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# A Religious Vaccination? How Christian Communities React to Right-Wing Populism in Germany, France and the US

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## Abstract

Right-wing populists across Western democracies have markedly increased references to Christianity in recent years. While there is much debate about how and why they have done so, less attention has been paid to how Christian communities react to this development. The present study addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Christian responses to right-wing populist politics in Germany, France and the US. It relies on quantitative studies, survey data and the qualitative analysis of 39 in-depth interviews with right-wing populist leaders, mainstream party politicians and church officials. The findings of this analysis suggest a potential ‘religious vaccination effect’ among Christian voters against right-wing populism but underline its connection to elite actor behaviour. Specifically, the availability of a ‘Christian alternative’ in the party system, as well as religious leaders’ willingness and ability to create a social taboo around the populist right seem critically to impact religious immunity to populism.

**Keywords:** Right-wing populism; religion; nationalism; voting behaviour; secularization; Trump

The ostentatious use of Christian symbols during the riots at the US capitol in January 2021 have drawn attention to right-wing populists’ increased use of religious references in recent years. While there is a growing academic debate about how and why populists use religious symbols (Brubaker 2017; Marzouki et al. 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Roy 2019), much less attention has been paid to how Christian communities react to this development. This study seeks to address this gap in the literature through a comparative analysis of Christian voters’, leaders’ and the institutional churches’ responses to right-wing populist politics in three Western democracies: Germany, France and the US.

The relationship between religion and right-wing populism in Western democracies remains a politically hotly debated, but academically under-studied topic (Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Zúquete 2017). Recently, this gap has been partly addressed by several studies on right-wing populists’ motives and methods in

their approach to religion. While some scholars have interpreted right-wing populists' use of Christian language and symbols in their rhetoric as an expression of resurgent religious culture wars (Althoff 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020), others have argued that populists merely 'hijack' Christianity (Marzouki et al. 2016) as an exclusivist identity-marker against Islam, but remain distanced from – and indeed are often hostile to – Christian doctrine, ethics and institutions (Brubaker 2017; Cremer 2018; Elcott et al. 2021; Roy 2019). However, only few researchers have systematically examined how European and American Christian communities themselves react to right-wing populists' religious references.

Instead, given Donald Trump's high levels of white Evangelical support during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, many observers saw traditional assumptions about the nexus between Christian conservatism and far-right politics in America confirmed, and some suggested that these assumptions should be expanded to the European context (Althoff 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Yet, other studies found evidence suggesting an electoral 'religion gap', or religious 'immunization effect' amongst many Christians *against* voting for right-wing populists in several Western European countries (Immerzeel et al. 2013; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2021). Such inconclusive observations of how Christian voters respond to right-wing populist politics are mirrored on the elite level by an uneven assessment of church leaders' responses. Media attention is often focused on those faith leaders who have made their name defending the populist right. By contrast, much less attention has been paid to leaders or churches which have publicly stood up against right-wing populist politics, or to the effect such opposition might have on Christians' voting behaviour. This is remarkable as church leaders in Western Europe have often been at the forefront of right-wing populists' critics (Elcott et al. 2021; Marzouki et al. 2016; Roy 2019). Indeed, even in the US, Trump was met with significant opposition not just from Christian progressives but also from parts of the conservative white Evangelical establishment (Alexander 2016; Beyerlein and Ryan 2018; Galli 2019).

Given such contradictory observations, this article seeks to address the gap in the literature through a systemic comparison of Christian responses to right-wing populist movements in Germany, France and the US. Specifically, the article examines the research question of how Christian voters, faith leaders and the institutional churches across these three countries have reacted to right-wing populists' religious appeals and how variations in levels of electoral support are connected to the public stance of the churches and to the behaviour of mainstream parties. The selection of Germany, France and the US as case studies has been inspired by a 'most similar and different outcome' approach (Rihoux and Ragin 2009). All three countries are advanced Western democracies with a Judeo-Christian heritage that have been subject to similar social upheavals such as globalization, immigration, rapid ethnic change and accelerated levels of secularization in the 20th and 21st centuries. Crucially, each country also recently experienced the rise of powerful right-wing populist movements, all of which have used Christian symbols and language in their rhetoric (Elcott et al. 2021; Marzouki et al. 2016).<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite these similarities, German, French and American Christian communities seem to diverge in their reactions to these developments, with overwhelming electoral support of Christian voters for Donald Trump in the US, and a comparative religious

immunity to right-wing populism among practising Christians in Germany and France (Dargent 2016; Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Overall, this article posits that under the surface of electoral variation, there is, in fact, a growing attitudinal and sociodemographic schism between the traditional religious right and a new populist secular right in all three countries, but that the extent to which this schism translates into religious immunity in terms of voting behaviour critically depends on the behaviour of elite actors in the churches and mainstream political parties. Specifically, this research's findings support claims in the literature that the existence and strength of a religious immunity largely depend on the availability of a viable 'Christian alternative' in the political party system, while also exploring a second key factor in understanding right-wing populists' (lack of) success among Christian voters; namely, religious leaders' willingness and ability to create a social taboo around the populist right. Empirical support is drawn from a range of sources including quantitative studies and survey data, as well as the qualitative analysis of official statements, party manifestos and 39 elite interviews with right-wing populist leaders, mainstream party politicians and senior church officials, conducted in Germany, France and the US between 2018 and 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The article is structured in four parts. The first reviews the state of the literature on Christian communities' voting behaviour in Germany, France and the US and their support for right-wing populist candidates in particular. It focuses on commonalities and variations between religious voters in these countries paying specific attention to the hypothesis that religion can 'immunize' voters against right-wing populism. The next two sections explore how the existence and strength of such an immunization effect is shaped by the behaviour of political and religious elites. Specifically, the next section investigates the extent to which mainstream political parties shape Christian voters' attitudes towards the populist right, while the subsequent section analyses how faith leaders' and institutional churches' reactions to right-wing populists' religious references impact right-wing populists' electoral fortunes among Christian voters. The conclusion places these findings in the context of the academic literature and discusses their implication for current debates about the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary Western societies.

