

**THIRD ITALIAN CONFERENCE OF EVS/WVS DATA USERS**  
**Crisis after Crisis: Value Change in Italy**  
Bergamo, 29-30 September 2022

## **Can we talk about growing religious polarization? Italy in comparative perspective**

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The debate over societal polarization has been receiving large attention among the public, as several scholars and pundits claim that contemporary societies are becoming more and more polarized. The concept of polarization can assume various meanings, but it always implies the existence of a potential line of conflict between two or more social groups. When it comes to religion, we would expect that, in a highly polarized scenario, religious and non-religious people are placed in two opposite poles when considering their attitudes, values, and behaviours. Moreover, the distance between the two groups is expected to have increased over time.

By using the five waves of the European Values Study (1981-2017), this contribution aims at addressing this issue by inspecting the impact of personal religiosity on moral libertarianism (justifiability of euthanasia, abortion, homosexuality, and other moral issues). We will do so by putting emphasis on the situation we are experiencing in Italy, to highlight the similarities – and the differences – that exists with both other Catholic countries and also with denominationally different ones.

*First*, we will test whether the gap in moral attitudes between religious and non-religious people has increased over time. To distinguish between religious and non-religious groups, we follow Wilkins-Laflamme (2016) and employ a typology based on the combination between religious denomination and attendance to religious service that, among other things, will permit to distinguish between practicing Christians and the so-called nominal or “cultural” Christian.

*Second*, we will analyse the moderating role of religious context in explaining the gap in moral libertarianism between practicing Christians and non-religious people. According to the hypothesis of religious defence in secular countries (Siegers 2019), the gap is expected to be higher in more secularized contexts in which practicing Christians are supposed to be a more distinctive group as they invest more effort in sustaining their religiosity.

*Third*, and relatedly, our contribution aims at assessing whether the speed of the processes of secularization impacts the dynamics of religious polarization. In other words, we would test whether religious polarization increases to a higher extent in contexts experiencing a faster process of secularization.

To answer our research questions, we will employ longitudinal multilevel models where individuals are nested into country-years, and country-years are nested into countries. As our preliminary results show, we would suggest always providing longitudinal evidence, possibly referring to a sufficiently large timespan, to better understand the phenomena of societal polarization. In this respect, the European Values Study is an invaluable tool to answer research questions that imply longitudinal variation over a long period of observation.

**Keywords:** religion, polarization, moral values and attitudes, comparative, longitudinal