

# Political Parties in a Comparative Perspective

## Cleavages and Partisan Realignment

Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster  
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

12 November 2025

## Event announcement

Next week, we'll have another session of our speaker series on *Understanding Democracies: Challenges and Solutions*.

- Werner Krause (University of Potsdam) will be our first guest
- Presentation on “Parties’ Path to Parliament and the Influential Role of Public Opinion Polls”
- you are all invited to join us next Wednesday, 12-13 in Room GraSP 101

## What we did last week...

- We learned what we mean by *institutions*
- ...and discussed how they can explain why new parties emerge and succeed
- Besides, we learned how we can summarize empirical papers

## Plan for today

Today, we are moving towards a second prominent approach to explain the emergence of political parties. We will discuss...

1. ...what cleavages are
2. ...how they can help to understand party emergence
3. ...and whether they are still relevant (in their original form)

## Summary of key take-away from last week's reading

Taking a step back from the several specific results, what's the main implication of this paper?

## Summary of key take-away from last week's reading

Electoral institutions shape the likelihood and success of new parties.

This means:

- the rules of the games substantially shape actors' motivations
- those who can change the rules determine the fate of other parties

This brings us to the complementary reading by Boix (1999)  
(Mark)

## Setting the rules of the game

- ruling parties have incentives to revise electoral rules if new (strong) forces emerge
- focus: from plurality systems to proportional systems
- two conditions are important:
  1. strength of the new competitor
  2. how much can ruling parties coordinate?

# Setting the rules of the game

Explaining the Selection of Electoral Rules in the Interwar Period and New Democracies after 1945.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES	AVERAGE EFFECTIVE THRESHOLD		
	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3
Constant	-13.03 (22.51)	-18.13 (14.40)	30.02* (4.70)
Threat <sup>a</sup>	-11.27* (3.39)	-34.07* (15.82)	-13.24* (3.89)
Strength of Socialism <sup>b</sup>		57.70 (45.86)	
Effective Number (N) of Old Parties <sup>c</sup>		7.31 (4.50)	

**Figure:** Effects of threats (socialist vote \* fragmentation of conservative camp) and strengths of old parties on introduction of more proportional system in new democracies after 1945

What's new in the other complementary reading by Blondel (1968)  
@Parichehr

# Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies

THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM OF PARTIES IN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES

	Comm.	Soc.	Lib./Rad.	Agr.	Christ.	Cons.
<b>Group 1</b>						
Two-party systems						
United States	L	e	L			
New Zealand	L	c			L	
Australia	L	c			L	
United Kingdom	L	e			L	
Austria	L	e?			L	
<b>Group 2</b>						
Two-and-a-half-party systems						
Germany	L	s			L	
Belgium	L	s			L	
Luxembourg	L	s			L	
Canada	s	L			L	
Eire	s	L			L	
<b>Group 3</b>						
Multi-party systems with one dominant party						
Denmark	L	s/m	s		s/m	
Norway	L	s	s	s	s/m	
Sweden	L	s/m	s		s/m	
Iceland	s/m	s/m	M		L	
Italy	M	s	s		L	s
<b>Group 4</b>						
Multi-party systems without dominant party						
Netherlands	M	s		M	s	
Switzerland	M	M		M	s	
France	M	s/m	s		s	M
Finland	M	M	s	M		s

Figure: Ideological composition of party systems

→ We need to consider ideology as well.

# Cleavages

*What do we mean when we are talking about a political cleavage?*

## Definition of cleavages

According to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), a cleavage can be defined...

- cleavages capture the lines of conflict running through a society
  - they are dynamic both in spatial and temporal terms
  - for a cleavage to be manifested, it must...
    1. lead to *socio-structural* differences
    2. entail a commonly shared value space among its members (*psychological group identity*)
    3. organize the conflict (e.g. through associations or parties)

Political cleavages structure politics. They capture demands of social groups and let parties adopt strategies to appeal to these groups strategically.

