), and D66 (Social Liberals)) is well established (Andeweg and Irwin 2009). In Spain, the Conservative Party has a strong historical association with the Catholic Church, and the party competition between the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Conservative Party (PP) represents the conflict between secular and confessional (Chaques and Roqué 2012). Since both the Dutch and the Spanish party systems harbor a conflict between confessional and secular parties, we expect morality issues to be subject to party competition, which is indeed the case. In the Netherlands, morality issues have attracted substantial party attention in party manifestoes and in parliamentary activities, and both abortion and euthanasia have been central issues in negotiations over Dutch government coalitions (Timmermans and Breeman 2012). In Spain, abortion has been a central political issue since the 1980s, and after 2000 other issues like same-sex marriage, assisted reproductive technology (ART), and, to a lesser extent, euthanasia have attracted attention in party competition (Chaques and Roqué 2012).

In the Netherlands, the women’s movement and secular political parties, especially PvdA, started lobbying for a more permissive regulation of abortion already in the late 1960s (Outshoorn 2001). However, the Christian Democrats participated in all Dutch coalition governments through the 1970s, most often in coalition with VVD, and systematically tried to avoid a government decision, for example by setting up a commission to investigate the issue. In the end, the CDA and VVD compromised on a permissive abortion law in 1981 (Timmermans and Breeman 2012). After the abortion conflict settled, the religious-secular conflict on morality issues did not end – it simply shifted to euthanasia, which had attracted public attention via court cases in the 1970s, and now made its way into party politics. For the CDA and its secular coalition partners, the VVD until 1989 and PvdA until 1994, euthanasia became a precarious issue. The secular parties supported more permissive legislation, as they did on abortion, whereas the CDA was strongly opposed and managed to avoid a decision on the issue until 1994 (Green-Pedersen 2007). Same-sex marriage resembles euthanasia with growing pressure from the secular parties, including PvdA in government after 1989, for permissive legislation. The CDA accepted the introduction of a same-sex union in 1994, but not same-sex marriage, and 1994 saw the first government coalition without the CDA, more or less since 1918, which consisted of PvdA, VVD, and D66. It seized on morality issues and implemented permissive legislation on euthanasia in 2000, same-sex marriage in 1997, and a relatively permissive embryo act in 2002. The regulation of ART was not changed, as the regulation from 1991 was already quite permissive (Timmermans and Breeman 2012).

In Spain, the political debate on morality issues only started in the 1980s due to the late democratization. The Social Democratic government taking office in 1982 only introduced minor permissive changes on abortion due to a skeptical public opinion (Chaques and Roqué 2012). This had all changed radically when the social democrats regained office in 2004 led by Zapatero, who dedicated a great deal of attention to morality issues during the campaign in order to profile the party as the ‘modern’ party in Spanish politics. Once in power, the government first introduced same-sex marriage in 2005 (Platero 2007) and then a per-
missive abortion law in 2010. These laws were met with fierce resistance from the Conservative party and the Roman Catholic Church, but had the support of the majority of the Spanish population (Chaques and Roqué 2012). Policies on ART and stem cells have been subject to much of the same party political battles, although were first seen as strictly medical issues. The first policies introduced in the 1980s and 1990s were thus relatively permissive, but were later restricted by the Conservative government in 2003. The PSOE government from 2004 turned these policies back in a permissive direction. Finally, euthanasia is slowly emerging as a political issue, but remains restrictively regulated.

The secular world: Denmark and the UK

Denmark and the UK have no conflict between confessional parties in their party systems, and politics is strongly dominated by traditional left-right competition. Morality issues are most often seen as non-partisan and outside of normal party competition, and they rarely find their way into party manifestoes or parliamentary activities like interpellations in Denmark or Prime Minister’s Questions in the UK. Instead, decisions on these issues typically depend on the activities of interest groups and individual MPs, and the color of government has little impact on the success of these activities (Albæk et al. 2012; Larsen et al. 2012; Cowley 2001).

