

# **Social Blocs, Political Cleavages and Institutional Change in Switzerland**

**A Neorealist Approach**

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# Table of contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 The growing importance of political cleavages, social conflict and institutional change . . . . .	6
<b>References</b>	<b>8</b>

## List of Figures

## List of Tables

# Abstract

What are the relationships between political cleavages, the formation of social blocs and socio-economic characteristics such as income and education? The present master thesis conducts a first analysis of the links between socio-economic factors, the formation of socio-political groups and social blocs, and of political cleavages. After assessing country's political stability in the last decades, a long-run analysis of the socio-economic determinants of voting outcomes for the main Swiss social blocs are conducted. Finally, two latent class analysis are conducted to identify socio-political groups and to what extent the latter conflate with socio-economic groups. This master thesis is the first work to conduct such an analysis for Switzerland, and the aim of this work is to provide a first step into a overall analysis of the political economy of institutional change in Switzerland, using the neorealist approach.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The growing importance of political cleavages, social conflict and institutional change

Part of the recent political economy literature developed a tremendous analysis of the long-run transformations of political cleavages in almost all democratic countries around the globe. Following the now well-known success of inequality studies in economics and social sciences since the work of, naturally, Piketty and Goldhammer (2014) but also of Milanović (2016) and others, economists are recently shifting their attention towards social conflict and political cleavages within capitalist economies.

One possible explanation of this sudden interest could be the following paradox: increasing inequality and neoliberal reforms which took place in the last decades did not pave the way mechanically for growing support for redistribution or left-wing parties. The same paradox could also be stressed for climate change since green parties were not relatively so successful despite the growing emergencies associated with environmental issues. More generally, the extent to which social and environmental issues translate into political conflict is of interest in the current age of “polycrisis”.

This sudden interest thus gave birth to an ambitious project mostly conducted by economists under the supervision of Piketty. Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty (2021) give a wide and broad analysis of political preferences as functions of socio-economic factors such as income, education, wealth, gender, religion and so on. This kind of project shows that economists are tackling with a subject that political scientists have been studying for decades, at least from Lipset and Rokkan (1967). The main findings of Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty (2021) can be summarized as follows: after the post-war period, political cleavages were structured around a single left-right axis structured around class conflict over economic issues. The support for the left was based on average on low income and education voters whereas the support for the right was correlated positively with income and education. Then, an “educational shift” took place in the 1980s and the vote for the left became positively associated with education, leading to a shift from “class-based” conflict to a “multi-party” structured around class and educational cleavages. The latter is reminiscent of what Inglehart (1971, 1990) called the cleavage around “Postmaterialist” values which appeared as a result of growing material security.

Inequality studies thereby gave birth to a renewed interest for political conflict in economics and political economy. However, this revival of attention among economists is not only the result of the inequality paradox, but also a consequence of the willingness of some theories to explain institutional change. In fact, rising inequalities in the last decades was mainly the result of important institutional change, oriented towards so-called neoliberal or structural reforms *cit.* Originally focused on explaining the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s, Régulation Theory (RT) developed a theoretical framework aimed at identifying accumulation regimes, their mode of regulation as well as their evolution, crises and successions ([Aglietta 1997](#); [Boyer 2015](#)).

Although the interactions between politics, the economy and institutions were not the original objective of RT, some trends made progress towards the integration of politics into a theory of institutional change. In this regard, the decisive step to a coherent and elaborated theory of the political economy of institutional change was made by the neorealist approach of Amable and Palombarini ([2005](#); [2008](#)).

The objective of this paper is to test the main empirical findings of Piketty and co-authors, but also of the political science literature, which has been analyzing the relationships between political cleavages and socio-economic factors long before Piketty. The motivation is to analyse to what extent political cleavages and the formation of social blocs are influenced by socio-economic characteristics such as income and education in Switzerland, which represents an interesting case study. The paper mobilizes the neorealist approach to study the evolution of political cleavages and social blocs in Switzerland. This, to the author's knowledge, the first time such an analysis is conducted for Switzerland since the neorealist approach has for now only been applied by to France and Italy. Finally, this paper is aimed to be a first step into a broader project to analyse the political economy of institutional change in Switzerland, from a neorealist perspective.

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