

# The religious cleavage in Switzerland, 1971-2007

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## 1. Introduction

Switzerland is a heterogeneous society, characterized by several lines of social divisions. In addition to a social cleavage, which is reflected by an economic left-right divide and is present in most West European societies, the Swiss society is also fragmented in religious and linguistic terms. While the linguistic divide may at first sight appear to be the most evident division in Swiss society, with four linguistic regions, its political impact has been relatively limited. True, there are important differences in political sensibilities between the linguistic groups, but they have not given rise to a proper linguistic cleavage. In contrast to other multilingual countries, such as Belgium or Canada, no political party of national significance seeks to mobilize a single linguistic group on the basis of a corresponding regional identity. The coexistence of different religions, by contrast, has played a central role in structuring Swiss politics. Together with the class cleavage, it has long been one of the two central lines of divisions characterizing electoral competition. While the class cleavage structured voters' and parties' preferences on an economic left-right dimension, the religious cleavage was associated with a second, cultural dimension. Analyses based on the first Swiss electoral surveys in the 1970s have shown that the religious cleavage was indeed the one with the largest impact on voting choices (Lijphart 1979; Trechsel 1995).

Yet, as in most West European countries, a process of electoral dealignment has affected the strength of traditional cleavages, of both class and religion. As far as the latter cleavage is concerned, the process of secularization has led to a decrease in the share of Catholics and Protestants in the electorate, and to a decline in religious practice. While church affiliation remains at a relatively high level, the number of people who regularly attend religious services has diminished more rapidly (Nicolet and Tresch 2009). Most observers concur that the political and electoral relevance of religion has strongly declined over the previous decades (e.g., Trechsel 1995; Lachat 2007).

The aim of this article is to present an overview over the developments that have affected the religious cleavage in Switzerland since the 1970s. Following the classical definition of Bartolini and Mair (1990), a political division requires to fulfil three conditions in order to qualify as a social cleavage: a structural basis opposing different social groups, a set of common values or interests shared by the members of these groups, and the political articulation of these interests by political parties or other types of organizations. This paper

will follow this threefold distinction, examining in turn the development of the structural basis of the religious cleavage, the relation between religion and ideological orientation, and, finally, the impact of religion on voting choices. To this end, I rely on data from Swiss national election studies, for the period from 1971 to 2007.

The next section presents the role that the religious cleavage has traditionally played in Swiss politics. Section 3 discusses how the traditional cleavages of class and religion have been influenced by a process of dealignment. I also review hypotheses about a possible transformation of the religious cleavage, from a divide based on confession to one based on religiosity. Section 4 introduces the data and variables from Swiss national election studies, on which the empirical analyses are based. The following section presents the corresponding results.

## **2. The traditional religious cleavage**

As in several other West European countries, the Swiss political space has traditionally been structured by two dimensions (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008): an economic divide corresponding to the traditional class cleavage, and a cultural dimension. These dimensions underline both the issue preferences of voters and the political positions of parties. The nature of the economic dimension has been relatively stable over time. It corresponds to a conflict between pro-state and pro-market views. The cultural dimension, by contrast, has been affected by several changes. In the post-World War II period, it was mainly influenced by the religious cleavage, as was the case in several other West European countries (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). It corresponded to conflicts over issues linked with moral values and Christian ethics.

Empirical analyses based on the first national election studies, realized in the 1970s, have confirmed the importance of the religious dimension. As regards first the ideological orientation and issues preferences of voters, several studies have shown that the cultural dimension of the political space was strongly related to the traditional religious cleavage (Inglehart and Sidjanski 1975, 1976; Kerr 1987). This cleavage was also central for understanding citizens' voting choices. Lijphart (1979) and Trechsel (1995; see also Hug and Trechsel 2002) have compared the relative importance of several cleavages in explaining

party preferences. Both come to the conclusion that the religious cleavage was the most important line of division, surpassing the effects of both linguistic and social class differences.

