

The Social and Attitudinal Basis of Political Parties: Cleavage Politics Revisited

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As a result of various political and non-political developments, the socio-culturally anchored and well structured character of European party systems has come under strain. This article assesses the overall social embeddedness of modern party politics and identifies newly emerging conflict-lines. It draws attention to phenomena that do not fit into the trend of dealignment, and discusses the relationship between group-based politics and democratic representation.

Introducing the conceptual framework

Is European party politics hovering above society, being at the mercy of short term political fads and games and of the popularity of individual leaders? Or is it anchored in solid, subjectively and objectively meaningful structures? Recent scholarly assessments typically underline the growing irrelevance of organizing principles that have guided the behavior of voters and parties in the past and depict a world of fragmentation, depolarization and decreasing social content. Below, I will first summarize the main arguments of the ‘dealignment’ or ‘cleavage-decline’ thesis and then I will present evidence that supports more structural (and therefore more revisionist, or, if you will, more traditional) understandings of party politics. The paper will not deny that traditional cleavages have lost a considerable part of their relevance or question the spread of individualistic patterns of behavior. But will dispute the evidence behind a linear process of fragmentation, depolarization and increasing social shallowness, and will draw attention to significant counter-tendencies.

Before engaging in the discussion of substantive processes, a short definitional exercise is due. The studies that emphasize growing fragmentation and idiosyncrasy

often also entail an assault on the term 'cleavage', the term that political sociologists have used for decades to grasp the depth and the width of socio-political divisions. Still much ongoing research relies on this concept but the uncertainties that surround its meaning and operationalization indicate an acute lack of academic consensus. While the present article mainly focuses on the analysis of real-life processes, it also takes a position on the conceptual debate. It posits that 'cleavage' should continue to be treated as a central concept for the analysis of political phenomena. It takes Bartolini and Mair's widely accepted definition as a starting point, according to which cleavages denote conflicts between organized socio-structural units (classes, ethnicities, denominations, etc) that have a 'set of values and beliefs which provides a sense of identity ... and which reflect the self-consciousness of the social group(s) involved'.¹

This definition has greatly advanced research in the field. But the definitional requirement of socio-structural origins and well-defined socio-structural bases has narrowed down radically, and in my mind unnecessarily, the applicability of the concept. Acknowledging that institutions and values, instead of social categories, may in some instances also dominate the identity of deep-seated, enduring, and comprehensive (that is, cleavage-like) political conflicts, the concept becomes suitable for analyzing a wider range of phenomena without losing its distinctiveness from ordinary and ephemeral political debates. The long-lasting organizing principles of mass politics tend to have a solid social background. The psychological relevance and survival of cleavages would be unlikely without some sort of social underpinning. But the conflicts may be rooted in primarily political-cultural differences and the mechanisms that sustain the politicized collective identities may have little to do with social categories measured by censuses.

Regardless of whether one emphasizes or de-emphasizes social-structural aspects, cleavage-politics implies group-specific party appeals, group-specific political behavior and polarized political systems. Polarization can manifest itself in three forms: as a large distance between policy alternatives, as a conflict between world views, and as confrontational behavior between the principal political actors. The presence or absence of the third form determines whether cleavage politics turns, in the best scenario, into consociational democracy or, in the worst case, into civil war.

As the history of modern societies attests, intellectuals, churches, trade unions or media outlets can be crucial for the organization of deep political divisions. Yet parties, due to their instrumental role in institutionalizing conflicts, loom larger than the above listed actors in the eyes of political scientists. Parties and cleavages mutually influence each other. A cleavage-ridden environment helps bundling the various issue positions into a few comprehensive ideological dimensions, constrains the coalition-preferences of parties, produces organizations that are

active between elections and motivates party leaders to invest in world views and group identities. Cleavage politics is also expected to stabilize the size and identity of parties and party blocs. The principal mechanism of this stabilization is in the fusion of party and group identity.

The overview of the recent developments in cleavage politics will be guided by the conceptual framework outlined above. Accordingly, the discussion will have three major sections: social structure, value structures and the style of party competition. First, however, I briefly summarize the debate.