## Four cleavages by Lipset/Rokkan



## Four cleavages by Lipset/Rokkan



## Four cleavages by Lipset/Rokkan



# Four cleavages by Lipset/Rokkan



## Group work on cleavages

In four groups, discuss what your cleavage is about.

1. Which social transformation led to its emergence?
2. What kind of socio-structural differences does it represent?
3. Which position do the opposing factions have?
4. Which parties might represent which side?

[15 minutes]

# Old Cleavages?

## National Revolution

- Centre-Periphery:
  - Concentration of power vs. regionalism
  - nowadays: regionalist and ethnic parties; earlier: Liberals vs. monarchy
  - Examples: *Scottish National Party, Bloc Québécois, Lega Nord*
- State-Church:
  - secularism vs. power of the church (e.g., on education, social welfare)
  - Religious parties (mainly Christian Democrats)
  - Examples: *Christlich-Demokratische Union, Partido Popular, Österreichische Volkspartei*

# Old Cleavages?

## Industrial Revolution

- Urban-Rural:
  - Cleavage between agrarian society and urban industrial class
  - Peasant parties, later partly captured by Conservative parties
  - *Examples: Finnish and Swedish Centre Parties, Polish Peasant's Party*
- Capital-Labor:
  - Interests of the working class vs. bourgeoisie/owners of production means
  - Socialist and social democratic parties
  - *Beispiele: British Labour Party, Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, Spanische PSOE*

## De-alignment vs. realignment?

On the relevance of cleavages for contemporary party systems, there are two perspectives:

1. de-alignment: cleavages become less significant in politics
2. re-alignment: cleavages change

## Changing cleavages

*Ford and Jennings (2020) present three proposals of new cleavages, which ones? What is the conflict about?*

## Changing cleavages

- materialism vs. post-materialism (Inglehart 1971)
- globalization winners vs. loser (Kriesi 2008)
- transnationalism vs. isolationism (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002)

**Question by Richard:** Why don't the authors consider the possibility that these political issues and developments could just be temporary and not cleavages which will determine the structure of politics for the next few decades?

# The post-materialist turn

TABLE 2

## DISTRIBUTION OF MATERIALIST/POST-MATERIALIST VALUES AMONG SIX WEST EUROPEAN PUBLICS, BY YEARS OF BIRTH: 1985

VALUE TYPE	POST-MATERIALIST	MIXED	MATERIALIST	TOTAL PERCENT	(NUMBER) <sup>a</sup>	SCORE ON PDI <sup>b</sup>
<b>Years of Birth:</b>						
1966-1970	21%	59	20	100%	(1,194)	1
1956-1965	22%	56	22	100%	(2,459)	0
1946-1955	16%	55	29	100%	(2,438)	-13
1936-1945	14%	52	34	100%	(1,921)	-20
1926-1935	10%	52	38	100%	(1,812)	-28
1916-1925	7%	51	42	100%	(1,577)	-35
Before 1916	6%	50	44	100%	(1,007)	-38

Source: Euro-Barometer Surveys #23 and #24. Based upon combined national samples of the publics of Germany, Britain, The Netherlands, France, Belgium, and Italy.

<sup>a</sup>These results are based upon a procedure that weights the results for each country according to its relative population. However, the number of cases in parenthesis is the actual number of respondents who received a score on the value index.

<sup>b</sup>The PDI is the percentage of post-materialists minus the percentage of materialists.

