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ARTICLE



# Morality politics in the European parliament. A qualitative insight into MEPs' voting behaviour on abortion and human embryonic stem cell research

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## ABSTRACT

The literature on morality politics is well-documented, but has mostly taken place at the national level. Yet, morality politics increasingly appears on the European Parliament's agenda. Abortion has been tackled through parliamentary reports on sexual and reproductive health and rights; while human embryonic stem cell research has been dealt with through the successive European research framework programmes. Using semi-structured interviews with (former) MEPs, this research examines how the central actors involved in these parliamentary debates perceive and explain their vote on these issues. The analysis particularly focuses on the role of religion and values, and uncovers its effects at several levels: national culture, political affiliation and personal believing. In that regard, respondents emphasise the great degree of freedom that the European parliamentary arena offers to its members to express their personal values and convictions – and not exclusively on morality issues.

## KEYWORDS

Morality politics; European Parliament; legislative studies; religion & politics; qualitative research

## Introduction

Morality issues can be defined as issues 'that are closely related to religious beliefs and moral concepts' (Baumann, Debus, and Müller 2015, 199). They include the categories of death issues (e.g., euthanasia), of sexuality issues (e.g., prostitution), of individual liberty issues (e.g., gun control), etc. (Heichel, Knill, and Schmitt 2013). The European literature on morality politics has been particularly flourishing during the last decade (see 2013 *JEPP* special issue, 20:3). Academics overwhelmingly embrace a public policy approach centred on the national levels (Engeli 2009, 2012; Euchner et al. 2013; Nisbet 2005). Comparative studies explore the power of macro-level factors, such as the existence of a religious v. secular cleavage, in accounting for variations between morality policy regimes (Banchoff 2011; Engeli and Allison 2013; Mintrom 2013). Within the realm of national parliaments, scholars also examine how legislators vote on these peculiar issues that often imply a relaxed

party discipline and the expression of 'free votes' (Baughman 2004; Baumann, Debus, and Müller 2015; Green-Pedersen 2007; Raymond and Overby 2016).

This article shifts the level of analysis from the national level to the supranational one. The European Union (EU) has never been considered as a salient arena in morality matters because it is not legally mandated for legislating on religion and values. Despite being anchored in normative foundations, the EU has been conceived as a technocratic project (De Vlieger 2011, 368–369) which leaves ethically sensitive issues in the realm of member states' competences (Doe 2011, 241, 244). The subsidiarity principle, enshrined in art.5.3 TEU, preserves national sovereignty and constitutes 'the single most characteristic element of the EU ethics' (Tallacchini 2009, 293). From the early 1990s onwards though, the Union has been creeping competences into new policy fields (Foret and Littoz-Monnet 2014, 13), so that morality issues are now dealt with in both national and supranational contexts. As a matter of fact, LGBT rights, abortion, prostitution, or gender equality now appear on the Union's political agenda, most notably within the European Parliament (EP).

Based on a qualitative approach, this research provides an original investigation into how individual members of the European Parliament (MEPs) explain their decisions (or that of their colleagues) when voting on morality pieces of legislation, with a particular emphasis on the role of religion in shaping their perceptions and behaviour on these issues, at different levels – that of national culture, political affiliation, and personal convictions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen (former) MEPs and one European political party who have been active in the abortion and/or human embryonic stem cell research (hESCR) debates. The interest of such qualitative approach is to go beyond MEPs' observable voting behaviour, which has been vastly studied, most notably through quantitative analysis of roll-call voting data (Attiná 1990; Bailer et al. 2009; Faas 2003; Hix 2002; Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005; Noury 2002; Raunio 1999). As a drawback, we do not aim at any representativeness of the sample, nor can we uncover the existence of systematic statistical relationships.

The following sections first review the literature on morality politics and identify the gaps this article aims to address. Second, they discuss two cases of morality issues debated at EU level: abortion and hESCR. Third, the methodological approach is described. A fourth section analyses MEPs' discourse over their voting behaviour on relevant parliamentary resolutions. Finally, conclusions and avenues for future research are drawn.

### **Morality politics: investigating religion and politics at multiple levels**

The literature on morality politics is mainly concerned with the role of the religious factor. After all, 'moral questions are the most likely to provoke a resurgence of religious influence on political choices' (Foret 2015, 175). Religion and morality politics studies can be grouped into three different slots, depending on the level of analysis (Heichel, Knill, and Schmitt 2013, 326).

From a macro perspective, one assesses the role of societies' confessional heritage in the adoption of restrictive/permissive morality policies, or the role of state-church relations' impact on morality policy variations.<sup>1</sup> From a cultural point of view, religion plays a role as a collective social universe rooted in heritage and intertwined with

national identity (Foret 2014a). Scholars show that Catholic societies generally adopt more conservative morality policies than their Protestant counterparts (Fink 2008; 1645; Minkenberg 2002, 236). From an institutional point of view, strict separation between Church and State (cf. the French *laïcité* model) results in more progressive regulatory regimes than cooperation models (as in Germany) (Foret 2015, 187). Investigating how these various cultural and institutional heritages interact in EU morality politics remains to be explored.