### Religious immunization to populism: Christian voters and the populist right in Germany, France and the US

In all three countries under consideration right-wing populists have recently made ostentatious use of Christian language and symbols. In Germany the anti-Islamist Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (PEGIDA) paraded oversized crosses in Germany's national colours at their demonstrations while the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) inserted the defence of Germany's Judeo-Christian heritage into its party manifesto and claimed to be the 'only Christian party left in Germany' (Focus 2017). In France the Rassemblement National (RN, or Front National (FN) until 2018) challenged the rules of *laïcité* by pushing for nativity scenes in public spaces, just as the RN's rising star Marion Maréchal-Le Pen praised France's status as the '*fille aînée de l'Église*' (the oldest daughter of the Church) (Roy 2019).<sup>3</sup> In the US, President Trump styled himself as the defender of Christian America by famously posing with a Bible in his

hand in front of a Washington DC church after security forces had used tear gas to clear his path through peaceful Black Lives Matter protestors (Bennett et al. 2020).

Given this centrality of Christian symbolism in right-wing populist rhetoric, many observers have assumed close ties between conservative Christianity and the populist right. Some have argued that the latter's rise is a 'cultural backlash', resembling America's religious culture wars of the 1980s and its expansion to Europe; others that right-wing populism's electoral success is largely driven by 'white Christian Nationalism' (Althoff 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). However, several studies, focusing on the motives, strategies and policies of right-wing populist leaders and movements, have added a new layer of complexity by arguing that right-wing populists' references to Christianity are primarily a reflection of a culturalized but largely secular 'Civilisationism' (Brubaker 2017), and that right-wing populists 'hijack' Christianity (Marzouki et al. 2016) as an exclusivist identity-marker against Islam without necessarily embracing Christianity as a faith.

The cases of Germany, France and the US seem to support such claims, as a new generation of German, French and American right-wing populists pair cultural references to Christian heritage with secular policy stances. The AfD, for instance, is one of Germany's most secular parties in its leadership and membership (Elcott et al. 2021). It has openly attacked Germany's churches over their welcoming of refugees, demanded the abolition of church privileges in taxation or education and pushed for an overhaul of Germany's church-friendly constitutional settlement of 'benevolent neutrality' (Cremer 2018; Elcott et al. 2021; Heimbach-Steins and Filipović 2017). Similarly, in France the RN has remained absent from the Catholic grassroots demonstrations against gay marriage, while styling itself as the main champion of a strictly secularist reading of *laïcité*, and defender of women and gay rights against Islam (Almeida 2017; Perrineau 2017; Roy 2019). Even in the US, where the Trump administration sought to balance clashes with America's churches on immigration and race relation by catering to the Christian right on social issues, observers have argued that Trumpism has been primarily driven by the rise of a 'post-Christian right' which is less socially conservative but more radical in its opposition to immigration, Islam and racial equality (Beinart 2017; Carney 2019; Kaufmann 2018). Given this apparent tension between right-wing populists' religion-laden rhetoric and some of their seemingly less-Christian policy positions, the question arises how these parties' politics are perceived by the Christian communities in Germany, France and the US.

At first glance a review of election results, survey data and existing quantitative studies suggests a high degree of variation across the three countries. In the US, Christians – and white Evangelicals in particular – appeared to be among Donald Trump's most loyal supporters: 81% of white Evangelicals and strong majorities of white Catholics (64%) and other Protestants (58%) voted for Trump in 2016 (Smith and Martinez 2016) and continued to support him throughout his presidency (Schwadel and Smith 2019). By contrast, in Western Europe scholars have identified a historical 'religion gap' or 'religious vaccination effect' among Christian voters *against* voting for right-wing populists (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Dargent 2016; Immerzeel et al. 2013; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2021). In Germany this hypothesis dates back to

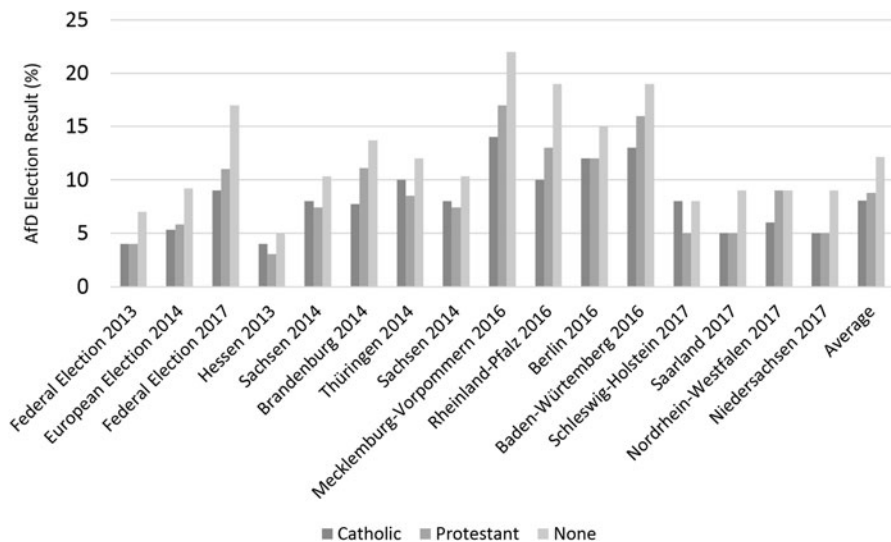


Figure 1. AfD Results in Germany by Religious Affiliation (in %)

Catholics' disproportional rejections of Nazism in the 1930s and found further expression in Christian voters' rejection of far-right parties after the war (Falter 1991). An examination of recent election data suggests that this dynamic also applies to the AfD. As illustrated in Figure 1, the latter has significantly underperformed among Catholics and Protestants in all European, state and federal elections, and in a recent analysis Pascal Siegers and Alexander Jedinger (2021: 149) confirmed a 'religious immunity to populism' among Christians in Germany. In France, the FN/RN similarly performed historically significantly worse among churchgoing Catholics compared with other parts of the population (Dargent 2016; Perrineau 2014). In the 2012 presidential election, for instance, only 4% of practising Catholics chose Marine Le Pen compared with 18% of the general population (Du Cleuziou 2019: 312). Pascal Perrineau concluded that 'the nationalist drive that feeds the far right in France always stumbled against the block of practising Catholics who yield far less to the temptation of the FN than most other parts of the population' (Perrineau 2014: 39). Adding to the image of complexity, the religious immunity hypothesis in France was recently called into question during the presidential election of 2017, in which 38% of Catholics voted for Le Pen, compared with only 34% of the overall population (IFOP 2017).