**Figure:** Generational distribution of materialist and post-materialist values (Abramson and Inglehart 1987, p. 235)

# Or a new globalization cleavage?

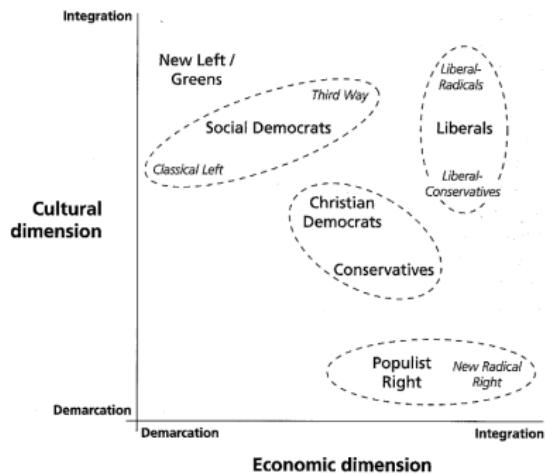


Figure: New political space according to Kriesi (2008, p. 15)

*...and your parties? Use the recent party program to search for explicit references to new cleavages*

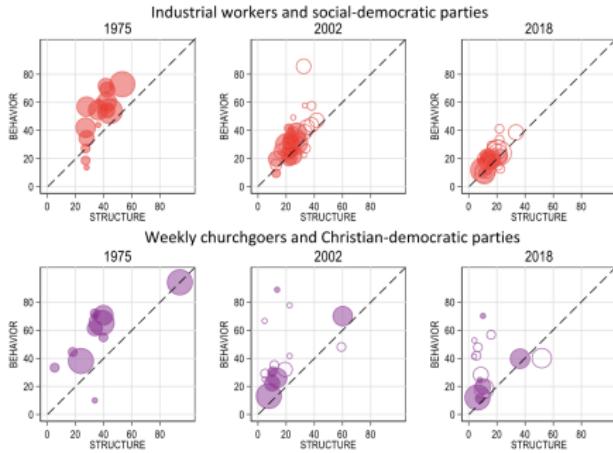
# Social transformations

*Why do new cleavages arise?*

## Social transformations

1. educational expansion
2. rising levels of migration
3. decline of the (White) working class
4. ageing societies
5. re-politicization of space (depletion of rural areas)

## Transformations on the demand-side



**Figure:** Evolution of cleavage strength for Social Democrats and Christian Democrats (Marks et al. 2023, p. 254)

*What's the story here?*

## Transformations on the demand-side

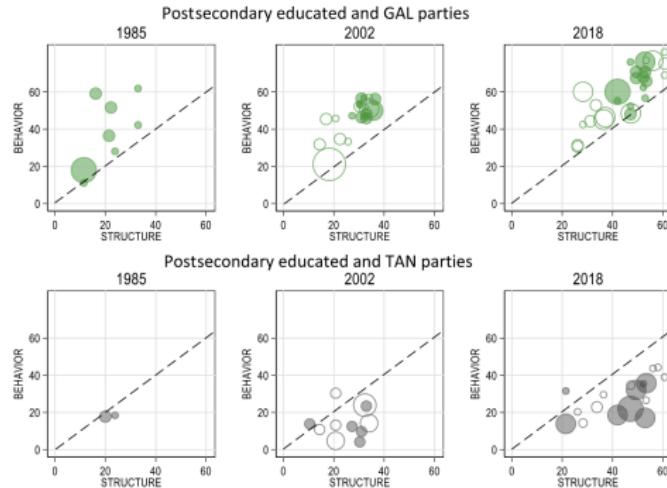


Figure: Evolution of cleavage strength for Greens and TAN (Marks et al. 2023, p. 255)

**Question by Bennet:** Is there really a Cleavage between educated and uneducated?

# Transformations on the demand-side

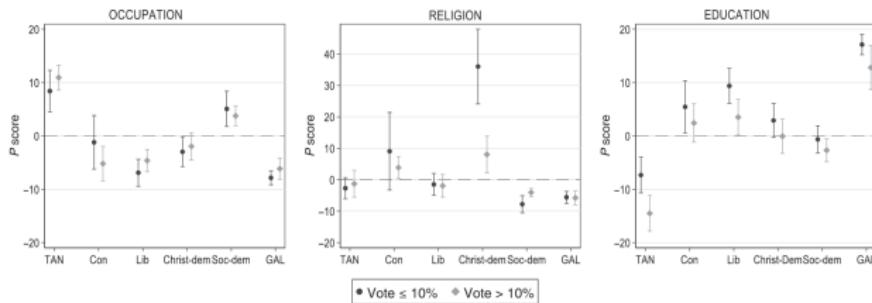


Figure: Evolution of cleavage strength for Greens and TAN (Marks et al. 2023, p. 255)

## Transformations on the demand-side

**Question by Ole:** Are green and liberal parties in the contemporary frame really the more disruptive agents compared to right parties?