The religious dimension has also long been central to understanding electoral competition in Switzerland for another reason. The Swiss cantons, the “units” of the federal state, differ in terms of the religious composition of their inhabitants. While some cantons are dominated by Catholics, others are religiously mixed (and were originally mainly Protestant). These differences are reflected in the configuration of parties in competition. This has led to different forms of the religious cleavage (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). In Catholic cantons, there is a strong opposition between Catholics and secular groups. This is reflected at the partisan level by the opposition between two moderate right-wing parties, the Christian Democratic Party (CVP) and the Liberal Party (FDP). In Protestant and religiously mixed cantons, by contrast, the religious cleavage has traditionally opposed Protestants and Catholics. In such a context, the CVP is opposed to both the FDP and the Swiss People’s Party (SVP). In the traditionally Protestant regions, there is also one party which is explicitly Protestant, the Evangelical People’s Party (EVP). But its importance at the national level is relatively limited.

This “traditional” configuration of the political space was typical of the post-war period. It has however been influenced by several developments, to which I turn in the following section.

### **3. The effects of dealignment and secularization**

In the past decades, the traditional cleavages of class and religion have been affected by several important developments. Many scholars have observed that the social cleavages that long gave their stability to party systems have eroded. The class and religious cleavages, which have been the dominant political oppositions in many Western democracies, have lost part of their power to structure individual votes. They have not entirely disappeared, but their importance is challenged as the social structure on which they are rooted changes and as new issues arise, which do not fit along these traditional oppositions. This general argument is usually called the “dealignment” hypothesis. Its main contention is that the importance of

traditional social cleavages has decreased and that they may be replaced by new political oppositions (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Franklin, Mackie, and Valen 1992).

In the case of the religious cleavage, the most important source of change is a trend towards secularization. It means that religion loses the important role it had traditionally played. It is a process characterized by an increased share of people who are not affiliated to any church, and to a decline in religious practice (Nicolet and Tresch 2009). It also means that religion loses parts of the “guiding” role it may have played in other domains. One would thus expect that people rely less strongly on their religious beliefs when taking, for instance, decisions in the political domain. These changes affecting the religious cleavage can be separated between a “structural” and a “behavioural” component (Lachat 2007). The structural part of the dealignment process regards changes in the size of social groups, that is, in the proportion of Christian voters and in the frequency with which they attend religious services. In the case of Switzerland, the proportion of Catholics and Protestants in the population has declined significantly, but church affiliation remains at a relatively high level. The frequency of church attendance, in contrast, has declined more rapidly. These two evolutions mean that religious parties, in particular the CVP, faces a diminution in the size of their core group of supporters. Furthermore, the religious cleavage has also been weakened by behavioural dealignment. That is, even among practicing Catholics, the impact of religion on political attitudes and voting choice is likely to have declined, as a consequence of the secularization process.

In parallel to the weakening of traditional cleavages, new issues have become more salient and have influenced the nature of the cultural dimension. Central among these is the rise of post-materialist values and of issues associated with New Politics and with the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s (Inglehart 1977; van Deth and Scarbrough 1995; Dalton 2002). The resulting dimension has been labelled the ‘New politics’ dimension, the ‘libertarian–authoritarian’ dimension (Kitschelt 1994, 1995), or the ‘GAL–TAN’ dimension (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002) (Green–Alternative–Libertarian vs. Traditional–Authoritarian–Nationalism). More recently, the content of the cultural dimension seems to have changed again under the influence of globalization and of the process of European integration. The associated economic, cultural, and political forms of competition have given rise to new political conflicts at the national level (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). The issues of immigration and of European integration, in particular, have become more salient in Western Europe and they have become central in structuring voters’ preferences and party positions.