At the meso level, scholars explore the organisational dimensions of religious influence, such as the political effects of the religious v. secular cleavage (Budde et al. 2018; Heichel, Knill, and Schmitt 2013). Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen (2012) two-world theory looks at the correlation between the presence/absence of Christian-Democratic parties in national political systems, and dynamics of agenda-setting (i.e., the opportunity to politicise morality issues). Their one-dimensional model has been reviewed by Hurka, Knill, and Rivière (2018), who show that the nature of political systems – party politics v. parliamentary politics – introduces shifting dynamics in partisan cleavages. Value politics actually displays a complex picture of intertwining divides (Tiberj 2017), ranging from the materialist/postmaterialist cleavage (Inglehart 1971), to the GAL (Greens, Alternatives, Libertarians)/TAN (Traditionalists, Authoritarians, Nationalists) one (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). MEPs' voting behaviour on abortion and hESCR provides a compelling stress case for testing the relevance of these ideological cleavages.

The micro perspective is well illustrated in the legislative field where, on those issues affecting deep personal convictions, legislators are often given more freedom to express a 'conscience vote' instead of a strict party vote (Green-Pedersen 2007; Ross, Dodds, and Ankeny 2009). Scholars have focused on the influence of denominational affiliation – *belonging* (Baughman 2004; Warhurst 2008) – and religiosity – *behaving* (Raymond and Overby 2016) – on national legislators' morality preferences and behaviour, or on that of their constituents (Baumann, Debus, and Müller 2015). However, how legislators' *believing* interferes in the decision-making process, and how they deal with potential conflict between their beliefs and their partisan affiliation, have rarely been tackled.

At EU level, the role of religion in the EP has extensively been researched in the 2014 ReIEP project (see 2014 *Religion, State and Society* special issue, 42:2–3). The objective was to study MEPs' beliefs and what they do according to their beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Findings show that the effect of religion is conservative – i.e., it reinforces the existing national, partisan, and denominational cleavages. At the MEP level, the project suggests that religion turns out to be a useful source of inspiration 'at critical junctures, when a representative has to make difficult choices implying deep value judgements' (Foret 2014b, 136). However, how religion influences MEPs' voting behaviour on specific morality issues remains unclear as no particular example supports the assumption. This paper provides more detailed accounts about religion influence in the legislative realm by focusing on two concrete morality issues, namely abortion and hESCR.

## **EU bioethics politics: the cases of abortion and human embryonic stem cell research**

Abortion and hESCR raise moral challenges related to the destruction of human embryos. Schematically speaking, they oppose pro-choice to pro-life actors. The former

defend women's freedom of choice to decide about their own bodies, and they usually (but not necessarily) defend freedom of research as well; the latter value the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. These two opposite stances are situated at the extremes of a cultural/moral axis opposing (pro-choice) progressives to (pro-life) conservatives.

Both issues have repeatedly been put at the EP agenda during the last twenty years. Abortion has mainly been dealt with through two parliamentary reports on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – the Van Lancker report in 2002 and Estrela report in 2013. Both emerged on the agenda of the parliamentary FEMM committee (Women's Rights and Gender Equality) on the initiative of two female S&D MEPs. The Van Lancker report was adopted by 280 against 240 in plenary session, after a few amendments. One of its key paragraphs recommended that 'abortion should be made legal, safe and accessible to all' (Spiteri 2002). Yet, the report mostly performed symbolic agenda-setting functions with no binding effect since the EU has no formal competence to legislate in the field.

The Estrela report submitted the first parliamentary resolution on SRHR since the Van Lancker report. In September 2013, a first draft was adopted in committee by 17 votes in favour, 7 against, and 7 abstentions, after 217 amendments – 'the largest number that a report in the FEMM committee has ever seen' (EPF 2014, 1). During the October harsh debates in plenary session, the report was sent back to the committee – which is quite unusual – under the pressure of conservative MEPs, mostly from the EPP and ECR. When a revised version of the Estrela report was put to the plenary vote for a second time, two alternative resolutions were set up: one presenting 'rather anti-choice' measures and supported by the EFDD; the other reaffirming member states' sovereignty on SRHR and backed by the EPP and ECR (EPF 2014, 2). This second resolution was adopted in place of the Estrela report by 334 against 327.

This article asks MEPs about their voting behaviour on abortion mainly in the context of the Van Lancker and Estrela reports. However, since the issue is tightly connected to other interconnected fields, additional parliamentary documents are taken into account, such as the 2010 and 2015 Tarabella reports on gender equality. In each case, the rapporteurs have been pushing for the EU to adopt a progressive position on abortion. All these resolutions were supported by a progressive centre-left coalition including the S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL, and ALDE; and opposed by a conservative centre-right coalition including the EFDD, ECR, and some EPP MEPs.

