

Research Proposal

Multidimensional Socio-political Conflicts and Social Blocs in Switzerland: A Political Economy Approach

Celâl Güney

Problématique and theoretical framework

A recent trend in political economy has developed a tremendous analysis of the long run transformations and evolutions of political cleavages in almost all democratic countries in the world. Following the well-known success of inequality studies in economics and social sciences since the work of, naturally, Thomas Piketty but also of other renown scholars such as Anthony Atkinson, Amartya Sen or Branko Milanovic, political economists are recently becoming progressively more interested in the problematic of social conflicts and political cleavages within capitalist economies. One possible reason for this sudden interest on this topic is the following paradox: rising inequality has not mechanistically paved the way for growing support towards redistribution, taxation of top income and wealth owners, and for political contest in general. The same paradox can also be stressed regarding climate change since green parties have not been relatively so successful despite the growing emergency of environmental issues¹. Inequality studies have thus given subsequent birth to a renewed interest for political issues in economics.

This project², mostly done by economists, gave rise to a wide and broad analysis of political preferences as a function of a set of socioeconomic factors such as income, wealth, level of education, gender, ethnic group or even religion (Gethin and al. 2021). Rising inequality within Western democratic countries since the 1980s, including Switzerland (Morgan and Neef 2020), was not followed by an increasing support for redistribution as predicted by standard economic model such as the median voter model or even as deterministic economic theories would suggest. According to Piketty (2018), the recent evolutions of social conflicts and political cleavages are not based anymore solely on social class, but rather centered around multiple axis combining for instance a “classist” left-right axis linked to economic issues with a “cultural” axis resembling strongly to the “post-material” axis already highlighted by Inglehart (1971; Inglehart and Norris 2017), with the exception that Piketty gives more emphasis to the education clivage as a source of the cultural clivage. The electoral support for left-wing political parties is supposed to have progressively shifted from the popular classes (low income, low level of education) to the educated classes whereas the support for right-wing parties remains a class-based support positively correlated with wealth and income. Piketty identifies those transformations as resulting in two distinct and significant social blocs/groups. On the one hand, the support for the left is dominated by the highly educated, labelled the “brahmin left”. On the

¹ For instance, in Switzerland, the green party is still behind the socialist party, the liberal radicals and way behind the Swiss people’s party. The green party is moreover expected to be the biggest loser of the 2023 Federal Elections: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/economie/dans-un-monde-en-crise--la-stabilit%C3%A9-politique-suisse-ne-vacille-pas/48007830>

² The significance and magnitude of this project can be seen directly on their online database: <https://wpid.world/>

other hand, the “merchant right” has gathered the most affluent classes in the support of right-wing parties. Finally, these two blocs could be opposed by either “nativist” or popular-social blocs (Piketty 2019).

Amable and Darcillon (2021, 2022) offer more contrasted results and insights. In fact, income levels are found to be still a predominant factor behind the formation of political preferences on a left-right axis. In this study, and more generally in Amable and Palombarini (2018), they notably identified the possibility of a political alliance between the most affluent and educated classes, giving rise to a “bourgeois bloc”, trying to position itself beyond the left-right divide and potentially facing a “nativist” or “anti-bourgeois” bloc.

A third insightful contribution on the transformation of political cleavages can be found in Oesch and Rennwald (2018). They argue that the political space has become a tripolar one: what was once the classic bipolar left-right cleavage centered around economic issues has given way to a tripolar divide and political competition due to the growing importance of far-right parties, the best illustration in this regard being Switzerland.

In this framework of shifting political cleavages, Switzerland is a particular and interesting case to study. In effect, Martinez-Toledano et al. (2021) underline the fact that Switzerland is the country for which the class-based conflict is the less salient whereas the cultural-based divide is the most predominant among Western countries. They explain, among other facts, that the gradual shift of the support for the left from popular classes to the educated was the most dramatic and intense. The Swiss political field is also an important pioneer and forerunner in the emergence of the “cultural-post material” divide with the intensification of the latter since the rise of what have become one of the most successful populists and far right political party of Europe, namely the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) as well as the rise and success of the green party. Another Swiss particularity would be the prevalence of the cultural divide over the class divide as a consequence of religious, linguistics and regional divides and the specific Swiss institutions which shaped the long-term evolution of the Swiss socio-political cleavages (Martinez-Toledano et al. 2021: 22).

Research question and hypotheses

My research agenda for this present study is to test for the empirical validity of these socio-political conflict models (brahmin left vs merchant right for Piketty (2018, 2019); bourgeois bloc for Amable and Palombarini (2018); tripolar poles for Rinnewald and Oesch (2018)) for Switzerland. Consequently, my objective is to analyze the factors influencing the transformation of social conflicts and political cleavages in Switzerland in the last decades. More specifically and to narrow this broad research topic, the main research question is the following:

- To what extent are economic factors still relevant to explain Switzerland’s political cleavages and social conflicts? In other words, what are the effect of economic issues on Switzerland’s political cleavages and conflicts?

This research question can be answered through subsequent questions inspired by the literature reviewed above:

1. To what extent is truly the support for the Swiss left linked positively with the level of education and negatively with the level of income (Piketty's brahmin left vs merchant right divide model)?
2. What are the main social blocs in Switzerland? How can they be identified and how did they evolve during the last decades?
3. Did the evolution of social blocs give rise to a "bourgeois bloc" as identified by Amable and Palombarini (2014, 2018) in the case of France and Italy?
4. To what extent are cultural divides more important than economic divides in Switzerland since the 90s?