All of these developments point to a weakening role of the religious cleavage in Switzerland, which has been confirmed by several empirical studies (Trechsel 1995; Nabholz 1998; Hug and Trechsel 2002; Lachat 2007). Yet, some authors have suggested that this cleavage may persist in a different form. In other words, we may witness a process of *realignment*, that is, the transformation of the traditional religious cleavage and the emergence of new, stable alignments based on religion or religiosity. One such possibility is the transformation from a confessional cleavage, opposing Protestants and Catholics, to a cleavage of religiosity. Geissbühler (1999), for instance, has analysed the political preferences of Catholics and concludes that this group does not have distinct attitudes anymore. The relevant factor today is not confession, but whether one regularly goes to church or not. The political attitudes of non Catholics differ only slightly from those of Catholics. But there are important differences among the latter, between frequent churchgoers and non-practicing Catholics. This is similar to what has been demonstrated, for instance, in Germany (Schnell and Kohler 1995; Wolf 1996).

Another argument against the hypothesis of a declining religious cleavage has been suggested by Nicolet and Tresch (2009). They agree that religiosity may be more important than the mere affiliation to a church. But they emphasize that attending religious services is only one aspect of people's degree of religiosity. It corresponds to an institutional aspect, indicating to which degree people belong to a church. This dimension is close to the simple distinction based on church attendance. However, these authors also account for a spiritual dimension, which captures whether citizens express spiritual concerns and believe in the Christian faith. By combining the 'belonging' and 'believing' dimensions, Nicolet and Tresch (2009) offer a more detailed typology of religious (or non-religious) groups. They expect both dimensions to be important when analysing the impact of religiosity on people's attitudes and behaviour.

#### **4. Data and operationalization**

This study will examine the empirical relevance of the religious cleavage by relying on data from Swiss national election studies. Such surveys were conducted for all elections since 1971. But for reasons of data availability and data quality, only those studies realized in the

1970s and since 1995 can be included.<sup>1</sup> Data from the most recent study, realized at the occasion of the October 2011 elections, are unfortunately not yet available.

As far as religious groups are concerned, I consider both people's religious affiliation and their degree of religiosity. I distinguish between Catholics, Protestants, and a third group including both respondents from a different confession and those without any religious affiliation. As regards religiosity, I rely on a question on the frequency with which respondents attend religious services. The information is summarized using a dummy variable, that distinguishes those who go to church at least once a month (the "devout" Catholics and Protestants) from the other respondents.

Regarding citizens' ideological orientation, I rely on their self-placement on a left-right scale. The exact wording and number of answer categories has varied slightly over the years, but all corresponding questions point to the same "general" left-right scale (i.e., not only an economic left-right scale). For voting choice, the party supported in the corresponding election is considered. The Swiss party system is highly fragmented, which means that some grouping of parties is necessary. For the present analysis, parties are grouped into four ideological families: left-wing, centre, liberal right-wing, and conservative right-wing parties. Each of these groups of parties contains one of the main four parties: the Social Democratic Party (SPS) on the left, the Christian Democratic Party (CVP) in the centre group, the Liberal Party (FDP) in the liberal right-wing group, and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in the group of conservative right-wing parties. The centre group contains only parties with a clear Christian affiliation (with one exception): besides the CVP, it includes two other smaller Christian social parties (CSP, PICS), as well as the Evangelical People's Party (EVP). The exception is the League of Independents (LdU).

## **5. Results**

I start the analysis by considering the evolution of the size of the religious groups, that is, by looking at the religious cleavage's structural basis. Table 1 shows how the size of the five groups of citizens changed over the years. In order to work with the same sample of voters for

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<sup>1</sup> See Lachat (2007) for an overview over the availability of Swiss election studies up to 2003, as well as the corresponding technical information. More information on the 2007 study can be found in Lutz (2008).

all analyses, these figures are based only on those citizens who did vote in the corresponding election. The most obvious change in the size of these groups is the strong increase in the number of respondents who are neither Catholic nor Protestant. This category includes both non-religious citizens and those of another religion. While this group included less than five per cent of voters in 1971, it has grown continuously over the years and now makes up for a quarter of the electorate. Among Catholics, there is a clear decline in the frequency of Church attendance. Among Protestants, by contrast, the number of frequent churchgoers was already relatively low in the 1970s and has not changed much since then.