This article also investigates MEPs' positions on hESCR, which has been tackled through EU research funding in the context of the successive European Framework Programmes for Research and Technological Development. FPs are set up for a four-year period, except the current one, Horizon 2020, which runs from 2014 up until 2020. Each programme sets a total budget and its distribution across thematic priorities (Hartlapp, Metz, and Rauh 2014, 122). Debates thus revolve around the shaping of the research agenda and the direction of funding flows (Prainsack, Geesink, and Franklin 2008). Tensions stem from the (in)appropriateness to invest public money 'from the common European purse to which all States had contributed' in a type of research – hESCR – that is outlawed in some countries (Fieldsend 2011, 227).

Whereas SRHR issues are mostly discussed within the parliamentary arena, FPs are managed within the European Commission under the lead of Directorate-General for

Research and Innovation, and must then be approved by the EP and the Council of Ministers. Today, Horizon 2020 forbids the Commission to directly fund the steps of research involving the destruction of human embryos (i.e., *getting* embryonic stem cells). It allows, however, funding the subsequent steps of research (i.e., *using* already derived embryonic stem cells) – provided that the member state allows such activity (European Commission 2013). Such compromise was first elaborated by Philippe Busquin (S&D/BE) when he led the drafting of the FP6 proposal during its 1999–2004 mandate as Commissioner for Research. When submitted to the EP in 2002, opponents to FP6 included members of the more conservative groups, but also members of the Greens/EFA group, whose progressive stances on abortion do not necessarily result in progressive views regarding hESCR.<sup>3</sup>

Despite representing a minor part of parliamentary debates (and of recorded votes) and being usually non-binding, abortion and hESCR have nevertheless the potential to structure political competition within the European Parliament. While the EP has usually been conceived as a two-dimensional competitive arena, structured along a socio-economic left v. right cleavage and an integration v. demarcation divide (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2005), morality politics seems to bring a third line of division. This cultural/moral divide does not fully overlap with the other two cleavages, as revealed by MEPs' voting records on several morality resolutions<sup>4</sup> (EPF 2014; VoteWatch Europe 2014).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, better understanding the motives behind MEPs' position-taking over these issues appears important.

## Methodological approach

While MEPs' voting behaviour has been extensively studied through quantitative statistical analyses based on roll-call voting data (see above), this research adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews. We acknowledge the usefulness of quantitative statistical analyses in uncovering systematic relationships between MEPs' voting behaviour and multiple factors (including their national background, national and European party group discipline, religious *belonging*, etc.), but we also believe that only in-depth interviews with MEPs<sup>6</sup> enable the researcher to examine comprehensively the role of their perceptions, values, and beliefs.

In order to uncover the peculiar effect of religion at different levels (national culture, political affiliation and personal beliefs), MEPs were confronted to the usual *principals* to which they are said to be accountable (Bailer et al. 2009; Coman 2009; Faas 2003; Finke 2014; Hix 2002): their European parliamentary party group (EPG), which organises parliamentary work and provides them with opportunities to shape policy and to access office; their national party, which they primarily adhered to and is in charge of their (re) selection; and their voters, in their national constituency, which reward or punish them at the polling station. Introducing these principals helps us to grasp the role of religion at both macro and meso levels, assuming that country (confessional) histories, party ideologies, and constituents' religiosity can intervene in MEPs' voting behaviour on morality issues. As for the micro level, respondents were directly asked about the role of their personal (religious) convictions, hence introducing the idea that the *agent's* own values are also determinant.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen (former) MEPs, and one member of a European political party, namely the European Christian Political

Movement (the ECPM gathers five MEPs sitting within the ECR group). The sample size is rather small, but this is due to the nature of this research: a total of twenty-nine (former) MEPs were contacted – fifteen of whom seemed to be reluctant to answer our questions. This reveals the uneasiness of legislators to talk about morality issues, especially those positioned on the conservative side.<sup>7</sup> In consequence, the sample has no pretention to be exhaustive or representative, but at least diverse. It gathers seven female and seven male respondents, across six EPGs and coming from eight EU member states (see [Table 1](#)), with a slight overrepresentation of Belgian S&D MEPs. This is not surprising since Belgian S&D MEPs have proven to be active in politicising abortion and hESCR at EU level.<sup>8</sup> Note that only a few respondents actually played a role in the hESCR debates: the adoption of FPs took place during the previous EP legislatures, and reaching *former* MEPs turned out to be challenging.