Dealignment and cleavage decline

A large part of the 20th century politics has been characterized by a combination of relative partisan stability and some form of polarization in most (although not all) Western European countries. Social segregation (think, for example, of class-specific neighborhoods), the burgeoning sector of social group-based civic organizations, the development of political subcultures and the loyalty of individuals to those group leaders who endorsed one of the party alternatives provided a firm background to the relatively static party political landscape. In this period, cleavages, particularly the ones described by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan² (church versus state, working class versus bourgeoisie, centre versus periphery, urban versus rural) were clearly central to party politics. But by the end of the century the majority of empirical studies reported a decline in the power of socio-demographic categories for explaining political choices and conflicts.³ Individualized, eclectic and egocentric patterns of citizen decision making proliferated.⁴ Many observers began to see political behavior becoming too idiosyncratic and particularized to fit into any grand structure.

The thesis of decline of structures can marshal not only empirical evidence but also a plausible narrative. According to this narrative, sectoral change (tertiarization), mediatization, affluence, cognitive mobilization, individualization and secularization have destroyed the basis for stable and politically homogeneous groups. Post-industrial society is not organized around large-scale units (e.g. factories) and does not allow social groups to discipline their members. There is less need for concerted political actions since citizens can rely on various non-political channels for satisfying their preferences. Traditional providers of information, such as, for example, churches and trade unions, have ceased to serve as important points of reference for the contemporary voter who is able to rely on her own cognitive skills, developed by education. The micro foundations of cleavage-politics (peer group pressure, socialization, etc) have been weakened since citizens stopped living in closed and homogeneous socio-political environments. Short term issue-positions, the popularity of party leaders and the retrospective evaluation of government performance have grown in importance

in determining electoral behavior. It has become difficult to establish a direct link between the changes in the proportions of social groups and the success of left or right or of any party or party family. Parties shy away from appealing to such traditional social groups like blue collar workers, not least because these groups diminished in size. The specific issues that dominate the political agenda nowadays change more frequently than in the past. As a result, new generations rarely inherit practically useful political loyalties. According to the conclusion of the 'decline thesis', politics has become free from social structural anchors, is not interpretable in terms of polarization between social blocs, and has ceased to be organized around a few comprehensive conflict lines.⁵

In addition to social changes, cleavage politics has been also undermined by the declining stakes of political competition. The stakes have become smaller in the sense that the regime alternatives to liberal democracy have almost entirely disappeared. It has also been argued that regulated capitalism has solved or at least has managed to contain the most burning problems of mass democracies, and therefore it has diminished the scope for cleavage-like oppositions.⁶ Globalization, European integration, regionalization and devolution, the ascendant power of mass media, the increasing role of judiciary, of central banks and of various other expert bodies had a similar effect: curtailing the scope of national governments (see also Gray in this issue). To conclude, cleavage politics has been weakened on all fronts: polarization, group-specific party appeals and group-specific political behavior.

Yet, the thesis stating the irrelevance of the cleavage model can be questioned from at least four different angles: by pointing at the close association between certain social structural elements and the vote, by acknowledging the cleavage-forming role of values, by emphasizing the role of agency in cleavage politics, and by underlining those developments in the communication environment that are conducive to cleavage politics.

Continuing, albeit changing role of social structure

In the field of electoral research, the 'decline of cleavages' tends to refer to two phenomena: the decline in the association between social position and vote, and the increasing level of volatility. On both accounts most studies indeed report a shift towards instability and fragmentation. But these findings must be taken with a grain of salt. First, we lack sufficient empirical evidence concerning individual level political behavior from the time before the Second World War. If political orientations have been characterized in that period by a larger degree of instability than what is typically assumed, then political science may have to reconsider its standards and appreciate more the stability apparent in present day politics.

Secondly, for methodological reasons it is very difficult to assess whether the role of social status is diminishing or growing. One would need to come up with

time-specific conceptualizations and operationalizations of social status and then compare the equivalent, but on the surface constantly changing, measures. A mission quasi-impossible. In reality, formally identical but in substance not equally accurate operationalizations are applied to different periods. Therefore, some doubt always remains whether contemporary social structure has been adequately captured. Studies that take into account factors that became relevant during the last decades, like employment relations, working environment, task structure, the autonomy of the job, life styles, consumption patterns, or the ability to change residence, typically do not show a linear decline in the importance of social status.⁷

Thirdly, the decreasing weight of traditional class position may simply be due to the growing incongruence between political and social systems. In contemporary Western societies a considerable proportion of lower classes is composed of immigrants. These denizens typically do not have the right to vote. And even when they do, they often abstain from elections and almost nowhere do they form their own parties.