<Table 1>

As these data are based on election surveys and as they include only voters, they may not represent the most adequate source for drawing conclusions on the evolution of religiosity in Switzerland. However, other data sources show a similar decline in the frequency of church attendance among Christians. On the basis of data from the World Values Survey, Nicolet and Tresch (2009) show for instance that the proportion of regular churchgoers has diminished by about 40 per cent from 1989 to 2007. Clearly, the core group of voters of the Christian Democratic Party, the party most clearly associated with the religious cleavage, has strongly eroded over the last decades.

The next “level” of the religious cleavage pertains to citizens’ issue and ideological orientation. The most commonly used dimension to describe citizens’ general political orientation is the left-right scale. Figure 1 shows the average self-placement of four groups of citizens. For this purpose, the ideological scale is recoded to the 0-1 range. Like in the above analysis, the sample is limited to voters. As the average values are all relatively close to the middle of the scale, the y-axis in Figure 1 does not cover the entire range of values, in order to make differences between groups and trends easier to see. Higher values on the ideological scale correspond to more right-wing positions.

<Figure 1>

Differences between these four groups of voters have become smaller over time. In the first two elections covered, practicing Catholics clearly were the most right-wing groups, followed by practicing Protestants. Devout Catholics remain the group which is located most to the

right. But they have become more centrist and they are now closer to the other groups. One can also notice that the differences between the other three groups, which were sizeable in the 1970s, have become negligible in recent elections. In other words, there are also clear signs of a weakening of the religious cleavage when considering political preferences.

These results seem thus to support further the hypothesis of a decline in the relevance of confession and religiosity for understanding citizens' preferences and party competition. However, considering only the general left-right scale may not be sufficient. First, these results may be due to a change in the meaning of the left-right scale, rather than to a higher degree of homogeneity of the various religious groups. As emphasized above, the nature of the most important issues has changed, leading to a redefinition of the cultural dimension of the political space. As the dominant cultural issues change from traditional moral values to issues of immigration and European integration, the content of the left-right scale is also affected. Thus the above analysis may not be sufficient to conclude that religious groups have become more similar on the issues associated with the traditional religious cleavage.

Nicolet and Tresch (2009) have also emphasized that it is only some specific political issues which are clearly linked to traditional Christian values. It is mainly in the domain of cultural liberalism (including issues such as divorce, homosexuality, or abortion) that an effect of religion or religiosity may be observed. Based on the 2007 World Values Surveys, they confirm this hypothesis by showing important differences in attitudes toward cultural liberalism, associated with both the institutional and spiritual dimensions of religiosity. Practicing Christians are the group with the most conservative views on issues of cultural liberalism. But there are also differences between the remaining groups: among those who are not involved at all in the church, for instance, those with spiritual concerns or who share the Christian faith are somewhat culturally less liberal than citizens who are entirely non-religious (Nicolet and Tresch 2009: 92-95). On other types of issues, however, differences between religious groups are small. This is true for both economic issues and other types of cultural issues. In other words, it is not the case that religion matters for cultural issues in general, but not for economic issues. It is only for specific types of cultural issues that an effect of religiosity can be observed. In the domain of cultural diversity (such as attitudes toward immigration) and on issues pertaining to the opening up of Switzerland, Nicolet and Tresch (2009) show that there are no significant differences associated with religiosity.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to replicate the analysis of Nicolet and Tresch (2009) with data from election studies. Questions pertaining to cultural liberalism as defined above are entirely missing from the data used here. And as the analysis of Nicolet and Tresch (2009) was limited to one wave of the WVS (as far as attitudinal differences are concerned), it is difficult to draw any definitive conclusion regarding *changes* between religious groups in terms of attitudes toward cultural liberalism. It appears clearly that such differences are important today, and it is likely that they have been at least as strong in previous decades. But this remains a conjecture given the lack of available data to study these developments in more detail.