Yet, in spite of this high level of variation on the surface of electoral outcomes, a closer inspection of German, French and American Christians' attitudes and socio-demographic backgrounds reveal a more uniform development underneath: namely a growing schism between the traditional religious right and a new secular right. In the US, the 2016 GOP primary results, for instance, showed that Donald Trump's earliest and most solid supporters were not the most pious, but religiously unaffiliated voters. Throughout the primaries Trump performed twice as well among those Republicans who never attend church (57%) as among frequent church-goers

(29%) (Carney 2019: 121). Moreover, studies found a growing attitudinal divergence between the Trumpist electoral core and conservative Christians, with Ruth Melkonian-Hoover and Lyman Kellstedt stressing that between 2011 and 2018, just as anti-immigrant sentiment surged among Trump's base of secular conservatives, American Evangelicals 'increased their support [for immigration] over time' (Ekins 2018; McAlister 2018; Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt 2019: 58). Benjamin Knoll found that frequent religious practice was strongly correlated with more openness towards immigration among Catholics and Mainline Protestants (Knoll 2009), a finding that was confirmed by Ekins, who suggested that for all denominations 'religious participation may have a moderating effect on politics, particularly on matters of race, immigration, and identity' (Ekins 2018: 25).

This observation is symptomatic of a more comprehensive shift towards internationalism in many US Christian communities since the 1990s as a result of their global engagement and racial diversification (McAlister 2018). Contemporary American Catholicism, for instance, owes much of its vitality to the influx of non-white and especially Hispanic believers and although less noted in the literature, similar demographic trends have taken hold within America's Evangelical community (McAlister 2018). By contrast, studies show that Trump's core base of working-class white people have undergone a process of rapid secularization in recent years (Carney 2019; Wilcox et al. 2012), leading to the emergence of a growing number of non-practising 'cultural Evangelicals' who might culturally identify as 'Christian' or 'Evangelical', but are increasingly dissociated from churches, congregations and evangelical beliefs. Like their European counterparts, these non-practising 'cultural Christians' often prove more sympathetic towards right-wing populist positions and candidates than their churchgoing brethren (Campbell and Putnam 2011; Ekins 2018; Knoll 2009). Peter Beinart suggests that this was because 'when cultural conservatives disengage from organised religion, they tend to redraw the boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasising race and nation' (Beinart 2017).

The German and French case studies seem to substantiate such claims. In Germany, for instance, scholars have shown that after the AfD's ideological transformation from a bourgeois Eurosceptic party to an anti-immigration, right-wing populist party in 2015, its core constituency shifted from disproportionately well-educated, upper-middle class, socially conservative and often church-affiliated voters, to a new electorate of less educated, working-class voters who held more secular attitudes (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). In fact, Marianne Heimbach-Steins and Alexander Filipović (2017: 150) observed that the post-2015 AfD shared 'a striking similarity in social structure with the votership of the (left-wing populist) party die Linke', with both electorates found to be disproportionately 'narcissistic', 'nostalgic' and 'pessimistic', as well as disproportionately irreligious (Gaston and Hilhorst 2018; Siegers and Jedinger 2021).

In France, the context of the anti-gay-marriage *Manif pour Tous* demonstrations in 2013 showcased a similar chasm between the Catholic bourgeoisie and the RN. Although observers had often assumed that the *Manif pour Tous* and its political successor organization *Sens Commun* were essentially 'an anti-gay marriage Tea party French style' fuelled by the far right (Du Cleuziou 2019; Stille 2014), the



RN's leadership remained markedly absent from the *Manif pour Tous* (*Nouvel Observateur* 2016). Moreover, the Catholic base that drove the demonstrations often turned out to be diametrically opposed to the RN's electorate in terms of attitudes and sociodemographic background. Although socially more conservative, France's practising Catholics were, for example, more sympathetic towards migrants and Islam than the French in general (Geisser 2018; More in Common 2018). By contrast, Olivier Roy observed that 'in terms of moral values [the electorate of the RN] is more liberal' (Roy 2016: 90, 2019). Moreover, devout Catholics and the electorate of Marine Le Pen came from opposite ends of the social ladder, with the RN electorate consisting primarily of young, rural, male and working-class voters, whereas the contrary is true for France's practising Christians, among whom women, the elderly and well-off city dwellers are overrepresented (Mayer 2016; Perrineau 2017). The fact that French congregations are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural creates further tensions with the RN's ethno-nationalist tendencies (Fourquet and Le Bras 2014).

Taken together, these observations suggest that under the surface of varying electoral results, in all three countries there is a growing attitudinal and sociodemographic divergence between practising Christians and right-wing populist movements. This finding is in line with demographic trends such as the rapid secularization of the white working class in Western countries and might help us understand the observation of 'religious immunity' to the populist right in Germany, France and even in the 2016 GOP primaries in the US. It fails to explain, however, why after the GOP primaries American Christians diverged so strongly from their German and French brethren in their support for the populist right, or why French Christians' religious immunity appeared to wane in the 2017 presidential elections. To explore additional factors determining this support, the next two sections shift from the analysis of voting behaviour and attitudes to an examination of the role of elite actors in the political and religious sphere.