Next to these 'negative' arguments, political sociologists identify a number of social structural positions that are able to inform attitudes, political behavior and party choice.⁸ In particular, religion continues to shape political behavior across large part of Europe, although the conflict between clericalism and anticlericalism is almost nowhere at the top of the political agenda.⁹ Perhaps even more importantly, the progressive blurring of national sovereignty has been paralleled by the strengthening of regional structures and the mobilization of regional identities. Region and ethnicity define the identity of more parties today than in the classical era of cleavage politics. Other social factors, like education, gender, and sectoral employment, have become important building blocs of political identities and political behavior relatively recently, typically after the 1970s.

The traditional class patterns of social organization have evidently changed in fundamental ways. Important groups, like the petty bourgeoisie, the low-skilled industrial workers or the peasantry, have dramatically shrunk in size. The bulk of citizens today are employed in the service sector, even in Eastern Europe. Various aspects of social position continue to be channeled into political attitudes and votes, but the links between parties and social groups have transformed. A considerable portion of the remaining blue collar workers have become alienated from left wing politics, and have become permanent non-voters or have joined the reservoir of radical right populist parties. Parallel to this process, segments of the middle classes have transformed into the staunchest supporters of leftist parties. In many countries, state sector employees, often with high education and relatively high income, dominate Social Democracy.

An increasingly large part of the middle class (sometimes labeled 'new middle class') occupies jobs that are hard to monitor by supervisors because of the

complexity of the performed tasks. These jobs have less hierarchical decision-making structures and therefore the attitudes and values concerning hierarchy and autonomy developed here contrast vividly with those developed in professions that deal with objects, or with routine, clearly defined tasks. Symbolic-cultural and client-interactive occupations engender libertarian, tolerant orientations, and employees dealing with welfare clientele tend to respond more positively to programs emphasizing economic solidarity. As a result the discrepancy between the political orientation of social and cultural specialists whose job is centered on communication, on the one hand, and managers and technocrats who focus on problem solving, on the other gaining relevance.¹⁰

Those who occupy positions in the lower echelons of organizational hierarchies or who work within collective decision-making structures tend to distrust free market competition. Preferences towards the role of the state in economy are also shaped by whether a job is in the private or public sector and whether it is exposed to international competition. For private employees working for companies exposed to global competition the country's competitiveness must be a primary concern, while public sector employees have the interest to maintain high levels of state redistribution. Employees in sheltered sectors are also less sensitive to the requirement of competitiveness. As a result, the center-left can expect solid support coming from public and non-profit sectors, especially social services, while center-right programs are more likely to gain backing among those who work in the competitive branches of the private sector. If, in a country, the center-right parties exhibit pronounced authoritarian elements, the highly educated employees of multinational companies must experience cross-pressure, since they tend to combine conservative (that is, anti-state) positions on the economy with tolerant and progressive attitudes on moral issues. Occupational groups most harmed by global competition, like shop-owners or craftsmen, are particularly likely to develop authoritarian attitudes and political preferences.¹¹

An argument can be made that not so much class and occupation, but education is the principal factor behind the bulk of contemporary preference formation. High education, together with transferable skills, leads to universalistic-libertarian values (permissiveness, pro-environmentalism, anticlericalism, etc) and support for left-libertarian parties. Lack of education amplifies concerns about immigration, increases support for law and order policies and for programs based on traditional morality, and triggers support for authoritarian conservative or radical right-wing parties.¹² Not only the amount but also the type of education matters: a focus on hard sciences tends to socialize people into blaming individuals for their failure while a focus on social fields encourages blaming the society, increasing the affinity with right-wing and left-wing policies, respectively.¹³

Perhaps less visibly, the deepening crisis of the welfare state is driving a wedge between the active labor force, on one hand, and bond holders and dependents, on

the other hand. The fast increasing group of pensioners forms the base of a few 'grey' (pensioners') party initiatives across Europe, but the conflict is still far from being institutionalized. Next to the general barriers that obstruct the emergence of new political actors, the solidarity that spans generations within the families obviously acts as a break on this type of polarization. But the fact that pensioners do not appear (yet) as a united socio-political group does not stop politicians thinking of them as such. The support of the elderly is actively sought by all major parties. The result is not so much the mobilization of the elderly but the demobilization of the young.

