

Review

In support of the social roots of party institutions, postmaterialism, de-alignment and the freezing theory

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Abstract

This article questions whether Lipset and Rokkan's (Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, (New York: The Free Press, 1967)) sociological explanation of party systems still holds in light of new developments. After outlining the famous cleavage theory, the essay proceeds by discussing the four cleavages and the party families that emerged from them. Next it considers the freezing hypothesis and compares Lipset and Rokkan's sociological explanation to Duverger's Law (Maurice Duverger, "Factors in a Two-Party and Multiparty System," in *Party Politics and Pressure Groups* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell)). The article concludes that, while political identification may no longer align with Lipset and Rokkan's original four cleavages, the cleavage structure itself is still relevant in explaining contemporary party systems today. Finally, the essay offers Dalton's (Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, (London: Chatham House)) theory of de-alignment and Inglehart's postmaterialism as explanations why.

Keywords: Postmaterialism, De-alignment, duverger's law, freezing hypothesis, social origins, political parties.

INTRODUCTION

The sociological explanation for party systems is based on Lipset and Rokkan's famous social cleavages theory, which argued that social cleavages arose out of two revolutions. The national revolution produced the center/periphery and church/state cleavages, while the industrial revolution produced the rural/urban and owner/worker cleavages. The authors claim that as the franchise was extended, political representation flowed from the interests of these social cleavages. Political parties eventually coalesced around whichever cleavages were most salient in any given polity (Russell J. Dalton, "The History of Party Systems," in Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996), 149-164).

Dalton offers a lineage of modern party families (Russell J. Dalton, "The History of Party Systems," in Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Western Democracies*, 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1996), 149-164). Of the families on the left, the Social Democrats (SD) are the

oldest and largest, representing industrial working classes. As either allies with, or an arm of (British Labour Party), the trade union movement, SD's early focus was on workers' rights. SD ideology spanned from Marxism (anti-capitalist) to mildly reformist. Most SDs eventually dropped revolution in favor of the welfare state. SDs are also in favor of European-wide standards of social protection. Communist parties emerged in early 20th century (Bolsheviks, etc...). Some were formed due to splits in Socialist party, others formed independently. Communist parties supported a more radical, revolutionary policy toward capitalism. Most declined dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The new left is a residual group emerging from disgruntled communist party activists in the early 1960s, student protest movements in the late 1960s, and Green Parties which arose out of citizen and environmental movements in the 1970s and 1980s advocating environmental policies, non-nuclear energy, and a more decentralized and participatory society. The new left is comprised of Inglehart's postmaterialists (Ronald

Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997)). The parties of the center and right were largely organized after parliamentary democracy became institutionalized. Liberal Parties (center) favor extended voting rights, civil liberties, and the separation of church and state (and education). Liberal centrist parties can lean left or right, so they make good coalition partners (coalition leaders want to make certain that their coalition center is also at the center of the party system spectrum when possible). Agrarian parties originally represented rural interests. As rural populations declined, Agrarian parties have adapted to include environmental issues and decentralization. Christian Democrat (CD) parties largely follow cleavages of the various Christian denominations (such as Catholic in Italy, or Protestant in Scandinavia), or they are comprised of a fusion of Catholic and Protestant (such as CDU in Germany). Also CD represents the interests of business (this can create conflict: how does neo-liberalism look out for the poor?). Finally, far right parties are staunchly nationalistic and therefore typically in favor of tough immigration laws and strict integration policy.

Each of these party families can be traced back to one of the four cleavages. Lipset and Rokkan recognized that the party systems of the 1960s still largely reflected the cleavage structures of the 1920s. They asserted their freezing hypothesis which posits that most modern parties have long-established ties with existing social groups. These alignments have become frozen or self-perpetuating as over the decades voters developed loyalties and interest groups established party ties. Since the party system left little electoral space for new parties, new groups tended to align with existing parties. Hence, political parties hadn't changed that much, if at all (until recently).

Is the party system still frozen?

The 1970s witnessed a thaw of voter alignments (de-alignment) marked by (1) a decline in class-based party identification, (2) a decrease in voting, (3) an increase in other types of political mobilization (protests, boycotts, etc.), and (4) the emergence of new parties. This change in the electorate impacted party systems by either (1) altering the overall number of parties in the system by creating new parties, (2) changing the number of relevant parties in the system by shifting support for existing parties, or (3) changing the ideological distance between the parties in the system (Dalton, 1988).