### **(A lack of) Christian alternatives: mainstream parties' role in strengthening religious immunity to populism**

The factor most commonly considered in the literature in this context is the role of right-wing populists' political competition. Studies have emphasized the centrality of mainstream parties (especially conservative or Christian democratic parties) for religious immunity (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2021). The underlying argument is that this immunity is indirect, resting on the mechanism that, in countries with strong Christian democratic parties, Christian voters are simply 'not "available" to these (right-wing populist) parties, because they are still firmly attached to Christian Democratic or conservative parties' (Arzheimer and Carter 2009: 985).

The comparison of the German, French and American cases confirms the importance of mainstream political parties. In the case of Germany, for instance, scholars have argued that the existence of a powerful Christian Democratic party (the CDU/CSU), which maintained ownership over key Christian issues and provided a political home for Christian voters, is a key explanatory variable for the strength of the religious immunization effect (Siegers and Jedinger 2021). This

hypothesis was echoed by senior German politicians and church leaders. Former CDU general-secretary Hermann Gröhe, for instance, argued in our interview that ‘it is certainly also a task of the CDU to provide conservative Christians with a political home’ and, as a result of it fulfilling this role, ‘social debates such as those surrounding gay marriage have not been turned into a “culture war” in the same way as in other countries’ (Interview Gröhe 2018). Similarly, the then president of the Conference of German Bishops, Cardinal Marx, emphasized that historically ‘many Catholics have often had a close bond with the CDU/CSU but going beyond this and further to the right has never been imaginable for Catholics’ (Interview Marx 2018).

Yet, while continued loyalty to the CDU/CSU may have made many Christian voters unavailable to the AfD, a factor that has often been overlooked in the literature is the analogous role played by other German mainstream parties. Thus, although the CDU/CSU is regarded as the primary party for Catholic voters, the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens have often offered political homes for German Protestants (Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Siegers et al. 2016). Siegers and Jedinger (2021: 163) hence found that ‘Protestant identification with the Social Democrats results in a similar immunization effect against the RWP [right-wing populist] vote as Catholic identification with the Christian Democrats’. This may partly be due to their relative refraining from engaging in left-wing identity politics, which helped block the AfD’s attempts to reshape the debate in identitarian terms and to repoliticize religion as a cultural-identity marker (Bornschier 2012). Another critical factor may be that, unlike other Western European mainstream left parties, which have embraced increasingly secular politics and rhetoric, Germany’s SPD and Greens largely resisted such trends. As former Bundestag president Wolfgang Thierse (SPD) put it during our interview: ‘So far, secularists and atheists have not gained the upper hand in the SPD. ... This has also not shifted in the last few years, even in light of the AfD’ (Interview Thierse 2018). Similarly, Katrin Göring-Eckardt, then parliamentary leader of the Green Party, emphasized that there have so far been no tendencies towards secularist reactions to the AfD’s religious references in her party ‘because what the AfD is doing there is so dubious that it is not taken seriously by us’ (Interview Göring-Eckardt 2018). Germany’s centre-left parties’ continued openness to religious voters seems, thus, to have amplified religious immunity to right-wing populism by providing religious voters with electoral alternatives to the Centre-Right.

A look at France suggests that the lack of such alternatives might help explain the apparent erosion of the religion gap in the second round of the 2017 presidential elections. At first glance French Catholics appeared to have a fixed political home in the centre-right Les Républicains (LR), just as German Catholics had in the CDU/CSU. Although this association is less straightforward in contemporary France, because the importance of *laïcité* effectively meant that, as LR MP Xavier Breton put it, ‘in France we don’t have a Christian democratic party and if we had one they wouldn’t talk about it’ (Interview Breton 2019),<sup>4</sup> studies show a historically ‘strong orientation towards the right among Catholics, particularly the practising ones’ (Dargent 2016: 20). Initially the 2017 presidential election seemed to confirm this rule when in its first round 46% of practising Catholics and 55% of the most frequent churchgoers cast their vote for the LR candidate François Fillon,



compared with only 20.1% of the general population (IFOP 2017). Yet, while this support demonstrated Catholics' continued attachment to the centre right, it also epitomized a new dilemma for Catholics. For Catholics' turnout was insufficient to enable Fillon to enter the second round of the presidential elections. In France's bipolar political system, this posed a predicament for Catholic voters: being no longer numerous enough to sustain the LR as one of France's top two parties, they were forced to look at political alternatives. However, unlike in Germany, the French centre left had historically often defined itself in opposition to the church; and while there had been a resurgence of a Christian socialist tradition in the 1980s (epitomized by figures such as Jacques Delors), recently, anti-clerical tendencies had re-intensified with the advance of secularization, the repoliticization of *laïcité* and the legalization of gay marriage (Fourquet 2018).

In light of the Parti Socialiste's (PS) own crushing defeat in the 2017 presidential election and near annihilation in subsequent elections, one might think that its secularist tendencies could be of lesser concern for Catholics. However, as PS MP Dominique Potier noted in our interview, the socialists' secularist current did not disappear after the election defeat; 'by contrast they rather joined the new En Marche movement' (Interview Potier 2019). Given the emerging bipolarity between Emmanuel Macron's La République en Marche (LREM) and the RN, a secularist turn of Macron's party under the influence of this influx would significantly dampen its prospects of replacing the LR as Catholics' political home and alternative to the RN. At the time of the interviews, such a development was no foregone conclusion. Indeed, many Christian leaders still expressed great hopes for Macron, referencing his upbeat remarks about religions' positive influence in society and initial hints at a more inclusive reading of *laïcité*. Yet interviewees also reported that recent developments had stifled many such hopes. Jean-Louis Bianco, the president of the observatory of *laïcité*, for instance, emphasized that although 'Emmanuel Macron had more liberal positions ... there was a strong *laïcité* influence (within the LREM)' (Interview Bianco 2019). LREM MP Françoise Dumas similarly confirmed that in the debate 'between a more liberal Anglo-Saxon conception [of state church relations] and a much more secular conception framed by the law of 1905, the president has now ruled: It's the law [of 1905] pure and hard' (Interview Dumas 2019).