Next to occupation, sectoral position and education, gender contributes most visibly to the structure of contemporary mass politics, although explicitly gender-based parties are rare. Women tend to support redistributive policies, partly due to their role in the non-profit sector and in the welfare state. Younger women tend to be libertarian, while the elderly can be still found on the conservative side in a number of countries. However, due to the recent shift of women to left-libertarian parties and due to the popularity of new radical right-wing parties among men, 'new politics' has a strong gender aspect.

Shifts in attitudinal structures

The logic behind the section above assumed that values, attitudes and preferences are shaped by social structural factors like job-experience and occupation-related interests. But as the choice of profession is often based on psychological and ideological orientations and values,¹⁴ values and attitudes often have an independent role in defining personal and group identities and political behavior. They can cement partisan loyalties as efficiently, or even more efficiently, than social structure.¹⁵ Therefore, values and attitudes should be considered not simply as integral elements of cleavages but also as their potential base. The value system of Western democracies has become more fragmented during the last decades, allowing for the development of idiosyncratic and transient value clusters, and in this regard cleavage politics has lost momentum. But the politically most salient values and attitudes are still ordered along few, well identifiable dimensions.

'New politics' is most typically associated with the axis of authoritarianism versus libertarianism. At the most abstract level, the dimension concerns what Kitschelt calls the 'governance structure of social life', that is, whether one favors or rejects traditional social norms and hierarchical decision making.¹⁶ But the issue content of this 'cultural left-right' dimension differs somewhat country by country. Most often it is linked to postmaterialist issues, environmentalism, euthanasia, international equality, etc, although these 'new' issues are often accompanied by 'old' ones, related to nationalism, moral conservatism or clericalism. Attitudes towards multiculturalism and security, the probably hottest issues of contemporary politics, are also well absorbed into this attitudinal dimension.

How is this attitudinal dimension related to the traditional left–right axis? This depends on what is exactly meant by ‘left’ and ‘right’. If these terms refer to identification with ideological labels, parties and traditions, there is a high degree of correspondence between the two. Libertarian values appear as assimilated into the leftist camp and right-wing politics is typically supported by authoritarian values, although the right-wing field is less homogeneous in this regards than the left. The majority of the parties combine redistributive attitudes with libertarianism or merge authoritarianism with a pro-market approach. These ideological packages define left and right in most of the developed world. But if by left-right one means an attitudinal dimension, consisting of issues related to redistribution, economic equality, size of the state, or the influence of trade unions, then the relationship is close to orthogonal: while some libertarians and authoritarians object to (neo-liberal) capitalism others regard the bureaucratic Leviathan as their principal enemy.

Although the authoritarianism-libertarianism dimension has received much attention in recent years in particular, the public continues to be divided in its attitude towards economic equality. As a result, the political space of European politics is typically described as having two dimensions. In those countries that are strongly polarized along the socioeconomic left–right dimension, in which institutional obstacles obstruct the emergence of new parties, and in which postmaterialist orientations are less widespread, the cultural dimension is of secondary importance. But the strategic options of parties are best understood by taking into account both dimensions even in these countries.

There are, of course, a number of issues that do not assimilate easily into the left–right terminology or into the above-described two attitudinal dimensions. In the maps of mass attitudes, environmentalism often appears as a separate factor, even though it is most forcefully represented in the party programs of left-libertarian parties. Attitude to centralization also often cross-cuts other ideological dimensions, but it tends to become politically relevant only when combined with the issue of nationalism and, consequently, with the authoritarian-libertarian dimension. Since the political right does not define the status quo any more, anti-establishment sentiments also have become more independent from the left–right axis. But genuinely anti-establishment groups that are not allied with the left or right are rarely significant political forces.

Already the fact that a limited number of dimensions is able to account for the bulk of variance in ideological positions testifies to the structured nature of the party political space. A further impetus towards continuing simplicity and structuration is provided by the one-dimensional language of politics. Left-right terminology continues to dominate public discourse and behavior, despite the fact that syncretic politics and populist appeals based on purposefully vague and idiosyncratic ideological profiles are increasingly successful.

