

# Identifying Christian democratic elements in politics

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**Abstract:** *The dilemma of whether a political party represents Christian democratic values in the public sphere ‘truly’ is exposed to day-to-day political debates. This article would like to contribute to the understanding of Christian democratic politics by presenting different paths to identify the presence of Christian democratic elements in politics.*

**Keywords:** *Christian democracy, ideologies, party politics, political values, Christian politics*

## Introduction

In March 2021 a two and a half years long political conflict arrived at a new phase when the major Hungarian government party, the Fidesz left the European People’s Party (EPP)<sup>1</sup>. Political debates generally have several dimensions, still, the normative part of this debate reflected on the question of who represents the traditional values of the EPP, for instance, Christian Democracy ‘truly’. From 2018, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán calls its government<sup>2</sup> (or even entire Hungary<sup>3</sup>) Christian Democratic and criticizes EPP for its submission to liberal/leftist values and policies. The other side, Orbán’s EPP opponents are not quiet either. When it became clear that Fidesz MEPs will leave the EPP fraction of the European Parliament, Manfred Weber (largely replying to Orbán’s former political statements) has said: “We don’t need any kind of lessons on our values in the EPP. This is about the provocations against Europe, about fundamental rights and rule of law. They moved away from the EP, we did not”.<sup>4</sup> Another comment came from, then the President of the EPP, Donald Tusk in a form a tweet when Fidesz quit the EPP: “*FIDESZ has left Christian*

*Democracy. In truth, it left many years ago.*<sup>5</sup> Fidesz MEP, Balázs Hidvéghi responded, that EPP “has left Christian Democracy, so Fidesz has left EPP”.<sup>6</sup>

Now, who is right in this political ding-dong? A few answers could be found from journalists, political commentators, and political scientists related to this question. For instance, both in Hungarian domestic and international journalism, Fidesz’s “Christian democratic” disguise (in short, that it is a kind of rhetoric without true representation of Christian democratic values) is a common notion<sup>7</sup>. Yet EPP also receives negative comments for being more the progressive center than traditional Christian democratic. However, based on the lack of comprehensive analyses in the broader field, this article intends to deepen the understanding of Christian democratic politics by presenting different paths to identify the presence of Christian democratic elements in politics. First, some definitions of Christian democracy will be cited in order to interpret them as possible analytical tools. Then, some of the most comprehensive characterizations will be presented, which, we argue, could be proper instruments for our purposes. In the last, concluding part of the article four possible areas of application will be suggested.

## **Definitions as possible analytical tools**

Researchers are not always keen to participate in seemingly indefinite debates on definitions. One of the most acknowledged scientists of Christian democracy, Stathis N. Kalyvas, in his book entitled *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, has argued that he will not “enter into the interminable normative debates about the ideology and interpretation of Christian democracy that dominate the literature”, and will also “avoid the debates on terminological issues such as the difference between ‘social Catholicism,’ ‘Christian Socialism,’ and Christian Democracy.”<sup>8</sup> Other definitions are, on the other hand, historically grounded but do not describe the central motif of the notion. For instance, the handbook of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung on Christian democracy writes that “Christian Democracy is a political movement that originated in Europe – specifically in the countries of Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, and Switzerland – during the mid-19th century. Organisationally, the movement was rooted mainly in the cultural and charitable Catholic associations and worker’s unions out of which political parties would form later on.”<sup>9</sup> Although later, the handbook underlines fundamental political beliefs and

objectives (e.g., in short, the recognition of free and constitutional democracy, legal right to freely strive for political and economic self-realisation, the idea of responsibility, subsidiarity, and solidarity)<sup>a</sup>, it does not contain a concise definition that could be used as a proper analytical tool for our purposes, namely to identify Christian democratic elements in politics.

Obviously, it is not assumed that definitions are useless. There are some which capsule the essence of the phenomenon, while even contain a few central characteristics which could help the identification. Encyclopædia Britannica argues that Christian democracy is a “political movement that has a close association with Roman Catholicism and its philosophy of social and economic justice. [...] It rejects the individualist worldview that underlies both political liberalism and *laissez-faire* economics, and it recognizes the need for the state to intervene in the economy to support communities and defend human dignity.”<sup>10</sup> We believe, that this description formerly could be utilized well to distinguish Christian democratic and non-Christian democratic political parties, and even though, nowadays, the Roman Catholic linkage is probably less tight, modest anti-individualism and defending human dignity could still be valid points of differentiation. Yet, these are not enough since crucial elements, such as subsidiarity or reconciliation are missing.