Given the LREM's parallel shift towards more libertarian positions on social issues such as embryo research, assisted suicide, surrogacy and assisted reproductive technology for gay couples, many Catholics felt confronted with what Sens Commun president Christophe Billan described as a choice between the 'chaos' of the RN and the 'decay' of Emmanuel Macron's socially liberal agenda (Interview Billan 2019). Certainly, frequent churchgoers still disproportionately supported Macron's LREM during the 2017 and subsequent elections (IFOP 2017), suggesting the religious vaccination effect's limitation to the most faithful, rather than its complete erosion. However, the weakness of the French centre right, combined with a perceived lack of alternatives, is likely to further delimit religious immunity in France.

Party loyalty and a perceived lack of alternatives also emerge as key factors in shaping Donald Trump's ability to attract many initially sceptical Christian voters in the US – albeit in different ways. For one, rather than strengthening faith-based

inhibitions against right-wing populism by binding Christians to a competitor party, American faith voters' long-standing attachment to 'God's Own Party' (Campbell and Putnam 2011) helps explain why many Christians voted for Trump during the general election even if they had opposed him during the primaries. Indeed, white Evangelicals were the most likely group to say that they supported Trump, mainly because he was the Republican nominee (38% of them gave this reason, compared with 28% of GOP voters in general and 13% of irreligious Trump supporters) (Smith 2016). Just as 'group loyalty is the stronger motivator of opinion than ideological principles' (Barber and Pope 2019: 38), for many Christians, party loyalty seemed to supersede faith-based objections to Trump.

However, while party loyalty may help understand why many traditionally Republican faith voters fell in line during the general election, it is insufficient to account for the significant number of Christian voters who had voted Democrat only a few years earlier but changed sides in 2016. More than 10% of Mainline Protestants, one in five Catholics and a third of white Evangelicals who had voted for Obama in 2008 migrated to the Republican candidate in 2016 (Smith and Martinez 2016). For these voters, even more important than loyalty to the Republican Party (positive partisanship) seemed to have been their rejection of the Democratic alternative (negative partisanship) (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Pew Research Center 2019). Pew Research found, for instance, that among Catholic, Evangelical and Mainline Protestant Trump voters, Trump's single most attractive feature was that 'he is not Hillary Clinton', with 76% of white Evangelicals citing this as a 'major reason' for supporting Trump in 2016 (Smith 2016). Trying to understand this alienation from the Democratic candidate, some observers have pointed to underlying sexism and personal animosity against Hillary Clinton, others to animosities towards minority candidates due to white Christian nationalism (Silva 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). These factors historically played an important role and certainly did so again in 2016. However, most leaders interviewed for this study stressed that even more important were Democrats' lack of faith-outreach and the impression that Christian voters were no longer welcome in the Democratic coalition.

Insiders like Eric Sapp, who had advised hundreds of Democratic candidates on faith outreach, described how, after 2012 'we were suddenly hearing from all these campaigns we were working with that "if we do faith outreach any longer, we don't stand a chance of getting any money from the central party"' (Interview Sapp 2019). Instead, he explained that suddenly 'our candidates were being attacked as "Democrats in name only" by the leftists who argued that the party needed to get rid of them' (Interview Sapp 2019). Former Obama White House official Michael Wear similarly observed that Democratic faith outreach 'ultimately failed' less because Christians weren't receptive, but rather 'due to forces within the party that were completely against any sort of detente or plural view of Christianity and politics' (Interview Wear 2020).

Joe Biden's presidential campaign of 2020 specifically sought to change such perceptions, making it, as the campaign's faith outreach director Josh Dickson explained, their 'first principle to make people of faith feel valued and respected in the democratic coalition, that is to show them that they are not seen as "deplorables" but as a central part of our platform' (Interview Dickson 2020). To this end,

the campaign made faith and morality a prominent part of Biden's platform; from campaign groups such as 'Believers for Biden', through TV advertisements targeting faith voters, to what Dickson described as the 'perhaps the most faith driven democratic convention in decades' (Interview Dickson 2020). While this strategy did not fundamentally reverse faith voters' traditional alignment with the Republican Party, it enabled Biden to make decisive inroads in key battle states and to overcome some of the negative partisanship that had lost Hillary Clinton so many religious Obama voters. With 24% support among white Evangelicals, 52% among Catholics and 49% among white Mainline voters, Biden received similar levels of support from these groups as Barack Obama in 2008 (24%, 54%, 45%, respectively), making him one of the most popular Democratic candidates with faith voters in recent decades (Pew, AU, AP/Votecast).

Taken together the three case studies underline the critical importance of mainstream parties' behaviour in shaping Christians' electoral responses to right-wing populism. Thus, while traditional party alignment with the centre right made German and French Christian voters unavailable to the populist right, it boosted Donald Trump's support in the 2016 election. Meanwhile the presence (or lack) of electoral alternatives on the centre left either amplified religious immunity (as in Germany), or convinced Christian voters that the populist right was the lesser evil (as in France and the US). However, interviewees such as Josh Dickson also repeatedly hinted at another key factor in understanding Christian voters' attitude to the populist right, stressing that 'faith leader engagement has been huge for us ... to amplify the voices of faith leaders that support us in these communities has been critical'.