As the paragraphs above have shown, the various interest and value-based conflicts that characterize post-industrial society tend to converge towards the opposition of a limited number of political camps whose discourse reflects, although perhaps less directly than before, the structural strains of the society. At the same time the classical patterns of social and political conflicts have weakened and one cannot speak of a genuine realignment yet. No analysis of party politics suggests that the old system of conflicts has been entirely replaced by a new one. The language of left and right is flexible enough to simultaneously reflect various conflicts, and parties are adaptable enough to incorporate new issue concerns without abandoning old symbols.

The conflict-line that has perhaps most potential to become the source of the principal cleavage of the future is the one described by Hanspeter Kriesi and his colleagues. They see globalization as a juncture that pits new losers against new winners. As a result, cosmopolitan citizens and entrepreneurs and qualified employees in sectors open to international competition become opposed to entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, unqualified employees and citizens who strongly identify themselves with their national community.¹⁷ This divide may translate in the European context into a preference for, or opposition to, further integration.

However, in spite the clear preferences of certain groups in the society, party systems are not (yet) split between the adherents of open and closed society. The attitude toward the European Union (although many already call it a cleavage)¹⁸ seems to be particularly slow in crystallizing into a clear-cut and significant opposition.¹⁹ The issue of European integration poses a challenge to traditional alignments, but the logic of domestic politics²⁰ provides little room for discussing the boundaries of the EU, while such a divide within the European Parliament would be so disruptive that it is very unlikely to institutionalize.

Powerful party strategies

In the structuralist approach, parties appear mainly through their representative role. But parties are also able to shape the political agenda, emphasize and de-emphasize conflicts, strengthen and weaken collective identities and facilitate coalitions among various social groups. Taking elements of the classical Rokkanian approach as starting points, a venerable current of cleavage studies (Sartori, Mair, Przeworski and Sprague, etc)²¹ emphasizes the influence of elites, parties, and in more general sense, of agency on cleavage formation. The intensity of group-consciousness and group-specific voting depends to a large extent on elites, and more specifically, on parties. Parties are able, particularly in politically turbulent periods, to define the identity of social coalitions, to create new relationships among social background variables,²² and they can even shape

social structure through government policies. Whether new conflicts can institutionalize into cleavages depends to a large extent on the elite's support of the old order: on the continuing insistence of mainstream parties on the traditional oppositions.²³

Parties 'betrayed' cleavage politics when they shifted, sometime during the 1960s, from class-orientation to catch-all strategy. But with hindsight it is clear that the change was not as radical and complete as often portrayed. More importantly, nowadays the room for catch-all strategies is diminishing rather than growing. The declining electoral turnout gives extra weight to the core groups of the party electorates. As a result, the mobilization of loyalists, as opposed to a random targeting of new voters, gains extra weight in the electoral strategy of parties. The mobilization of core supporters appears as a crucial component of party strategies even in recent American presidential elections.²⁴

Parties can fight against individualization and volatility not only by having group-specific appeals, but also by resorting to an adversarial and polarizing strategy. The decline of structural voting that is witnessed in many countries is often due to political and not social reasons, like the temporal ideological convergence of parties, and these recent trends may be therefore reversible.²⁵ The level of programmatic polarization has been repeatedly shown to be related to (and perhaps shaping) the level of group-based electoral behavior,²⁶ contradicting the hypothesis of a linear decline. The polarization of party systems rather fluctuates than declines in a secular fashion. During the 1970s and 1980s, many scholars noted the increased willingness of parties to make coalition with ideologically different partners, but looking back it is clear that the separation of leftwing and rightwing blocs remained largely intact.

Adversarial behavior, centered on an 'us versus them' rhetoric, has not completely vanished either. Think of Spain, which is more conflictual today than it was a decade ago, and is dominated by debates that are fueled by disagreements on such emotionally charged issues as nationhood, security, civil rights and the memories of the civil war.²⁷ The politicization of collective identities by divisive historical symbols is not as unfashionable today as the modernization theory would let us believe. Anticommunism has become an important political weapon in Berlusconi's Italy or the Kaczyńskies' Poland many years after the fall of communism, indicating that the association of contemporary political divisions with historical conflicts and emotionally charged symbols continues to be a prominent form of mobilisation.