Our methodological approach implies two main limitations. First, MEPs did not always refer to their own voting behaviour, but often sought to explain that of their colleagues. In other words, MEPs tend to speak about what ‘others’ do rather than to talk about their own experience. Second, we chose to focus on those MEPs involved on morality issues. Yet, their involvement might specifically result from their deep convictions – thus reversing the causality link we aim to underline. In consequence, we might overestimate the role of beliefs in general, as MEPs not involved/interested in these issues might simply follow the position of their principals. Still, focusing on active MEPs provides detailed information about EU actors’ positioning and influence, and about coalition-building dynamics over these issues.

## How do meps explain their vote on morality issues?

### *National culture and national voters*

Nationality is considered by most respondents to constitute the best predictor of their votes on morality issues (Interviewee 3). MEPs clearly distinguish between the national delegations they perceive as more progressive or conservative. Respondents either shed light on the most active delegations (e.g., the progressive S&D delegations or the conservative EPP ones), or explain group defections (e.g., the conservative S&D MEPs or the progressive EPP ones). For example, Slovakia, Italia, Poland, Malta, Croatia, Hungary, and Cyprus are cited as the most active conservative EPP national delegations; Sweden, Belgium, and France as composing the dissenting progressive EPP delegations.

In most cases, the strength of Christianity within the countries of conservative MEPs is mentioned as the explanatory factor determining their votes on both abortion and hESCR<sup>9</sup> (cf. the historical presence of the Church and the Vatican in Italy, for example). Besides, the interviewed MEPs, mostly originating from Western Europe, tend to describe Central and Eastern European countries as more anchored in the religious tradition than their Western counterparts; and thus more prone to adopt conservative stances (cf. the above-mentioned EPP national delegations identified as more conservative). For some (Interviewees 1 and 13), this divide seems so deep as to suggest that MEPs would actually have failed to reach an agreement on the 2002 Van Lancker report and on FP6, had the enlargements taken place before their adoption. Interviewee 8 does not share such perception: new member states are not all Christian countries; some of

**Table 1.** Sample description.

Interviewee #	Name	Nationality	EPG	National party	Moral Ideology	Topic(s) of interest	Additional information	Date of the interview (mm-dd-yy)
Interviewee 1	Busquin, Philippe (♂)	Belgian	S&D (2004–2009)	Parti Socialiste	Progressive	hESCR	Commissioner for research (1999–2004)	03–19–16
Interviewee 2	Casini, Carlo (♂)	Italian	EPP (1984–1999 and 2004–2014)	Unione dei Democratici cristiani e dei Democratici di Centro	Conservative	Abortion + hESCR	Support to the ECI ‘One of Us’	05–20–16
Interviewee 3	De Keyser, Véronique (♀)	Belgian	S&D (1999–2014)	Parti Socialiste	Progressive	Abortion	Fields of interests: women’s rights and secularism in politics	04–28–16
Interviewee 4	Estrela, Edite (♀) (former assistant: Milton Nunes – ♂)	Portuguese	S&D (2004–2014)	Partido Socialista	Progressive	Abortion	Rapporteur of the 2013 report on SRHR	06–10–16
Interviewee 5	Gustafsson, Michael (♂)	Swedish	GUE/NGL (2009–2014)	Vänsterpartiet	Progressive	Abortion	Chair of the FEMM committee (2011–2014)	04–30–16
Interviewee 6	Hautala, Heidi (♀)	Finnish	Greens/EFA (1995–2003, 2009–2011 and since 2014)	Vihreä liitto	Progressive	Abortion	Co-chair of the EPWG	06–16–16
Interviewee 7	Jurek, Marek (♂)	Polish	ECR (since 2014)	Prawica Rzeczypospolitej	Conservative	Abortion	Member of the ECPM Representative of the Polish Federation of Pro-life Movements within the One of Us federation	03–08–17
Interviewee 8	in’t Veld, Sophie (♀)	Dutch	ALDE (since 2004)	Democraten 66	Progressive	Abortion	Co-chair of the EPWG	03–10–16
Interviewee 9	Matera, Barbara (♀) (assistant: Raffaele Padovano – ♂)	Italian	EPP (since 2009)	Forza Italia	Progressive	Abortion	Vice-chair of the FEMM committee (since 2009)	06–03–16

(Continued)



**Table 1.** (Continued).

Interviewee #	Name	Nationality	EPG	National party	Moral Ideology	Topic(s) of interest	Additional information	Date of the interview (mm-dd-yy)
Interviewee 10	Morgano, Luigi (♂)	Italian	S&D (since 2014)	Partito Democratico	Conservative	Abortion	Member of the Working Group on Human Dignity	03-08-17
Interviewee 11	Tarabella, Marc (♂)	Belgian	S&D (since 2004)	Parti Socialiste	Progressive	Abortion	Rapporteur of the 2010 and 2015 reports on Gender Equality	03-18-16
Interviewee 12	Van Doesburg, Leo (♂)	Dutch	ECR	N.A.	Conservative	Abortion + hESCR	ECPM Director for European Affairs	06-23-16
Interviewee 13	Van Lancker, Anne (♀)	Belgian	S&D (1994-2009)	Socialistische Partij/Anders	Progressive	Abortion	Rapporteur of the 2002 report on SRHR	03-25-16
Interviewee 14	Zaborska, Anna (♀)	Slovak	EPP (since 2004)	Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie	Conservative	Abortion	Chair of the FEMM committee (2004-2009)	06-17-16

them, such as Bulgaria or the Czech Republic, have even developed extremely secular traditions.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, other national characteristics can explain MEPs' vote on morality issues: in Germany, the eugenic practices of the Nazi past – not religion – explain why pro-choice representatives often stand against hESCR (Banchoff 2011).