### **The churches' social firewall: faith leaders' role in legitimizing or tabooing right-wing populism**

The role of faith leaders in shaping right-wing populists' ability to co-opt religion for political gain is an important factor, yet it is often overlooked in the literature. Specifically, faith leaders' willingness and ability either to condone and legitimize, or to challenge and socially taboo right-wing populists' religious references seems to correlate directly with the strength of religious immunity (Cremer 2021). Scholars have long emphasized the importance of social taboos in determining social and political behaviour in general, and in voters' reaction to right-wing populist movements in particular (Douglas 2003; Haidt 2012; de Jonge 2019). Eric Kaufmann, for instance, describes how the erosion of the 'bounds of acceptable debate over immigration can set off the spiral of populist-right mobilisation' (Kaufmann 2018: 218). Elite actors play a crucial role in either maintaining or eroding such social bounds. Scholars have, for example, pointed to mainstream parties or the media as central actors in establishing social taboos around right-wing populists through a cordon sanitaire of non-cooperation or non-reporting (Heinze 2018; de Jonge 2019). Church leaders may play a similar role within congregations through public statements, sermons and social norm setting. Moreover, such taboos may be particularly powerful in religious communities, because of religious institutions' traditional role in defining social norms and because religious individuals tend to be more susceptible to social taboos than their secular neighbours (Haidt 2012).

The German, French and American case studies seem to confirm this hypothesis. In Germany, the churches' consistent and unambiguous public opposition to the AfD has been credited with creating a strong 'social firewall' in religious communities against the populist right (Cremer 2021; Elcott et al. 2021; Püttmann 2016). Thus, although initially not opposed to a new right-wing party, Germany's churches soon became one of the AfD's most prolific adversaries by clearly positioning themselves in the pro-immigration camp and shouldering much of Germany's refugee aid. They publicly argued – with explicit slights directed at the AfD's reference to Christian identity – that 'our Christian identity is particularly evident when every person who seeks refuge in our country receives humane treatment' (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2016) or that welcoming refugees and immigrants is a 'commandment of Christian responsibility' (EKD 2015). Moreover, both the Protestant and Catholic church leadership condemned AfD rhetoric as 'hate speech' (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2016) and declared the positions of the AfD leadership to 'stand in profound contradiction to the Christian faith' (Evangelisch.de 2018).

Given this clear public demarcation, the notion that disaffection to the AfD may have become associated with significant social costs among church members is intuitive and was strongly supported by interviewees. The president of the Protestant National Synod, Irmgard Schwätzer, observed that 'the difference in electoral behaviour is, above all, a result of the continuing social influence and moral authority of the churches' (Interview Schwätzer 2018). Likewise, the director of the Protestant Academy in Berlin, Christian Staffa, argued that, due to the church leadership's clear positioning, 'acting on right-wing attitudes is "blocked" differently as a Christian. [A Christian] knows that: "if I act on these attitudes, I'm really part of 'them' [the populist right] and somehow I know that's wrong"' (Interview Staffa 2018). The representative of the Catholic Bishops' Conference to the federal government, Karl Jüsten, concurred, arguing that Catholics were less likely to vote AfD because 'the Church and its leadership have openly taken a clear-cut position in rejecting this ideology' (Interview Jüsten 2018). These assessments were confirmed through outside perspectives such as that of Thomas Krüger, the president of the Federal Agency for Civic Education, who pointed to an 'inner resilience (among Christian voters), created by the clergy and their relatively clear positions against right-wing populism' (Interview Krüger 2018). Indeed, even former AfD officials like Marcus Pretzell explained that many Christians within the AfD struggled, 'precisely because they are Christians, they actually have a very hard time with the AfD ... These conservative Christians are very sensitive to warning calls and social taboos' (Interview Pretzell 2018). Other AfD interviewees explained that the 'exclusions' and 'accusations' they experienced through the churches have discouraged the AfD from further attempts to associate itself with the churches or to use Christian symbols (Interview Hampel 2018; Interview Meuthen 2018; Interview Schultner 2018). Instead many AfD leaders publicly distanced themselves from earlier pro-church positions, called on party members to leave the 'system churches', denounced the churches as 'red-green filth' or 'asylum lobby groups', and redefined the AfD as 'not a Christian party' (FAZ 2016; Hofmann 2019).

While Germany's churches thus successfully challenged the AfD's religious references in the late 2010s, for decades France's Catholic church was no less pronounced in its public opposition to the FN/RN. With repeated interventions, warning Catholics that the FN's positions were 'incompatible with the Gospel and the teaching of the church' (Cardinal Decourtray, cited in *Le Monde* 2002), individual clergy denying FN politicians the holy sacraments, and ubiquitous sermons against the FN, the institutional church appeared committed to maintaining a strong social taboo (Senneville 2015). When in 2002 Jean-Marie Le Pen first qualified for the run-off of the presidential elections, the bishops even broke their traditional *laïcité*-imposed silence on party politics and issued a statement urging Catholics not to vote FN (Lesegretain 2017; Ricard 2002). As in Germany, this social taboo appears to have been a key explanatory variable for the 'religion gap' historically observed in France. Indeed, research shows an 'institution effect' and a 'Pope Francis effect', through which whenever church authorities publicly speak out in favour of immigration or against the populist right, sympathies with the latter decreased among practising Catholics in France (Geisser 2018: 12; More in Common 2018). Interviewed RN officials confirmed such dynamics, with Marion Maréchal-Le Pen reporting that 'the social taboo around the FN continues to exist in parts of the population and in particular among Catholics' (Interview Maréchal-Le Pen 2019) and Gilbert Collard specifically singling out the norm-setting role of bishops, saying: 'It's conformism: they have demonized us and it has worked' (Interview Collard 2019).

However, in the second round of the 2017 presidential election Catholic authorities seemed to cease making use of this authority. Unlike in 2002 and in contrast to their Protestant, Muslim and Jewish colleagues, in 2017 the Catholic hierarchy gave no voting instructions against the FN, but referred voters to 'their own discernment' (Ribadeau Dumas 2017). This decision crowned a gradual process of demobilization in the church's position vis-à-vis the FN/RN since 2015, when the bishop of Toulon first broke the traditional *cordon sanitaire* by inviting Marion Maréchal-Le Pen to speak at his diocese's summer academy.