Another promising definition could be cited from John Bruton who wished to highlight that, in contrast to “mere means of realizing values (like socialism or the free market), ‘Christian democratic’ describes a true value system.”<sup>11</sup> The author also argues that “Christian democracy starts, not with a preordained view of how society should be organised, but with a view of the value of each person as an individual who has been created by God.”<sup>12</sup> Bruton is not just right in these statements, but could also construct a line of differentiation between Christian democracy and other ‘isms’ (nationalism, socialism, capitalism) by pointing to a supposed ‘core’ of Christian democracy. Still, probably his definition would also include other Christian political movements (such as Christian socialism) and not just Christian democracy.

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<sup>a</sup> In our point of view, the principles which are present the KAS handbook, in their present form, are not suitable for detecting Christian democratic elements properly either. Surely there are precise elements, such as solidarity or subsidiarity, yet, we believe, that there are too many characteristics (above the four aforementioned beliefs, for instance, freedom, equality, social market economy, solidarity, special bond with Churches) which would result in a too broad focus.

Moreover, his definition is not precise enough to identify Christian democratic elements in politics, such as subsidiarity or transnational reconciliation.

To sum it up, we claim that definitions of Christian democracy presented above are very limited as analytical tools for our purposes. However, it is crucial to highlight that the elaboration on the limited usefulness of the definitions in our case, is not posed as criticism and it would not devalue any of the conceptualizations. It seems that definitions serve other purposes, hopefully, 'characterizations' would be better instruments for detecting Christian democratic elements in politics.

## **'Characterizations' as possible analytical tools**

Definitions are one possible way of conceptualizing a phenomenon. The other one is that we try to characterize it, or in other words, to describe a few central characteristics of the phenomenon. In a short overview article, titled *Christian Democracy*, Kalyvas and another well-known researcher of the field, Kees Van Kersbergen summarize some relevant conceptualizations of Christian democracy. They argue that "perhaps the first systematic exploration of the distinctive elements of Christian democracy was that of Irving (1979, p. xviii-xix), who listed several principles of distinctiveness, including the Christian commitment to elementary human rights, liberal democratic values, and class and transnational reconciliation. Building on this, van Kersbergen (1994, 1995, 1999) argued that the key concepts that made Christian democracy distinctive were integration, (class) compromise, accommodation, and pluralism."<sup>13</sup> These two characterizations seem to describe well how Christian democratic politics looked like in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the devotedness towards elementary human rights, liberal democratic values, pragmatism, and compromises in domestic and integration on an international level.

Trying to find answers for the question in their article, titled *Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care?* Tim Bale and Aleks Szczerbiak highlighted five characteristics of Christian democratic politics, namely:

- (1) "Christian democratic party is a commitment to the idea of society as an organic whole."
- (2) "Christian democrats are traditionally strong supporters of the family as the key means of achieving this societal equilibrium."

- (3) “Christian democrats have normally supported some kind of ‘social capitalism’, best exemplified by the German ‘social market economy.’”
- (4) “Christian Democrat foreign policy is underpinned by a strong emphasis on transnational, as well as domestic, reconciliation.”
- (5) “Christian Democratic parties’ programmes are explicitly rooted in and underpinned by religiosity.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the authors investigate the case of Poland, their characterization includes not just the instruments of Christian democratic politics, but elements as well that point to the value-baseness of Christian democratic politics (family, religiosity). In our point of view, Bale and Szczerbiak’s categories are both comprehensive and concise, which could make them a proper tool for identifying Christian democratic elements in politics.

A slightly different but still related question attracted the interest of Carlo Invernizzi Accetti who wished to investigate whether the European Union is secular or not by looking at the European treaties and the past jurisprudence. In his article, partly building on Max Weber’s methodological instruments, he argues that it is more adequate to describe the EU framework and institutional relations as it exists today as an ideal-typical notion of ‘Christian Democracy’ than “secularism” or “laïcité”. The author distinguishes four features that underpin his statements, in short, these are the following:

- (1) European institutions “seek to accommodate a plurality of different modes of articulation between them, according to a *doctrine of subsidiarity*.”
- (2) “European Union explicitly recognizes *religion as a source of ‘inspiration’ for public law*.”
- (3) European treaties and the jurisprudence “have endorsed a ‘*positive interpretation of the principle of religious freedom*.’”
- (4) European treaties and the jurisprudence “implicitly grant a *privileged status to Christianity* as a constitutive element of the specific kind of civic ‘ethos’”.<sup>15</sup>

Without investigating the validity of Invernizzi Accetti’s argument, it is clear that the four features are well-grounded theoretically (he also points to the leaders of early Christian democratic ideas, including Luigi Sturzo, Alcide de Gasperi or Jacques Maritain as sources of thoughts), yet these characteristics are constructed to a *sui*

*generis* institution, the European Union, which constrains the areas of application. Probably, with slight modifications, it could be used for analyzing nation-states.

Nevertheless, another insightful piece of scientific literature was written by Invernizzi Accetti in the past years which are, we conclude, could be used as a proper instrument for our ambition. In his monograph published in 2019, entitled *What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology*, Invernizzi Accetti analyzed Christian democracy as an ideology, and based on Michael Freeden's concept of ideologies, he named six conceptual building blocks of it, namely: (1) anti-materialism, (2) personalism, (3) popularism, (4) subsidiarity, (5) social capitalism, and (6) Christian inspiration.<sup>16</sup> In one of our former [articles](#) which includes a summary of the author's related arguments, we have already highlighted that it might be used as an instrument to analyze contemporary Christian democratic political parties and politicians.

1. Table Existing 'characterizations'

Irving (1979)	Van Kersbergen (1994, 1995, 1999)	Bale and Szczerbiak (2008)	Invernizzi Accetti (2018)	Invernizzi Accetti (2019)
Christian commitment to elementary human rights	Integration	Society is an organic whole	Subsidiarity	Anti-materialism
Liberal democratic values	(Class) compromise	Supporters of family	Religion as a source of inspiration	Personalism
Class and transnational reconciliation	Accommodation	Supporters of social capitalism	A positive interpretation of religious freedom	Popularism
	Pluralism	Reconciliation in foreign policy	The privileged status of Christianity	Subsidiarity
		Programs rooted in religiosity		Solidarism
				Christian inspiration

Most of these 'characterizations' as we called them, are made after deep examinations of the Christian democratic movement by acknowledged researchers based on manifestations of Christian democratic parties, politicians, and philosophers. What we would suggest is to use them in a 'reversed' way, more



specifically, to use them as instruments to identify Christian democratic elements in politics. We do not doubt that, depending on the areas of application, a careful operationalization should be made. We treat all five characterizations utilizable, yet, in the case of current political analysis, we would argue that the 'characterizations' of Bale-Szczerbiak (2008) and Invernizzi Accetti's monograph (2019) are the most fruitful.

## **Conclusion - possible areas of application**

The underlying reason behind the writing of this article was the dilemma that if there is a political phenomenon that is regarded as Christian democratic, how is it possible to 'check' or 'validate' that the statement is right. In the beginning, by showing the Fidesz vs. EPP saga as an example, we wished to point to the fact that there are cases where political science should provide tools for deeper understanding. We argued that the usefulness of definitions is limited for our purposes. Then, we presented five relevant characterizations of Christian democracy, that could be grounds for an elaborated analysis. The question which remains to be answered here is what is meant by 'political phenomenon' in the first sentence of this chapter, or in other words, which are the possible areas of application. Here we will name only four, shortly.

First, we believe, that party or government programs are providing relatively stable ideas (they reflect less on day-to-day politics) which makes them proper instruments for this kind of analysis.<sup>b</sup> Second, political science is well familiar with rhetorical analyses, thus another way would be to examine speeches of politicians, political leaders in a set timeframe. This path might have the advantage of understanding comprehensive ideological, or religious ideas and their roots. The third way, which focuses more on the 'actualization' and not just the articulations of Christian democratic elements (and, by this, could contribute in other aspects than the first and the second area of applications), is to analyze policies, partly through legal documents. The last, which is related to the third, and which has an example in the aforementioned article of Invernizzi Accetti (2018), is to investigate whether the

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<sup>b</sup> Though not detecting Christian democratic elements but to compare and 'old' and a 'new' government program was the ambition of our two other articles (in the case of CDU/CSU and Fine Gael). Link\*



institutional framework and judicial decisions reflect any value orientations or not. In any way, we believe that a well and formerly set conceptualization should be utilized to detect Christian democratic elements in politics.

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