**Question by Sophie:** To what extent is the decline of traditional cleavages irreversible or could new circumstances lead to them coming back?

## Re-politicization of space

KCW: What do you think the University of Wisconsin–Madison does not do well? When you think about [it]. . . .

Martha: Represents our area. I mean we are like, we're strange to Madison. They want us to do everything for Madison's laws and the way they do things, but we totally live differently than the city people live. So they need to think more rural instead of all this city area.

Donna: We can't afford to educate our children like they can in the cities. Simple as that. Don't have the advantages.

Ethel: All the things they do, based on Madison and Milwaukee, never us.

Martha: Yeah, we don't have the advantages that they give their local people there, I think a lot of times. And it is probably because they don't understand how rural people live and what we deal with and our problems.

**Figure:** Focus groups with rural residents in the US (Walsh 2012, p. 523)

What does Walsh (2012) do in her study and what does it tell us about space as a cleavage? [Frieda, Kyro and Melanie]

## What we've done today...

- defined cleavages
- traced some historical examples of how cleavages crystallized in political parties
- discussed changes in cleavage structures

## To prepare for next week...

- With the next session, we'll enter the third block of our seminar: functions of political parties
  - Readings:
    - Main reading**
      - Rahat G and Hazan RY** (2001) Candidate Selection Methods: An Analytical Framework. *Party Politics* 7 (3), 297–322. ISSN: 1354-0688, 1460-3683. DOI: [10.1177/1354068801007003003](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068801007003003)
    - Complementary reading**
      - Schwenk J** (2022) Candidate Selection and Female Representation in the Context of High Corruption: The Case of Italy's 2014 Mayor Elections. *Electoral Studies* 79, 102500
    - Podcast** (complementary)
      - Haughton T** (2024) *Party People: Candidates and Party Evolution*

Thank you for your attention!  
Any further questions?

## Literature

-  **Abramson PR and Inglehart R (1987)** Generational Replacement and the Future of Post-Materialist Values. *The Journal of Politics* 49 (1), 231–241.
-  **Blondel J (1968)** Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 1 (2), 180–203. JSTOR: 3231605.
-  **Boix C (1999)** Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies. *American Political Science Review* 93 (3), 609–624.
-  **Ford R and Jennings W (2020)** The Changing Cleavage Politics of Western Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science* 23, 295–314.

## Literature

-  **Haughton T** (2024) *Party People: Candidates and Party Evolution.* 2024.
-  **Hooghe L, Marks G, and Wilson CJ** (2002) Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration? *Comparative Political Studies* 35 (8), 965–989.
-  **Inglehart R** (1971) The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies. *American Political Science Review* 65 (4), 991–1017.
-  **Kriesi H** (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization.* Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 428 pp.
-  **Lipset SM and Rokkan S** (1967) *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives.* Free Press, 1967.

## Literature

-  **Marks G et al. (2023)** The Social Bases of Political Parties: A New Measure and Survey. *British Journal of Political Science* **53** (1), 249–260.
-  **Rahat G and Hazan RY (2001)** Candidate Selection Methods: An Analytical Framework. *Party Politics* **7** (3), 297–322.
-  **Schwenk J (2022)** Candidate Selection and Female Representation in the Context of High Corruption: The Case of Italy's 2014 Mayor Elections. *Electoral Studies* **79**, 102500.
-  **Walsh KC (2012)** Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the Power of Perspective. *American Political Science Review* **106** (3), 517–532.