However, the findings from the interviews suggest that this shift in tone was not necessarily due to a change of attitude among senior clergy, who privately remained in unison in their rejection of the RN. Bishop Rougé stressed that 'the FN is still a neo-pagan and atheist right, and it is also a highly secularized working-class right – even some sort of a revisited communism, all of which has no affinity with Catholicism at all' (Interview Rougé 2019), while his colleague Archbishop Wintzer confirmed that 'overall the activists of the FN know very well that the bishops of France are not favourable towards the FN' (Interview Wintzer 2019).<sup>5</sup> Instead, the church's new quietness appeared driven by a broader reconceptualization of its relationship with politics: away from the vision of a broad national church and towards a minority church that seeks to save the Christian community by distancing it from secular society (Dreher 2017; Fourquet 2018; Roy 2019). As Bishop Rougé put it, given 'our marginalisation in society ... today the question of our relation to politics is rather secondary in the priorities of the church. Today we are rather mobilized for the advance of faith' (Interview Rougé 2019).

Yet, even if the reasons for the church's shift towards a more apolitical mentality were primarily demographic or theological, the erosion of non-practising Catholics'

religious immunity to the RN suggests that its consequences may be highly political, undermining the social taboo around the RN in two crucial ways. First, directly, by discouraging clergy from using their authority to criticize the RN, thus giving especially cultural Catholics who might be less aware of their leaders' private reservations, the impression that the RN was indeed '*dédiabolisé*'. And second, indirectly, by further separating religion from politics, and thereby implicitly undermining the church's moral authority in political issues in general. This risk was highlighted by Bishop Stenger, who emphasized that 'one of my hypotheses for why the taboo [around the FN] is blowing up is that religion is increasingly being privatized; ... so more and more Christians feel able to separate their conscience from the Gospel during the elections' (Interview Stenger 2019). In the long run, some interviewees cautioned that such developments may contribute to a situation in France similar to that in the US, where US faith leaders' inability or unwillingness to create a social taboo around Trumpism appeared as a key variable in understanding the lack of religious immunity there.

As in France, the results from interviews with US faith leaders suggest that this comparative lack of social taboos around right-wing populism is not necessarily a result of the faith leaders' affinity with Trumpism. On the contrary, the interviews with members of America's religious 'establishment' (including most white Evangelical leaders) suggested that they were overwhelmingly critical of Trumpism. The vice president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Vigneron, for instance, reported that 'many of the Bishops are more critical of Trump ... and I think members of the active religious communities, like the Jesuits, the Mercy Sisters etc. are perhaps the most critical' (Interview Vigneron 2019). Mainline Protestant leader and Auburn Seminary president, Katharine Henderson, stressed that 'Trump does not represent the Presbyterian church at all' (Interview Henderson 2019), and the then editor-in-chief of the Evangelical flagship newspaper *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli, added that 'all these leaders of what I would call establishment and mainstream Evangelical organizations are very much anti-Trump' (Interview Galli 2020). Privately, even members of Trump's own Faith Advisory Board admitted their scepticism, with one stressing that 'there were 16 candidates in the Republican primary. Donald Trump was my 17th choice'.

In trying to understand why faith leaders' scepticism did not translate into the same social taboo among their flock as had been the case in Germany or France, interviewees stressed two factors. First, that the decentralized structure of the American religious landscape limited Christian leaders' *ability* to 'speak for Christianity' publicly in the way their French and German counterparts could. Thus, while America's religion-friendly separation of Church and State has created a religious marketplace full of diversity and vitality, the same diversity also means that no single set of leaders can speak with the level of authority for American Christianity as, for instance, an alliance of Protestant and Catholic bishops could in Germany or France (Campbell and Putnam 2011; Cremer 2021). Such dynamics were exacerbated by an accelerating crisis of religious hierarchies in America (Chaves 2011; Olson 2008). The president of the Institute for Religion and Democracy Mark Tooley emphasized that 'one of the explanations for Trump's success' was that especially among Protestants 'the big story in American religion is the



collapse of the denominational traditions and the decentralization of religion in America' (Interview Tooley 2020). Former co-host of the National Prayer Breakfast and Republican Congressman Randy Hultgren similarly stressed that 'with regards to Evangelical faith leaders there really isn't a Billy Graham right now, so it's a little bit more diffused as to who the leaders of faith are' (Interview Hultgren 2020), while conservative commentator Pete Wehner observed that nobody knows 'who is the most prominent Mainline leader these days' (Interview Wehner 2019). Religious freedom activist Stanley Carlson-Thies argued that this lack of authority and deference was particularly strong in Protestant denominations, because 'we don't have the Pope or somebody who can stand above it all' (Interview Carlson-Thies 2019). However, even Catholic interviewees reported an erosion of institutional authority, leading one of them to conclude off the record that unlike in France, you cannot see a strong 'Pope Francis effect' against Trump in the US. Given this lack of formal hierarchies and prominent leaders, it was comparatively easy for Trump's White House Faith Advisory Board to legitimize Trumpism in the eyes of many faith voters even if most of the Evangelical 'establishment' remained critical.

Amplifying on these structural limitations to American faith leaders' *ability to be heard*, the second key factor highlighted was a reported lack of *willingness to speak out* against Trumpism. Indeed, surveys show that half of American pastors felt limited in their ability to speak out on moral and social issues, and that only one in five (21%) felt comfortable speaking out about specific political actors (Barna 2019). During our interviews, faith leaders confirmed that Trumpism was a particularly delicate topic, with Pete Wehner emphasizing that 'in my experience, many pastors who are conservative politically are alarmed and worried about Trump, but they don't speak out' (Interview Wehner 2019). While some interviewees traced this silence back to theological, historical and external factors, most emphasized concerns about running into conflict with congregants or donors as key reasons. Evangelical leader Rob Schenck, for instance, explained that in America's marketplace of religion 'it's very difficult for Evangelical clergy to speak up, particularly if you are compensated within these systems, if your livelihood depends on it. So, self-preservation is why these [anti-Trump] voices have quieted' (Interview Schenck 2020). Jackie Johns from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary reported that 'religious leaders in conservative churches who opposed Trump were very quickly marginalized to the point that if they were pastors, many of them lost their churches, or if they kept their churches, they lost large portions of their congregation', making 'most conservative clergy who are opposed to Trump so fearful of taking a stance against Trump that we don't know who they are' (Interview Johns 2019).