National religious culture and tradition also impact MEPs' voting behaviour through their voters. When asked about the constituency factor, respondents point to its determining influence:

'You are only accountable to your voters in the end.' (Interviewee 8)

'I was elected by people who share my deep conviction that human life should be protected from its conception to its natural death.' (Interviewee 14)

'I have never hidden my commitment to unborn life and my electorate has always rewarded me with a consensus that often made me be the first among the elect[ed] of my constituency.' (Interviewee 2)

The constituency factor is especially important when it comes to ethically sensitive issues because these are deemed to be 'easy issues' – i.e., easy for voters to understand (Interviewee 3). However, MEPs acknowledge that identifying their voters, and knowing their position, can be quite difficult, especially during European elections (Interviewees 3, 6 and 11).

Interestingly, the constituency factor seems to display influence through voters' religiosity: 'if you are elected thanks to the Catholic Church support, you cannot vote in favour of pro-choice positions' (Interviewee 13). Other progressive MEPs share this opinion:

'If you are a Christian-Democrat MEP who was elected mostly by Christians living in a conservative region, and if you do not follow their convictions, then you risk losing the next election.' (Interviewee 3)

MEPs elected by 'very strong constituencies who have strong opinions on these things [i.e. abortion and hESCR] are keen to vote in a conservative way, even though they might personally think differently.' (Interviewee 6)

Although Interviewees 3, 6, and 13 come from the progressive coalition – this might shed some doubts on the effect unveiled – quantitative analyses in national contexts have highlighted similar patterns (Baughman 2004; Baumann, Debus, and Müller 2015).

The impact of constituents' religiosity can be related to the national context. Interviewee 13 told the story of former Irish EPP MEP Dana Scallon, who campaigned at the national level around a pro-life stance in order to be elected at the European level. The strategy allegedly proved successful given the country's strong Catholic tradition. At the same time, precisely because abortion remains a controversial topic of the national political agenda, Irish progressive MEPs may be strong allies for the European centre-left political groups (Interviewee 13). Hence, 'the status of religion as an issue in national politics dictates the use that MEPs can make of it at the EP. The more it is controversial, the more it may be rewarding to build political strategies on it' (Foret 2014c, 321).

Eventually, the constituency factor also interacts with the closeness of upcoming elections (Interviewee 4). The failed Estrela report, for example, was debated just before the 2014 European elections. On the one hand, those conservative MEPs fearing to lose

their female electorate (which is expected to support more progressive views on abortion) did not want the public to know they were against the report, and accordingly abstained in the vote (this was the case of several EPP MEPs). On the other hand, because Estrela was very well-known in her country, the Portuguese EPP delegation, which never took position on abortion, suddenly decided to voice a strong opposition to the report. In a nutshell, 'this was about internal politics as well' (Interviewee 4).

### ***Political affiliation: national party and EPG***

Political affiliation constitutes another level at which religion may affect MEPs' decision-making process, depending on the position of the party on the cultural/moral cleavage. Political affiliation is double at EU level: MEPs adhere and represent their national party, but also act as members of their European parliamentary party group. In some cases, the position of their national party on morality issues might clash with that of their EPG. For example, the Italian Cinque Stelle party defends rather progressive views while sitting in the EFDD, a conservative group, and while coming from an allegedly conservative country (Interviewee 11). Therefore, national party membership constitutes a frequent cited factor of group defection.

Throughout the interviews, the influence of party affiliation on MEPs' position-taking has been tackled through the perspective of party discipline. The question was not so much whether the values embodied by their parties would influence their vote on morality issues, but whether the national party and the EPG would impose a common position and sanctions in cases of defection.

Whether national parties give voting instructions to their MEPs seems to vary across parties, and respondents' answers provide us with an ambiguous picture. Some insist they never received any instruction (Interviewee 2 argues on the contrary that he has been able to affect his party guidelines); others pledge allegiance to their national party – whether on morality issues or on any other kind of political debate (Interviewee 5). According to Interviewee 5, the degree of compliance with the national party varies across countries. He explains his own loyalty in the light of the Swedish political system: 'That is because the party system in Sweden is really well representative'<sup>11</sup> [...]. But I think other countries have more individual representatives, like for example the UK'.