Having discussed the relation between religion, religiosity, and ideological orientation, I now turn to the analysis of voting choices. Figure 2 shows the distribution of party preferences among Catholics and Protestants, after dividing each of these groups into two, by the frequency of church attendance. Among these four groups of voters, Catholics with a high level of church attendance stand out very clearly, especially in the 1970s. During this period, their level of support for centre parties, a group dominated by the CVP and other Christian parties, reached 60 to 75 per cent. It has strongly diminished since then, but remains impressive, at a level of about 45 to 50 per cent in the 1990s and 2000s. This decline has been compensated by a rise in the level of support for left-wing and for conservative parties. This change brings them closer to devout Protestants. In both groups, support for centre parties has strongly declined since the late 1970s, while more of them favour the left and the conservative right. An impact of confession can still be clearly noticed. In the 1990s, support for centre parties was about 30 percentage points stronger among religious Catholics than among religious Protestants. Nevertheless, the effect of confession has weakened. Among voters who do not attend church frequently, differences have also become smaller. Support for centre parties is still stronger among Catholics, but the level of support has weakened in both groups. This has been compensated by an increase in the share of votes of conservative parties. Furthermore, this evolution is more pronounced among Catholics, making the two groups more similar to one another.

<Figure 2>

In terms of voting choices, differences between the social groups are more resilient than in terms of their general ideological preferences. Both confession and religiosity still appear to

play an important role in explaining party preferences in Switzerland. The impact of confession has weakened, but it still accounts for large differences in the level of support for centre parties. These differences, however, are more pronounced when confession and religiosity interact. Thus, we rather find an opposition between devout Catholics, on the one hand, and the other three groups of voters, on the other. This goes in line with the thesis suggested by Wolf (1996) in Germany and Geissbühler (1999) in Switzerland.

We can go one step further in the analysis of the religious cleavage, by summarizing its overall strength with an index. Several such measures have been suggested in the literature on the analysis of social cleavages. The most famous one is probably the Alford index (Alford 1962). It has been developed in the case of the class cleavage, but this and other indices (such as the Thomsen index or the kappa index) can be applied to various types of social divisions. These indices of cleavage strength summarize the degree to which different social groups vary in their electoral choices. I rely here on the absolute lambda index (Lachat 2006, 2007). This is a measure that can be applied to any number of social groups and parties. It represents an extension of the kappa index developed by Brooks, Hout, and Manza (Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995; Manza and Brooks 1999). Contrary to the kappa index, the lambda index weights the differences between social groups by their size. In this way, it allows one to account for both “structural” dealignment, that is changes in the size of social groups, and “behavioural” dealignment, that is, changes in their voting behaviour (Lachat 2007).

To compute the lambda index, I first estimated for each election a multinomial logistic regression model, in which voting choice (in four categories, as in the previous analyses) is regressed on dummy variables identifying the five religious groups, as well as on a few control variables (age, gender, education level).<sup>2</sup> The estimated parameters are used to compute predicted probabilities of voting choice for each social group ( $s=1, \dots, S$ ) and party family ( $j=1, \dots, J$ ). The absolute lambda index is defined as

$$\lambda_{abs} = \sqrt{\sum_{j=1}^J \sum_{s=1}^S \omega_j \omega_s (\pi_s^j - \bar{\pi}_s^j)^2}$$

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<sup>2</sup> The results of these regression models are not presented here for reasons of space, but they are available upon request.

where  $\omega_j$  is the estimated vote share of party  $j$ ,  $\omega_s$  is the proportion of voters belonging to social group  $s$ ,  $\pi_s^j$  is the probability that a member of social group  $s$  supports party  $j$ , and

$$\bar{\pi}_s^j = \sum_{s=1}^S \omega_s \pi_s^j.$$

This index corresponds to a (weighted) standard deviation of the party vote shares between the different social groups. It can range from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 0.5. But very high values are unlikely to be found in practice, as they would correspond to a situation in which each social group supports its own specific party.

