Morality Politics in the United Kingdom: Trapped between Left and Right

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Introduction

As a secular society with a long-standing liberal tradition, the UK is often considered to be among the most permissive countries on morality issues. This view of the UK often refers to the mid- to late 1960s known as a ‘permissive’ period where several forms of social and moral regulation underwent a substantial liberalization including capital punishment, censorship, divorce regulation and the decriminalization of homosexual relations (Richards 1970; Durham 1991; Studlar 1996). Most important here, the 1967 Abortion Act was one of the most permissive abortion laws at the time – although it did not give women a right to abortion on request as, for instance, Denmark did in 1973.

What this chapter aims to demonstrate, however, is that while the UK does provide a few examples of early or far-reaching permissive changes, this tendency is highly uneven across the various issues not only because the country remains restrictive on some issues, but also because the timing of policy change varies to a great extent. Behind this variation lies the absence of a religious–secular conflict line in the British party system. In relation to the two ideal types of morality politics given in Chapter 1, the UK clearly belongs to the secular world. As a consequence, morality issues live on the periphery of British politics. They generally do not fit the left–right conflict that defines British party politics and therefore neither of the major political parties pays much attention to them. Societal actors like the Church of England are similarly unable or unwilling to push for restrictive moral legislation.

Even if morality issues are only rarely part of British party competition, they do sometimes generate some political attention and policy
decisions are made. Since the party system does not produce a general conflict dimension over morality, we expect substantial variation across the five issues. The policy processes might be similar, however, simply due to the fact that all of the morality issues fall outside of normal party competition and are instead processed as ‘conscience issues’ (Cowley and Stuart 2010). As a consequence, the particular characteristics of British parliamentary politics – for instance, the rules regulating private member bills and amendments to government bills (Cowley and Stuart 2011) – become more important than party competition. The lack of a central conflict definition on morality issues further means that there is no general tendency toward more permissive policies, since policy developments depend very much upon the individual issue.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: The next section first gives a short overview of party conflict and the party system in Britain, including a description of the key institutional features of the political system that may influence when and how morality issues can be politicized. The core part of the chapter analyzes the five morality issues individually in order to uncover the terms of political conflict surrounding each one of them. The key conclusion is that morality politics in Britain typically develops in a depoliticized context, which makes both the timing and content of policy changes relatively unpredictable compared with countries in the religious world.

Britain in the secular world: The dominance of left–right party politics

The modern British party system is organized around left–right competition. Due to the electoral single member, plurality system, this left–right conflict has mainly taken the form of two-party competition. The identity of the two major parties has changed since the early 20th century, with Labour replacing the Liberals as major party on the center-left after the World War I while the Conservatives continued to represent the center-right. The Liberals, however, never entirely disappeared from the House of Commons and have emerged stronger electorally since the mid-1970s. Until the election of 2010, the UK effectively has had a multiparty electorate while remaining largely a two-party House of Commons, based on vote/seat shares (Webb 2000: 4–15).

In terms of issues, the left-right conflict has been dominated by macro-economic policy and other issues related to the British welfare state. Thus, even though the left–right divide has been blurred somewhat by the more mixed policies of New Labour governments,