Despite the growing body of scholarship arguing to the contrary, Lipset continued to maintain that material values are still the most politically salient (Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990)). Bartolini and Mair conducted a

massive study that covers most European democracies between 1885 and 1985 (Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair: *Identity, Competition, and Electoral Availability: The Stabilization of European Electorates 1885-1985*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)). The authors conclude that Lipset and Rokkan's freezing hypothesis holds, that class has not been replaced by values, and that the postwar period in Western Europe is not marked by de-alignment. Bartolini and Mair's conclusion is widely disagreed with (as is Lipset's).

For instance, Dalton agrees that the traditional parties continue to win the majority of the votes in Western Europe. Still, while admitting that the traditional party systems have not changed all that much, Dalton also argues that de-alignment has been severing the traditional ties between class groups and political parties (Dalton, 1988).

Dalton points to the old bourgeoisie/proletariat cleavage, and explains that it is eroding because the old middle class has largely been replaced by a new middle class, the "salariat." Dalton further argues that the growth of this new middle class has led to a decline in class voting because the salariat lacks traditional ties to class groups and possesses more mixed policy positions than the old bourgeoisie. Similarly, Dalton points to the religious cleavage between Protestants and Catholics and notes that it is eroding as well. This erosion has led to a decrease of religious influence on voting behavior. Overall, de-alignment is weakening traditional class alignments. Given that there has not been any realignment (which requires clearly defined and highly cohesive social groups), Dalton points out that the established parties have had to adapt to either incorporate the new parties or compete with them for the non-aligned vote.

What's causing de-alignment?

While there is no real consensus on specifically what causes de-alignment, at the heart of the matter is a shift in values. There is a large body of literature that examines the marked shift in values across the Western world. Dalton credits Inglehart as having developed the most systematic attempt to describe and explain value change in industrialized societies, while others question his findings for various reasons (Thomas M. Trump, "Value Formation and Postmaterialism: Inglehart's Theory of Value Change Reconsidered," *Comparative Political Studies*, 24 (1991), 365-90; Raymond M. Duch and Michael A. Taylor, "A Reply to Abramson and Inglehart's 'Education, Security, and Postmaterialism,'" *American Journal of Political Science*, 38:3 (1994), 815-824).

Inglehart's theory of value formation is based on the recognition that generations living in post-war Europe tend to be safer, wealthier, and possess higher levels of subjective well-being than those that struggled under the

economic hardship of the Great Depression and physical peril of the two world wars. While this trend is intuitive and not at all surprising, Inglehart insists that there's more to the story. Rather than a simple dollar-for-dollar incremental correlation between wealth and subjective well-being, Inglehart found a threshold of diminishing returns (around \$2,000 in 1980s value) where the benefits of wealth—as measured in subjective well-being—leveled off. Inglehart argues that this is because a largely universal transformation of values takes place near this threshold whereby concerns for economic security are exchanged for the higher-order pursuits. Furthermore, Inglehart theorized that this change was intergenerational rather than based on a life-cycle effect (people's values change as a natural part of the aging process). Two hypotheses support his theory: the Scarcity Hypothesis and the Socialization Hypothesis.

Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to political values, Inglehart's Scarcity Hypothesis argues that when material needs (basic economic security, law and order, personal safety) are scarce, then these will be valued more highly than postmaterial values (higher-order values such as individual freedoms, self-expression, political participation, etc...), and vice versa. In other words, when existential security is low, people will hold material values more dearly. But when existential security is high, people will hold postmaterial values more dearly.

What caused existential security to increase in the post-war years? After WWII, the end of conflict, the presence of the US military, and international peace agreements, all contributed to a Western European citizenry that felt safer than the generation before them. From an economic standpoint, financial aid from the Marshall Plan, assistance from NGOs (Red Cross, etc.), the post-WWII economic success, and the establishment of the welfare state, all contributed to a Western European citizenry feeling more economically secure and prosperous than the generation before them. Healthy, happy workers increased production, increased productivity produced a surplus, and the surplus funded the welfare state. The welfare state not only contributed to overall economic security and prosperity among post-war Europeans, it also captured the radical left and largely removed the threat of a communist revolution (Maier's "politics of productivity") (Charles S. MAIER, "The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II," In P. J. Katzenstein, ed., *Between Power and Plenty*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 23-49). Those who were raised in this environment of relative safety, security, and economic prosperity took their material needs for granted. Survival was abundant. So according to the scarcity hypothesis, material concerns were abandoned in pursuit of the scarcer higher-order things in life.