Overall, two different factors seem to determine whether national parties issue voting instructions: the national political agenda and party ideology. First, when a (morality) issue is not part of the national agenda, parties do not take any position at all, and representatives cannot follow any guideline (Interviewee 5). It also happens that national parties simply do not know the EP agenda, which prevents them from taking any official position on the issues at stake (Interviewee 3). Last but not least, the composition of the national ruling coalition explains the general moral orientation of the national delegations (Interviewee 8).

Second, if party ideology is strongly anchored on one side of the cultural cleavage, it is more likely to provide clear orientations. The Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party is often mentioned by (progressive) respondents as an illustrative example of a national pro-life party. Interestingly, Interviewees 8 and 11 relate MEPs' cultural positioning to the pro/anti-integration stance of their national party, suggesting that the two dimensions reinforce – but do not determine – each other (Interviewee 8). Christianity would be

used here to defend national identity (Foret 2014a, 117) and the right to remain sovereign in all matters – including morality ones. Finally, an interesting pattern relates to the role of liberalism, as illustrated by the Italian case of Forza Italia: even though Berlusconi is conservative on many issues, no instruction emanates from his party and free vote is given on ethically sensitive issues because of the basic liberal ideology of the party (Interviewee 9).

Regarding the influence of the EPGs, the existence of an official common position to be followed by MEPs is again variably assessed by the respondents, even by those MEPs belonging to the same political group. In the EPP case, for example, Interviewee 14 states that there is no voting instruction, while Interviewee 2 asserts that ‘in the congress of the party and in the electoral programmes it was always claimed the right to life from conception’. These differences in judgement reveal different perceptions of what the group position implies: either rigid voting instructions, or simple political guidelines. In the former case, party cohesion is strongly encouraged, and defection deemed costly. In the latter case, simple political guidelines help MEPs who are not directly involved in the issue at stake, and who may lack information about it, to make up their mind by following the group voting instructions. National delegations, especially the small ones (Interviewee 11), cannot follow what happens in all the committees and have no choice but to rely on the group position, especially during the plenary sessions (Interviewees 1 and 3).

From the respondents’ perspective, some EPGs would easily adopt a common official position while others would experience more divisive debates: the progressive S&D is often cited as a very homogeneous group on morality issues, while the right-wing groups, especially the EPP, are seen as quite heterogeneous (Interviewee 11). This is verified in terms of voting data (see above); but we can also interpret this in terms of S&D respondents’ willingness to give a positive view of their group – and a negative one of their opponents – as cohesion usually carries a positive connotation (Close 2016). However, even the S&D official position is far from being self-evident, and sometimes requires internal votes in order to be defined (Interviewee 3).

If cohesion is positively valued, some respondents negatively evaluate the existence of strict voting instructions on morality issues:

‘It would be incredible if there were no voting freedom on sensitive issues. This is not the *parti unique* and *pensée unique*.’ (Interviewee 10)<sup>12</sup>

Freedom of vote, on the contrary, allows the expression of diverse national and partisan cultures: ‘I found that [free vote] was very good because in the GUE-NGL, there are very variations of the left parties from very different contexts and very different histories’ (Interviewee 5). MEPs suggest differences across EPGs, and have the feeling that while EPP members can always disagree with their political group, the EPP seems to adopt a rigid party line (Interviewee 4), especially on abortion (Interviewee 9, who is herself a member of the EPP). This suggests that those EPGs which easily adopt a common official position would not oblige their members to vote accordingly, while those experiencing divisive debates would adopt tougher voting instructions. In some way, ‘discipline starts where cohesion falters’ (Hazan 2003, 3).

Overall, respondents stress that party discipline is quite flexible within the EP, that their mandate is individual, and that even if there is no official ‘free vote’, they are not

obliged to vote according to what their political group has decided – provided that their dissent is announced before the vote actually takes place (Interviewees 3 and 11). Dissension might be a risky strategy though: if you want to be given political responsibilities (such as being rapporteur), you cannot always vote according to your conscience and constantly be a factor of instability (Interviewee 13). A high degree of freedom of expression seems to apply mainly to senior experienced MEPs, while rapporteurs' personality was also mentioned by several respondents (Interviewees 1, 3 and 11). Still, the EP would constitute a more favourable arena for the expression of dissenting opinions than national parliaments (Interviewees 1 and 3). This can partly result from the institutional framework of the EU institutions. Indeed, the supranational legislative-executive relationship structure resembles more the US 'check and balances' system than that of national European parliamentary democracies. In most EU countries, the government's survival depends on the support of the majority, and party voting unity is therefore crucial. At EU level, majorities are not static (Interviewee 3).