Taken together, these structural limitations significantly reduced American faith leaders' ability and willingness to challenge and taboo Trumpism in the same way that their German and French counterparts challenged and tabooed the AfD or RN. Put in the context of findings in the literature about the 'self-fulfilling spiral of populist-right mobilisation', in which the erosion of social taboos increases the populist right's vote share, which in turn further erodes social taboos (Kaufmann 2018), the silence of American faith leaders emerges as a crucial factor in

accelerating many American Christians' 'conversion' to the populist right, whereas German and French faith leaders' outspoken opposition had a significant impact in bolstering Western European Christians' religious immunity to right-wing populism.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, these findings from Germany, France and the US allow us to distil several lessons about the reaction of Christian communities to right-wing populists' religious references. First, that under the surface of electoral variation between overwhelming electoral support of Christian voters for Donald Trump in the US, and powerful religious immunity to right-wing populism in Germany and France, there is a growing attitudinal and sociodemographic schism between the traditional religious right and a new secular populist right in all three countries. Second, that the extent to which this schism translates into religious immunity in terms of voting behaviour depends on the behaviour of elite factors and in particular on the availability of Christian alternatives in the party system. And third, that another often-overlooked factor in explaining Christian voters' reactions to the populist right is the behaviour of religious leaders and especially their ability and willingness either to legitimize the populist right or to erect social taboos around them.

These empirical findings are of some consequence for the debate about right-wing populism and religion in Western democracies. For one because they challenge traditional assumptions about the nexus between conservative Christianity and the populist right. Thus, instead of claims about the revival of America's old religious right and its expansion to Europe, this research suggests that right-wing populism is rather linked to the processes of secularization and the consequent rise of a new post-religious right in Western Europe and the US, which is distinct and often politically, culturally and sociodemographically opposed to Christian beliefs and institutions. This finding complements discussions in the literature about how right-wing populists' culturalized and identitarian approach to religion differs from that of Christian democratic or conservative parties, as well as about the growing strength of secular white nationalist currents within the populist right (Brubaker 2017; Haynes 2019; Marzouki et al. 2016; Roy 2019). However, this article also raises new questions about the conditions under which the old religious and the new secular right might clash or cooperate. Specifically, it lends empirical support to the hypothesis that religiosity might work as a powerful inoculator to populist appeals (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2021) but stresses the importance of political and religious elites. Adding to academic discussions on elite actors' 'responses' to the radical right (Bornschiefer 2012; de Jonge 2019), this finding underlines the importance of electoral alternatives in the party system as well as of the maintenance of powerful cordons sanitaires and social taboos around far-right parties and leaders. In particular, centre-left parties' potential role as 'buffers' and electoral alternatives (provided they remain open to religious voters and avoid fuelling populist identity politics), as well as churches' and faith leaders' role as powerful norm-setters are often overlooked in the literature but emerged as critical factors in understanding variations between Christian responses to populism in Germany, France and the US.

This is an important contribution to broader theoretical discussions about voting behaviour, as it suggests that the latter does not simply depend on the match between the ideological profiles of a voter and that party, but also on the wider party system, the availability of party alternatives and the behaviour of other elite actors. By implication, differences in election outcomes are not necessarily always indicators of significant cultural or sociodemographic ('opinion') changes in the electorate. Instead, the comparison of Christian voting behaviour in Germany, France and the US shows that electoral variations may also occur primarily as a result of differences or changes in the political supply side, with parties in some countries creating different electoral outlets for political voices that may also be present in other countries but be represented there in different ways or not at all. These insights can help shift the academic debate from (over-)generalizations about *whether or not* religion or other ideological sociodemographic factors drive voting for right-wing populist parties, to the perhaps more appropriate question of *under which contextual conditions* they may do so.

It remains to be empirically tested whether the findings from the German, French and American case studies are also applicable to other countries, and how they may, for instance, play out differently in Central or Eastern Europe, with their different trends of secularization, different institutional settlements of church–state relations and different traditional party systems. Nonetheless, the findings of this research suggest that far from being helpless bystanders, faith leaders and mainstream politicians can play an outsized role as the populist wave breaks over the West; not only by shaping right-wing populists' electoral fortunes but also by determining what role religion will come to play in Western societies going forward.

**Supplementary material.** To view the supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.18>.

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## Notes

1 While historically the term 'right-wing populism' has often been interpreted differently in the German, French or American contexts, recent attempts by right-wing populist leaders to connect their movements through transnational populist organizations have increased terminological coherence and facilitated their comparability.

2 The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. Interviewees were fully informed about the research project and provided written and/or verbal consent to the use of the material. Consent was obtained prior to the investigation via email and again verbally at the time of the investigation. In addition, each interviewee was sent a list of direct quotes to be used, providing them with the opportunity to review, retract or anonymize material and provide feedback prior to publication. Ethical approval for this procedure was sought from the author's academic institution and was granted in June 2018 (for interviews in Germany), February 2019 (for interviews in France) and October 2019 (for interviews in the US). For a list of interviewees see the Online Appendix.

3 While in the early 2010s the FN/RN briefly toned down its religious rhetoric to the benefit of its embrace of secularism (*laïcité*) under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, it has recently re-intensified its religious

references, for instance, by presenting itself as the protector of Christian minorities abroad, by pushing for the public display of nativity scenes or by stressing France's Catholic identity (Fourquet 2018).

4 Although it is important to recognize that unlike in other secular countries French *laïcité* does not explicitly prohibit denominational parties and that a (small) Christian democratic party currently exists (the PCD).

5 Even Monsignor Rey sought to relativize his invitation of Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, stressing that 'there is no relationship between the RN and the church: I invited Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, but I also invited a representative from the radical left the following year' (Interview Rey 2019).

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