Even technological changes can help to conserve or revive certain aspects of cleavage politics. Group-specific political behavior presupposes intensive contact with like-minded people. During most of the 19th and 20th centuries, citizens were defenseless against the socio-economic forces that gradually undermined the homogeneity of their traditional environment. But present-day media technologies provide possibilities for living in a homogeneous virtual reality. By exploiting these technical changes the messages of the parties can be better

tailored to specific groups than before.²⁸ The increasing compartmentalization of the mass media also means that parties can avoid appearing in the eyes of the median voter as the agents of particular groups, and in this way they can combine the advantages of the cleavage- and the catch-all eras.

The appropriate media of the catch-all party strategy was the public mass media and the large commercial mass media (especially TV and radio). Using these channels the parties could directly reach the average voter. With the development of cable networks and the internet the situation has changed. Partisan institutions (see the Christian Broadcast Networks, Fox News, etc in the US) started to flourish and growing numbers of voters are attracted to (partisan) blog networks and web-based grass-root organizations (e.g. MoveOn). These organizations are rarely maintained by parties but their activists are often party activists. Socialstatus based groups play only a marginal role in organizing postindustrial media, but the role of world views, identities and virtual social networks is growing rather than declining.

It is obvious that the large emphasis during electoral campaigns on leaders instead of on parties, or on the 'management of the country' instead of on ideologies, is detrimental to cleavage politics. But one should not forget that, in most of the 19th and 20th centuries, clientelistic, elitist, and unresponsive parties dominated the political landscape. The demands of more educated and sophisticated voters and party members may actually push the parties towards a more accurate representation of the existing ideological preferences.²⁹ The most visible method of channeling group interests, the organizational linkage between voters and parties, is without doubt declining. But parties have much more accurate information about the preferences of their voters than before. The weakening of organizational structures marginalizes activists, but, in itself, does not foreclose cleavage-centered strategies.

East–West differences

Not all comments made above apply to post-communist Europe. In the narratives concerning the region, dealignment appears not as an endstate but as a departure point. Many observers see no role for traditional cleavages to play in post-communist politics since social differentiation and political traditions have been equally suppressed by communist dictatorship.³⁰ Indeed, party systems are volatile and therefore contrast vividly with the 'frozen' systems of classical cleavage politics. The prevailing fluidity is partly due to the frequent changes in the supply side: loyalty among politicians to their parties tends to be low and, as a consequence, parties split and unite with considerable frequency. But the demand side is to be equally 'blamed': voters easily desert parties. In Central-Eastern Europe government parties suffer from a particularly large 'negative

incumbency effect' which indicates that voters are more sensitive to governmental performance than to ideology and use elections to punish governments for not delivering according to expectations. Living in the midst of a radical social transformation there is inevitably confusion in the mind of voters what class they belong to and which party serves the interests of that class.

While the picture that emphasizes fluidity is largely accurate, it creates the misleading impression of politics that is hovering entirely above the society. In fact political sociologists often find as much, or even a greater relationship between vote and various social background characteristics than in the West.³¹ Stephen Whitefield, for example, concludes that 'There is considerable evidence that post-communist societies contain structured social and ideological divisions, that social factors – especially age, education, religion, ethnicity, and occupational class – significantly shape ideological perspectives, and that voters choose parties that in large measure programmatically reflect their interests.'³² There is a solid link between market position, the possession of transferable skills and the vote.³³ Ethnic parties play a major role in a number of countries (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Latvia, Romania, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina), and are present in others (Ukraine, Lithuania, Moldova, Serbia, and Croatia). The difference vis-à-vis 20th century Western Europe is not so much in the association between social characteristics and vote but in the lack of social closure that could guarantee long term stability.³⁴

The differences between East and West concerning the attitudinal and value aspects of cleavages are pronounced. Conflicts related to the pace of transition and to the fate of the representatives of the old regime still dominate the public sphere of many post-communist countries. To the extent that one posits relatively stable social segments (members and descendents of the communist ruling class versus the principal losers of the communist takeover) behind this conflict and allows for mechanisms that socialize new generations into this divide, the anti-communist conflict can be compared to classical cleavages.³⁵

The historically most embedded attitudinal conflict of the region is related to a bundle of issues that are usually discussed under the heading of Westernization: liberalization, modernization and opening up of national boundaries. This dimension differs from the 'authoritarianism-libertarianism' dimension known from the West to the extent that issues such as environmentalism, integration of immigrants and euthanasia have a smaller weight, while issues related to national identity are more important. The Eastern cultural dimension is also different from the Western one in that it has a clear foreign policy component. The attitude to European integration is a more integral part of this dimension than in the West.