In Denmark, abortion reached the political decision-making process in the late 1960s and early 1970s due to pressure from women’s organizations and individual left-wing MPs. The proposal met with some reluctance, but no strong resistance from any political parties. First, a broad majority of the parties agreed on having a commission investigate the issue, which led to a more permissive regulation in 1971 under a right-wing government and then the very permissive law in 1973 under a left-wing government. When this law was passed, the parties allowed their MPs to vote freely on the issue with strong internal divisions within the major right-wing parties and, to some extent, the Social Democrats (Albæk et al. 2012). The early settlement of the abortion issue did not have much impact on other morality issues in Denmark. In fact, they did not receive any political attention until the mid-1980s when a debate about same-sex marriage emerged due to pressure from gay rights interest groups and individual MPs from the Social Liberals who seized on the issue to appear more progressive than the right-wing government (which included the very small Christian Democratic Party). In 1989, Denmark was the first country in the world to introduce same-sex unions with several legal rights for homosexuals (Albæk 2003). ART started to emerge as a political issue from the mid-1980s, mainly pushed by left-wing politicians who called for very restrictive legislation in opposition to medical and economic interests. Parliament passed a very restrictive moratorium on embryo research in 1987 with partial liberalizations in 1992 and 1997 (Albæk et al. 2012). The policy processes were often quite chaotic because parties allowed free votes and thereby cancelled the normal party-based structure of decision-making. Although relatively permissive, the 1997 law excluded lesbians and singles from ART, based on an amendment proposal from three Social Democratic MPs (Albæk 2003). Stem cell research was partially liberalized in 2003 with broad support. The major gay rights organizations pressured for lifting the exclusion of homosexuals from ART and adoption rights, which reached the decision agenda in the late 2000s by way of a new small libertarian party that managed to get MPs from the right-wing government parties to break rank and support the bills. The government tolerated this because of the non-political understanding of the question. Same-sex marriage was finally introduced in 2012 after having been stalled in many years of discussion within the national Church, and a broad majority in Parliament supported it. Finally, there has been no political debate in Denmark about allowing euthanasia, which remains restrictively regulated (Green-Pedersen 2007).

The policy process concerning morality issues in the UK resembles that of Denmark in many respects. The UK was an early mover in terms of abortion when a permissive law was passed in 1967. Like in Denmark, this law was not the re-
result of party politics but of pressure from interest groups that had support from individual MPs like the Liberals’ MP David Steel, who introduced the private member bill that ultimately passed. The Labour government allowed the bill to come to a vote, but the Labour party never moved the issue into party competition (Lovenduski 1986; Larsen et al. 2012). Like in Denmark, the early passing of an abortion law did not lead to pressure for more permissive regulation of morality issues. The next issue to gain political attention was ART in the late 1980s. The Conservative government was reluctant to introduce regulation, partly because of internal conflict, but in the end introduced a quite permissive regulation in 1990. Since then, Labour governments have introduced several further steps in a more permissive direction and the UK is the most permissive of all countries on ART and stem cell regulation due to a lack of party conflict and a focus on the economic growth potential of these new technologies (Larsen et al. 2012). The issue of same-sex marriage and further rights for homosexual couples was not raised until under the Labour government in the 2000s, which introduced same-sex unions, adoption rights, and ART for homosexuals. These questions were more actively promoted as partisan questions by Labour, although no real partisan conflict emerged, as the Conservatives had no clear party position on the question and allowed free votes (Larsen et al. 2012). Like in Denmark, replacing same-sex union with same-sex marriage is currently still on the table. Finally, euthanasia remains firmly outside party competition and there is no sign that the UK is moving away from a restrictive regulation.

Conclusion

In this short article, we present the argument that dividing countries into a religious and a secular world depending on whether or not they have a conflict between confessional and secular parties in their party system provides the key to understanding differences in the politics and policy on morality issues. In the religious world, this brings these issues into ‘macro-politics’ in the form of party competition and makes the color of government a key determinant of policy development. In the secular world, these issues are far from macro-politics and are driven by issue-specific dynamics. We do not find that policies in general are more permissive in countries belonging to one of the worlds, but the policy processes are clearly different. The presence of Christian Democratic/confessional parties in government in the religious world clearly matters. In a broader perspective the projects represents an attempt to develop the policy agenda-setting approach into a framework for comparing politics and policy choices on problems that involve more or less controversy between political parties and other actors.

References


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