Inglehart suggests that the scarcity of existential security can lead to xenophobia, and therefore reasons that the scarcity of WWI and the Great Depression

greatly contributes to our understanding of the totalitarian regimes that marked the era (Ronald Inglehart, "Globalization and Postmodern Values," *The Washington Quarterly*, 23:1 (2000), 215–228). More recent data from the 1990 World Values Survey (WVS) suggests that the scarcity hypothesis also explains the experience of the Eastern European states. Their citizens didn't enjoy the same level of safety and economic prosperity as the citizens of Western Europe, and so they continued to express concern for material values.

Inglehart's second hypothesis, the Socialization Hypothesis, argues that the level of existential security an individual experiences in his or her formative years determines the values that individual will hold throughout his or her lifetime (contrary to the lifecycle effect). Therefore, persons born in the midst of the depression and WWII should hold material values throughout their lives, while those born in the relative peace and security of post-war Europe should demonstrate postmaterial values.

Therefore post-materialism, as used by Inglehart, refers to a set of values that includes more than just immediate material needs such as safety, shelter, and economic security, but also includes higher-order values such as individual freedoms, self-expression, concern for the environment, political participation, equal rights, etc...

Inglehart labels these higher-order values, "postmaterial values," and concludes that the values individuals hold depends largely on the socioeconomic structure they are born into. Ultimately, Inglehart argues that post-material society has greatly changed individual values (Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles Among Western Publics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977)).

Inglehart tested his theory with data collected from six Western European nations in 1970. Of those surveyed, the younger generation expressed greater concern for higher-order values while the older generation expressed greater concern for the more traditional material values such as safety, shelter, and economic security.

Inglehart continued to track the younger survey respondents over the next twenty-five years and found no substantial change in their values. Therefore Inglehart argues that value change is intergenerational rather than a result of the life-cycle effect. Inglehart argues that his findings help explain the shift in values occurring in post-industrial societies.

Are Lipset and Rokkan's Social Cleavages Still Relevant?

The overall trend of changing citizen values is mirrored at the polls as more and more voters cast their ballots based on values rather than class. These results seem to suggest the emergence of a third revolution—a post-industrial revolution—and the creation of its own

accompanying cleavages. The emergence of the new material/postmaterial value cleavage appears to be growing in political salience while the older class-based cleavages are declining. For example, the new value-based cleavage caused a split in the British Left between Labour and the Social Democrats (1981) and voted the Green Party into West German government for the first time (1983). Even Norway, Sweden, and Denmark—normally bastions of class-based voting—have seen substantial decreases in traditional class-based voting over the decades of the post-war era. In some West European states, class-voting had dropped to as low as 8% by 1986, with 75% of the postmaterialist vote going to either new left parties such as the greens or to established left parties that adopted postmaterial platforms. This trend has resulted in the decline of the Marxist left and the rise of the postmaterial Left (Ronald Inglehart and Scott Flanagan, "Controversies: Value Change in Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review*, 81 (1987), 1289-1319).

With these new issue cleavages will come new challenges and, of course, change. One of the biggest changes to political participation in Western Europe overall, is the postmaterialists' tendency to seek other forms of political participation. These alternate forms of participation are marked by a decline in voter participation and an increase in boycotts, protests, issue advocacy, and even violence (Russell J. Dalton, 1996; Joan M. Nelson, *Understanding Political Development*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987)).

The Institutional Explanation

The institutional explanation for party systems is based on Duverger's law which states that single-member plurality systems tend to favor two dominant parties, while multi-member systems tend to favor three or more parties (Maurice Duverger, "The influence of electoral systems on political life," *International Social Science Bulletin*, 3 (1951), 314-52). There are two main reasons for this. (1) Because the race can only be won by one candidate in a single-member plurality race, smaller parties will build coalitions in order to compete against larger parties. (2) More importantly, because voters do not want to waste their vote, they will vote for a candidate who can win, even if it is not their first choice.

Cox refined Duverger's law by asserting that in the voter's mind, the number of viable candidates in any race is one plus the district magnitude (Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)) (Duverger did not specify how many parties would exist in multi-member district races, just that there would be more than two). Like Duverger, Cox argues that voters tend to vote strategically. Rather than waste their vote on a candidate who cannot win, voters will abandon their first choice and vote for a more viable

candidate.

The main advantage of the institutional explanation is its ability to demonstrate how institutional structure (determined by history and previous choices) both shapes and constrains the choices of individual actors while still accounting for human agency. However, one drawback is that the empirical evidence supporting it doesn't always hold water. For instance, Duverger's theory appeared to prove accurate in the 1968 US presidential race between Nixon (R), Humphrey (D) and Wallace (I). Wallace supporters, realizing that their preferred candidate was not one of the two candidates likely to win, cast their vote for a more viable candidate (Richard F. Bensen and M. Elizabeth Sanders, "The Effect of Electoral Rules on Voting Behavior: The Electoral College and Shift Voting," *Public Choice*, 34:1 (1979), 69-85).

