

Non-Catholics influenced Vatican II liberalization of Catholic church, new study says

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A new analysis of voting patterns among bishops at the Second Vatican Council points to the indirect influence of non-Catholic churches in the Council's liberalization of the Catholic Church.

Melissa Wilde, an associate professor of sociology in the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, led a team of researchers that investigated data from the [Vatican](#) Secret Archive to determine the critical factors influencing how bishops voted at the Second Vatican Council.

Their findings are outlined in "Religious Economy or Organizational Field? Predicting Bishops' Votes at the Second Vatican Council," published in the August issue of *American Sociological Review*.

The researchers found that the relationship between the church and state as well as changes in the institution's situation in relation to other institutions, particularly a loss of dominance and the presence of and relationship with other religious institutions, were crucial factors in predicting whether religious leaders would be open to change and also what kinds of change they would prioritize.

They concluded that in places where the Roman Catholic Church enjoyed a stable monopoly as the state church, religious leaders were almost impervious to outside influence and opposed to most kinds of

change. In areas in which Catholicism was not the established faith but where the religious field was stable, however, leaders of other religious institutions were a crucial source of influence on Catholic bishops who attended and voted at Vatican II.

The article also explores factors that predicted bishops' votes on two of the most contentious issues dividing the Roman Catholic Church during Vatican II from 1962-1965: the validity of a document titled "On the Sources of Revelation," which upholds the inerrancy of the Bible, and the importance of the Virgin Mary.

"This is the first attempt to subject any Council votes to rigorous quantitative analysis," said lead author Wilde, who studies the processes and factors that direct religious change. "It was exciting being the first person to gain access to these votes on an event as important as the Council."

In addition to her research on Vatican II, Wilde has examined the demographic factors that explain why American Protestantism has gone from being majority Mainline to majority conservative and the role of religious competition in the rise in marital annulments in the Catholic Church.

She is currently investigating how and why the politics of sex and gender have become key issues dividing the American religious field through a comparative-historical study of the major American religious groups' reactions to changing norms regarding birth control, abortion, divorce, women's ordination and homosexuality over the course of the 20th century.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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