Polarization, another element of cleavage politics, strongly characterizes Eastern Europe, particularly in the form of adversarial politics. The competing political teams often regard each other as enemies, not as opponents. But in many

instances the strong emotional and ideological conflicts remain at an elite level, and therefore the socio-political landscape, with the exception of the ethnic factor, continues to be characterized by considerable fluidity.

Conclusions

Cleavage politics is a complex phenomenon, with a number of distinct aspects. It does not equal stability of vote choice akin to the one that existed in the 1950s in Western Europe. For the full picture, one must take into consideration all its manifestations. Comprehensive surveys suggest that social structure still informs citizen's behavior and parties' strategies. The new occupation, education and gender-based alignments influence parties, social movements and political attitudes. Parties continue to identify with, and appeal to, distinct clusters of values and nurture the collective identity of their core supporters. Political behavior is shaped by robust group interests, a number of symbolic issues divide the politically active (and therefore relevant) minority of citizens, and parties continue to cater to a diverse electorate. The cleavage model of politics is less relevant, but far from irrelevant.

Some of the aspects of cleavage politics, however, have clearly lost strength during the past decades. Traditional social categories have a weaker impact on electoral behavior and parties rarely claim to represent particular socio-structural groups. Direct confrontation between self-aware social groups has a marginal role in general, and not only inside the party political sphere, and public discourse tends to de-emphasize socio-demographic categories. Electoral research (see particularly the work of Mark Franklin and his colleagues) has documented a dramatic weakening of social closure: new generations of voters are less and less immunized against change in party affiliations. The level of political alienation has taken more individualistic forms. Organizing the discontent into a politically effective community is therefore more difficult than ever.

To conclude, many elements of cleavage politics survive, some even invigorated, but the fragmented and fluid social landscape does not any more allow for a politics based on the opposition of few inward-looking social groups. Is this good or bad news for democracy? The concept of democracy relies on the notion of autonomous individuals while representative democracy is based on the idea that these autonomous individuals can choose between alternative programs and teams of politicians and can hold these politicians accountable. The room for rational deliberation is necessarily restricted in settings where membership in one particular group determines political behavior. From this perspective, the decline of traditional cleavages can be heralded as part of the process of democratization, when 'voters begin to choose'.³⁶ Furthermore, if political behavior becomes free of the 'straitjacket' of group loyalty, there is also more room for focusing on

programs and government performance, and therefore more possibilities are created for exercising accountability. Since cleavage politics typically entails group hostility and mutual suspicion, its absence opens the door in front of more tolerant and consensual politics and policy making. The victory of one side of a cleavage may easily lead to the alienation or discrimination of the losing side, while the weakening of cleavages increases the chance that average citizens will have a government that is closer to their preferences.

On the other hand, one must recognize that cleavages are not simply conflicts, but institutionalized conflicts. Institutionalization is supposed to lead to stability, predictability, and thereby, to social peace. Politics that is less obviously connected to deep structural conflicts is potentially more prone to media manipulation or to the appearance of maverick politicians and may easily result in an elitist form of politics that loses the trust of the citizen.³⁷ Representation and accountability faces serious challenges if preferences are not aggregated into a small set of distinct positions, and if the optimal party strategy is to satisfy ad-hoc groupings of minority preferences instead of acting on behalf of a well-defined principal. The weakening of group-based loyalties and prejudices may turn passionate citizens into sporadically interested spectators.

Cynicism and declining participation in traditional forms of political activities are, of course, prominent features of contemporary politics. But the analysis above suggests both that growing alienation is not inevitable and that the inability of parties to reflect on socio-structural and value differences cannot be the principal cause of these negative phenomena.

Although the elements of cleavage politics less often crystallize into a self-conscious opposition of major socio-political blocs than in the past, political science should continue researching structural oppositions. First, temporal tendencies should not be the only factor determining the research agenda. To give an example: there may be less inequality in Europe than there was a century ago, but that does not necessarily diminish the relevance of inequality as a social phenomenon and as a research subject. Secondly, the vitality of cleavage politics depends to a large extent on political actors. The incentive structure of politicians is a function of the requirements of competition, and therefore a more explicit focus on cleavage strategies can never be foreclosed.

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