The values of the absolute lambda index for the religious cleavage can be found in Figure 3. One can notice again a clear decline in the degree of polarization of religious groups. The average differences in their voting behaviour were much weaker in recent elections than in the 1970s. In the first elections, the values of the index of cleavage strength are in the 0.12 to 0.16 range. This means that the typical difference between social groups in the vote shares of parties was about 12 to 16 per cent. These differences are substantial. They are clearly larger than the corresponding values for the class cleavage in the same period (Lachat 2007). In the 1990s and in more recent elections, by contrast, the religious cleavage has lost much of its strength. It is now also weaker than the class cleavage (Lachat 2007). The values of lambda in the elections since 1995 are about 0.08. In other words, the “typical” difference in party support across social groups is about twice as small in the 1970s.

<Figure 3>

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Table 1. Size of religious groups (confession and church attendance) among voters

	Catholics		Protestants		None/Other	N
	Low att.	High att.	Low att.	High att.		
1971	17.3	25.2	45.0	8.2	4.2	1010
1975	15.1	27.5	36.4	15.6	5.3	621
1979	18.3	21.6	49.7	4.3	6.1	575
1995	22.2	17.7	36.2	7.8	16.1	1112
1999	25.8	14.1	37.1	8.7	14.3	1182
2003	23.5	12.9	31.6	8.2	23.8	1283
2007	21.4	14.6	29.9	8.7	25.4	1345