The research question implies the following hypotheses that will be tested in the study:

1. The support for the left depends positively on the level of education and negatively on the level of income and wealth (the brahmin left vs merchant right hypothesis).
2. The social preferences on economic issues such as the support for redistribution, the level of taxation, for public intervention or social benefits depend negatively with the level of wealth/income and the level of education (the "bourgeois bloc" hypothesis 1).
3. The social preferences on "cultural" issues such as the support for immigration and European Union integration depend positively with income/wealth and the level of education (the "bourgeois bloc" hypothesis 2).

Methods and sources

The methods employed will be mostly econometrical and statistical methods applied to survey data. Since most of the dependent variables will be nominal or ordinal (for example political leaning, preference for redistribution and taxation...), I will mostly perform multinomial logit and ordered logit regressions. Since regional divisions are important in Switzerland, hierarchical/multilevel model can be useful along with the logistic regressions. To try to analyze more in details the social blocs, I can also use the latent class model which can give powerful results for the identification of social blocs.

My study will also be an attempt to employ those statistical methods to a specific case study (Switzerland), an approach which is I think original for three reasons. This is a specific approach that, to my knowledge, has not been applied within this research topic yet. First, Piketty (2018) and Gethin et al. (2021) only use linear regressions to assess the evolution of political cleavages and Switzerland is a bit of a leftover among the tremendous set of countries analyzed in their research. Second, Oesch and Rennwald (2018) use generalized linear models, but I will use different data sources and only focus on Switzerland to have a deeper analysis. Finally, regarding Amable and Palombarini and their neorealist approach (2014, 2018), they mainly focus on France and Italy and the latent class analysis they use to identify social blocs in France and Italy has not yet been applied in Switzerland to identify social blocs and possible political alliances (at least to my knowledge).

For data sources, I envisage two possibilities. First, the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) offers useful social surveys on diverse subjects linked to social sciences for various countries, including Switzerland. Their datasets contain variables which are of interest for my

research³. Second, the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS) offers post electoral surveys for Switzerland. Their “Swiss Election Study (Selects)” covers most of Switzerland’s election and voting since 1971. On the one hand, FORS make available panel electoral survey data which contains different waves as, for example, the “Selects 2019 Panel Survey (waves 1-6)”⁴ (ref. 104584). On the other hand, FORS also offers cumulative dataset which covers a long period from 1971 to 2019⁵.

Bibliography

Amable, Bruno, and Thibault Darcillon. 2021. “The Brahmin Left, the Merchant Right and the Bloc Bourgeois.” *Review of International Political Economy*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2021.1913440>.

———. 2022. “Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right. How Useful Is This Distinction for the Analysis of Political Divides in Western Democracies?” *Political Economy Working Papers*.

Amable, Bruno, and Stefano Palombarini. 2014. “The Bloc Bourgeois in France and Italy.” In *Economic Crises and Policy Regimes*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 177–216.

———. 2018. *L’illusion Du Bloc Bourgeois: Alliances Sociales et Avenir Du Modèle Français*. Raisons d’agir. Paris.

Durrer de la Sota, Carmen, Armory Gethin, and Clara Martinez-Toledano. 2021. “Party System Transformation and the Structure of Political Cleavages in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, 1967-2019.” *World Inequality Lab – Working Paper*, no. 2021/08.

Gethin, Armory, Clara Martinez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty. 2021a. “Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies, 1948-2020.” *World Inequality Lab – Working Paper*, no. 2021/15.

———. 2021b. *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020*. Harvard University Press.

Inglehart, Ronald. 1971. “The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies.” *The American Political Science Review* 65 (4): 991–1017.

Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2017. “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: The Silent Revolution in Reverse.” *Perspective on Politics* 15 (2): 443–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717000111>.

Morgan, Marc, and Theresa Neef. 2020. “What’s New About Income Inequality in Europe (1980-2019)?” *World Inequality Lab - Issue Brief*, no. 2020/04.

Oesch, Daniel, and Line Rennwald. 2018. “Electoral Competition in Europe’s New Tripolar Political Space: Class Voting for the Left, Centre-Right and Radical Right” 57: 783–807.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12259>.

Piketty, Thomas. 2018. “Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of Political Conflict (Evidence from France, Britain and the US, 1948-2017).” *World Inequality Lab – Working Paper*, no. 2018/7.

³ For a quick overview of the ISSP data and variable, I made recently a website dedicated to graphical visualization of some of their datasets:

https://celalguney.shinyapps.io/Projet_Data_Science/?_ga=2.220552472.1874121342.1679593668-1453518093.1673880491

⁴ <https://www.swissbase.ch/en/researcher/my-downloads/104584/16585/download-details>

⁵ <https://www.swissbase.ch/en/researcher/my-downloads/104701/16702/download-details>

———. 2019. *Capital et Idéologie*. Le Seuil.

“Swiss Election Study (Selects) 2019.” n.d. Accessed March 19, 2023.
<https://www.swissubase.ch/fr/catalogue/studies/13846/18585/overview>.