### **Individual beliefs**

At the individual level, both MEPs' beliefs and personal experience can affect their voting behaviour on morality issues – maybe even more here than in any other policy field. As expressed by Interviewee 4:

'Fundamental rights decisions collude [...] with the personal experience of the person, not only with what the party thinks. [...] It is not the same, no, than voting to harmonize the size of a potato. People do not have such a strong opinion about that'.

As a matter of fact, issues involving an ethical dimension are more sensitive and people are more emotional about them; hence, personal experience plays a more important role (Interviewee 8). One reported anecdote describes the case of a British Conservative MEP during the 2002 parliamentary debates on the FP6: he stood up during the plenary session and explained that he was not in favour of hESCR and that he respected embryo's dignity; however, he also claimed his own right to dignity and his hope to recover from Parkinson thanks to hESCR. Interviewee 1 and other MEPs felt moved by the speech, which turned some EPP votes in favour of FP6.

If MEPs hold particular values and convictions which do play a role in shaping their voting behaviour ('After all, everybody votes according to her/his own convictions – how could we determine one's position if not according to one's own convictions?' – Interviewee 8), their values and convictions may simply correspond to those of their EPG and/or national party. Therefore, it is not always easy to isolate a clear independent effect at the individual level. In most cases, politicians join the parties whose positions are the closest to their own preferences, as highlighted by the ECPM members:

'On the main issues we are focused on – the protection of life and dignity [...], the promotion of family values [...], freedom of religion or belief [...] – we do not really need to issue any voting advice. Our Members are supporting us based on their own convictions.' (Interviewee 12)

'There was no voting instruction, but we are unanimous. We deal, by definition, with the protection of life as one of the characteristics of our European movement.' (Interviewee 7)

What those personal values and convictions correspond to varies substantially. Some MEPs anchor their progressive position on hESCR in the freedom and progress of science (Interviewees 1 and 11); others link their pro-choice position on abortion to concerns about gender equality and women's rights (Interviewees 5 and 9). In those cases, MEPs' values correspond to secular values. Yet, morality issues directly challenge religious and philosophical worldviews. (Non) religion here refers to (non) belief, or (non) conviction; it refers to 'a personal inspiration likely to intervene in the decision of the representative' (Foret 2014a, 110). Our data suggest that religion and philosophical convictions matter, for both progressive and conservative MEPs. Interviewee 1 claims to be a laic person for whom freedom of research constitutes a politico-philosophical engagement. Interviewee 2 states that he 'feel[s] perfectly consistent with [his] Christian faith'; and Interviewee 7 asserts that 'Catholic teaching reinforces [his] moral responsibility'.

Even though religion is often associated with conservative stances (most conservative MEPs belong to the EPP, which labels itself as a Christian-Democratic political group – Interviewee 11), religious people also happen to be progressive, just as secular people happen to be conservative (Interviewee 8). For example, a very Catholic person might not accept that religion dictate every aspect of people's lives (Interviewee 9 here referred to the *laïcité* principle). Interviewee 9 actually represents a very interesting case that cuts across all traditional cleavages, namely the religious (a), national (b), and political (c) ones: she is a Catholic (a) Italian (b) EPP (c) MEP... who adopts progressive positions. To speculate, in her case, *gender* could constitute a crucial explanatory factor of her voting behaviour on abortion.

Eventually, when MEPs' personal (religious) beliefs conflict with their party's or group's position, abstention emerges as the preferred option. Abstention allows respecting one's deep convictions, without risking hurting her/his co-partisans (Interviewees 5 and 9). Thus, abstention is not only used strategically in case of conflict between the principals' positions (Mühlböck and Yordanova 2017), but can be used by MEPs to follow their deep convictions. Abstention also enables MEPs to differentiate between the report at stake as a whole, and some of its provisions in particular. For instance, conservative MEPs might be in favour of the Tarabella reports on gender equality while opposing those provisions dealing with the abortion issue specifically (Interviewee 10). By contrast, voting 'abstain' is deemed unfair by Interviewee 5, who seems to argue that MEPs should assert more their convictions when voting on morality issues: 'That is for me a way not to take a decision. [...] I have more respect for Ms. Zaborška [...] because it is clear what she wants [...] she does not hide it'.

## Conclusion

In the light of the growing politicisation of morality issues at EU level, this article has questioned how MEPs perceive and explain their voting behaviour on these issues. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with (former) MEPs involved in the abortion and/or hESCR debates. The qualitative analysis has attempted to better understand the role of religion and values from the MEPs' own perspective, at several levels: national culture, political affiliation and personal beliefs.

The findings revealed that MEPs perceive the influence of religion at these various levels. At the national level, when explaining their behaviours, respondents appealed to

MEPs' respective national cultures (more or less connected with Christianity), the saliency of morality issues on the national agenda, and electoral considerations (including both voters' religiosity and the prospect of upcoming elections).