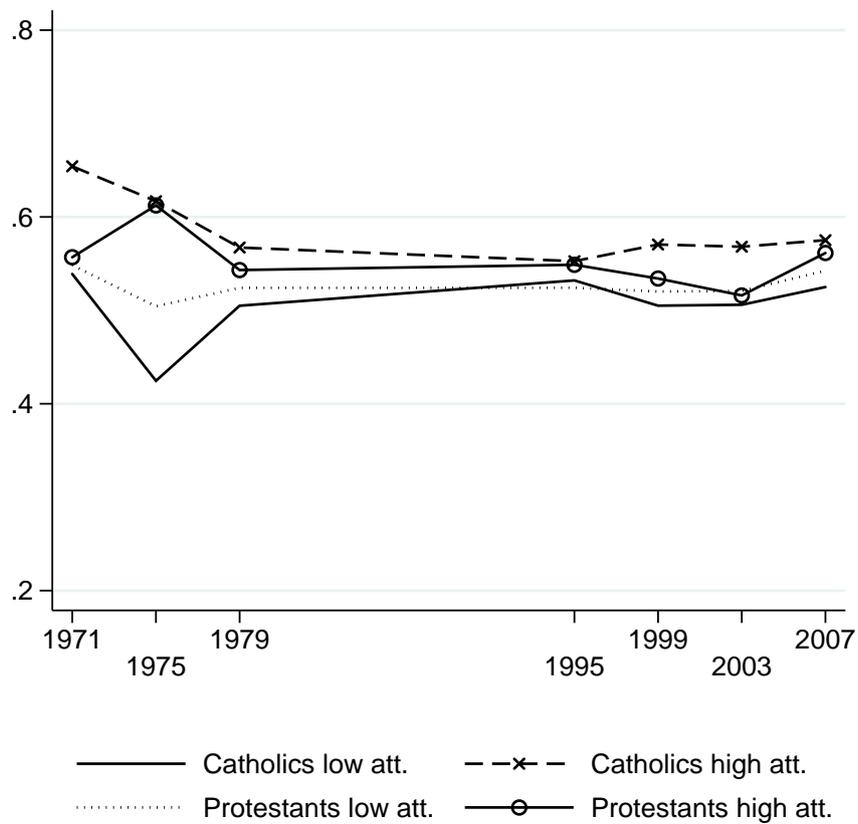


Figure 1. Left-right self-placement of voters, by religion and church attendance

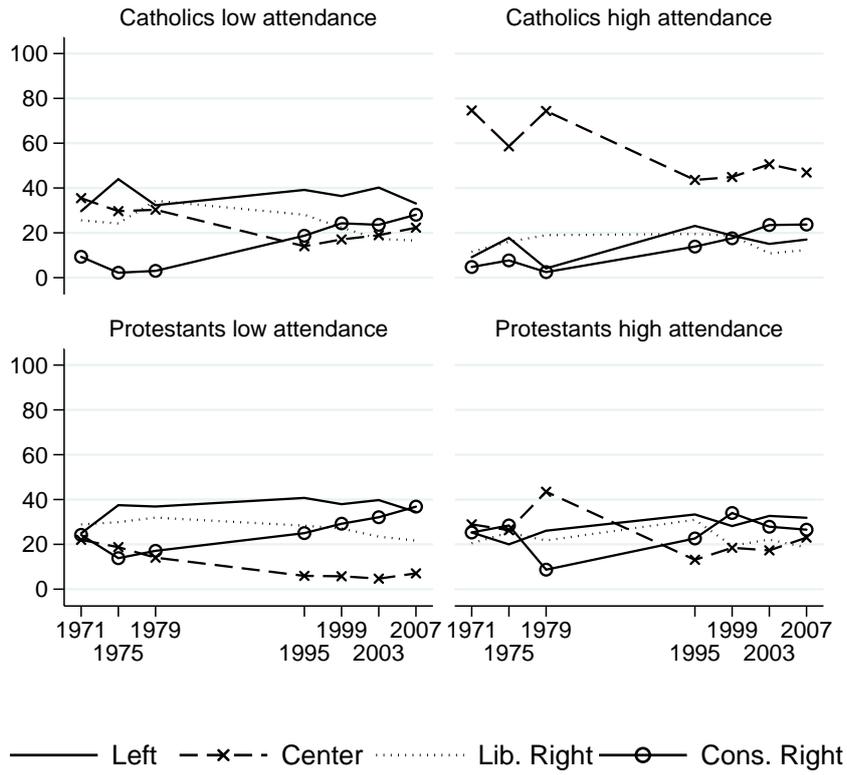


Figure 2. Voting choice by religion and church attendance

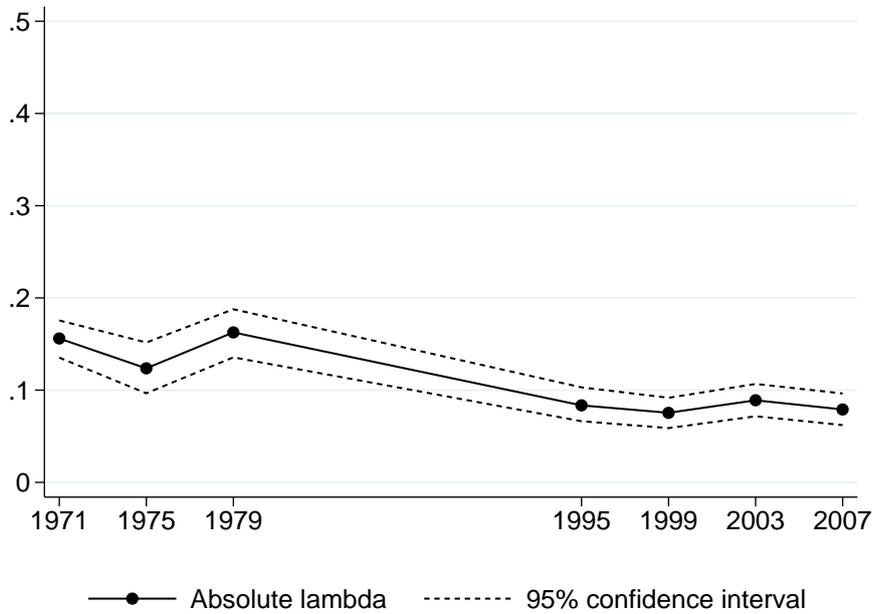


Figure 3. Strength of the religious cleavage (absolute lambda index)