However, there are two problems that arise. The first has to do with bounded rationality. Duverger's law only works in explaining the 1968 election outcome if Wallace supporters are aware of his third place ranking and the improbability of that ranking improving. While this knowledge may seem self-evident today, with modern technology to forecast election outcomes and by-the-minute election campaign coverage, availability of this knowledge is far less self-evident in 1968, and even less so in the pre-television era.

The second problem one encounters in applying Duverger's Law to the 1968 election is the issue of strategic voting. Both Duverger and Cox maintain that voters will engage in strategic voting because they won't want to waste their votes.

Chhibber and Kollman test the effect of decentralization on strategic voting using historical data from Canada, Great Britain, the US, and India (all of which have a history of SMD and plurality voting) (Pradeep K. Chhibber and Ken Kollman, *The Formation of National Party Systems: Federalism and Party Competition in Canada, Great Britain, India, and the United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)). They find that in highly centralized states, Duverger's law held up very well. However in India, strategic voting for the two dominant national parties only occurred roughly 60% of the time, demonstrating that voters continued to cast their ballots for favored local party candidates rather than sure winners.

One could argue that a similar pattern continues to occur in the U.S. today. Because there is ultimately only one seat to be won in US presidential elections, and because the electoral votes in each state are ultimately gained by winning a majority of the popular vote in each state, U.S. presidential races are basically the culmination of 50 separate SMD plurality races combined.

Bowler, et. al. investigates how well Duverger's law holds up in light of the US Electoral College (Shaun Bowler, Todd Donovan, and Jeffrey A. Karp, "Why Politicians Like Electoral Institutions: Self-Interest, Values,

or Ideology?" *The Journal of Politics*, 68:2 (2006), 434-446). While Bowler, et. al. find that Durverger's law is likely to hold in the United States, even with the Electoral College, I'm not convinced. The only true strategic voting occurs in swing states where an individual's vote is likely to matter. In die-hard red or blue states, a large percentage of voters continue to waste contrary to Durverger's law. Given the prevailing ignorance among the American public regarding the Electoral College, this may reflect the limitation of bounded rationality more than a lack of strategic voting. Either way, the institutional explanation is not without its weaknesses.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Sociological Approach

The main advantage of the sociological approach is that it offers a convincing explanation of the structural origin of political parties which not only works well with Dalton's dealignment; it also addresses the issue of why third-wave democracies have poorly consolidated democracies. Two main problems arise from this approach, however.

The first is that, like any structural approach, the sociological explanation does not account for human agency. In his application of Lipset and Rokkan's approach to Central and Eastern Europe, Sitter found that rational explanations are more applicable than structural (Nick Sitter, "Beyond Class vs. Nation? Cleavage Structure and Party Competition in Central Europe." *Central European Political Science Review*, 2:3 (2001), 67-91). However, Kreuzer and Pattai found that historical legacy had a lot to do in influencing the strategic choices of political actors in the newly independent for Soviet states (Marcus Kreuzer and Vello Pettai, "The Formation of Parties and Party Systems: New Insights from the Post-Communist Democracies," *World Politics*, 56(2004), 608-33). Also, van Biezen argues that we should distinguish between party formation and party adaptation (Ingrid van Biezen, *Political Parties in New Democracies: Party Organization in Southern and East-Central Europe*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003)). Therefore van Biezen suggests that Lipset and Rokkan's cleavages may still apply to Central and Eastern Europe in the future.

A second issue arises with the empirical evidence: Dalton's famous work on de-alignment (Dalton, 1988). Dalton has not been alone in arguing that the traditional class-based cleavages are no longer politically salient. However, Inglehart's theory of value change and his work on post-materialism largely reconcile the two by pointing to a third (postmaterial) revolution with its own (material/postmaterial) cleavage structure is simply replacing the traditional class-based

cleavages with value-based ones (Inglehart, 1977). Therefore, the sociological explanation still holds, and is

strengthened by Inglehart's ability to apply it to new value-based social cleavages.

The Sociological Explanation Prevails

This essay argues that Lipset and Rokkan's sociological explanation of party formation is both conceptually satisfying (even if the old class-based cleavages no longer hold) and could still prove to be empirically sound. While it fails to account for human agency, as the previous essay maintains, the growing reliance on institutional analysis in the field of CP suggests that future applications of Lipset and Rokkan's theory can be fruitful despite this limitation.

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