Regarding political affiliation, MEPs emphasised the origins of the national parties on either side of the secular/religious cleavage, but also suggested a link between moral stances and the party's position on the integration/demarcation cleavage. Also, liberalism was cited as an ideology that would value more individual freedom on value-loaded issues, thereby impacting individuals' leeway to express their own convictions when voting. EPGs' influence on MEPs' voting behaviour was mostly tackled through the prism of group cohesion and discipline. While cohesion was perceived as a strength, excess of party discipline was negatively assessed, revealing some EPGs' incapacity to build a common position, but also impeding MEPs to express their own convictions.

The role of religion in EU morality politics seems influential at the level of MEPs' *believing* – as regulated by individual relativistic choices, not institutional denominational *belongings* or sociological degrees of religiosity (*behaving*). However, personal beliefs often collide with the values and positions of the party/group MEPs decided to join. In that regard, most respondents emphasised the great degree of freedom that the European parliamentary arena usually offers to express their personal values and convictions – and not exclusively on morality issues.

In conclusion, investigating the multi-level influence of religion on MEPs' voting behaviour on morality issues has provided valuable insights into how MEPs manage conflict over these issues. Our findings suggest some avenues for future research at the cross-roads of different academic fields. European Union politics scholars could draw on the ideological cleavage sustained by morality issues to further explore the nature of the EU polity as an emerging 'community of values'. Legislative studies could work on existing sophisticated models accounting for M(E)Ps' voting behaviour by bringing agency back in the analysis. For example, individual factors related to (European) parliamentarians' religious affiliations and beliefs could be more systematically measured by means of semi-structured questionnaires (which currently focus more on strategic factors related to (re-)election prospects) or grasped through M(E)Ps' speeches and *explanations of votes* (EoV) whenever available. Finally, the religion & politics literature could enrich the analysis through the lens of religious lobbies' activism at the EP, of the complex intertwinement between religious and (rising) populist messages, or of transatlantic insights on American morality politics.

## Notes

1. Beyond morality politics, early studies put forth the role of national cultural heritage on the formation of party systems across European countries (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), and notably the existence of religious (Catholic vs Protestant), or religious vs secular, cleavages. The impact of these cultural divides on voters' behaviour have been extensively studied (e.g., Knutsen 2004; van der Brug, Hobolt, and de Vreese 2009). In this study, we focus on the role of (religious) values on legislators' personal decision-making.
2. The project relied on qualitative data collected through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews, applied to 167 out of the 736 MEPs of the seventh legislature (2009–2014).

3. Green legislators worry about the instrumentalisation of human life for research purposes (Bardon 2014, 161). hESCR also bears the risk of a '*marchandisation du vivant*' (Tournay 2006, 268) ensuing from potential women's eggs trading (Banchoff 2011, 130; Foret 2015, 186).
4. See also a previous version of this paper in which we conducted an analysis of roll-call voting on the 2015 Tarabella resolution (Author and Author 2016).
5. Centre-right groups in particular appear quite divided on these votes. When comparing voting cohesion scores as provided by VoteWatch for the 2014–2015 period, we observed that cohesion scores for the EPP, ECR and EFDD were lower on morality issues (SRHR), respectively 50.8, 56.7 and 33.3, compared to an average score in plenary (2015) of respectively 98, 81 and 59.
6. In a few cases, former assistants were interviewed. Although they do not represent 100% of their MEPs' opinions and beliefs, they have a deep experience of bargaining processes in the EP and of their respective MEPs' motives behind their voting behaviour.
7. Most refusals came from conservative MEPs, although we cannot draw any conclusion from this observation.
8. As highlighted by Engeli et al.'s (2012) two-world theory, their involvement may be attributed to the saliency of the secular v. religious cleavage that has historically built the Belgian political landscape, with the Socialists and Liberals actively involved on the secular side, opposing the Christian-Democrats on the religious side.
9. Respondents' accounts did not enable us to draw any conclusion with regard to the Protestant v. Catholic cleavage, which scholars nevertheless consider to shape citizens' attitudes on both morality issues (Fink 2008; Minkenberg 2002) and European integration (Nelsen and Guth 2015). Christianity was considered as global factor, with no distinction between its specific components.
10. Note that Interviewee 8 is part of the ALDE, which gathers Liberal parties from CEE countries that have a rather secular tradition and defend more progressive stances, such as the PNL (National Liberal Party) from Romania, the NDSV (National Movement for Stability and Progress) from Bulgaria, or ANO2011 (Yes2011) from Czech Republic.
11. In that sense, parties in highly proportional systems represent more homogeneous segments of the electorate, and therefore have clearer positions than in systems where fewer parties (due to majoritarian rules) tend to adopt a 'catch-all' approach to the electorate.
12. Interviewee 10 is an Italian member of the S&D group, which imposed in 2015 100% party discipline on gender equality issues, among which abortion. Some Italian and Maltese S&D MEPs testify some resistance to conform to such voting instructions though.

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