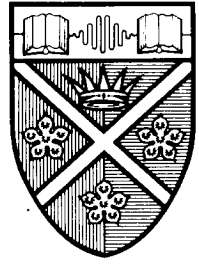


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*ELECTORAL CHANGE IN  
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*Consequences of Post-Industrial  
Social Change*

*by*

*Mark N Franklin  
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*No. 62*

*1989*

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CHANGE**

**By**

**Mark N. Franklin and Thomas T. Mackie  
(University of Strathclyde)**

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## Introduction

This is a report on the initial findings of a comparative study of the linkages between social divisions and party choice in Western countries. The study consists of a series of investigations based upon a common research design.<sup>1</sup> Its focus is upon the consequences for political parties of changes in the social basis of electoral choice since the 1960s. In particular, many countries have seen a decline in the support for left wing parties which might be the consequence of an emerging post-industrial society; and so our primary concern has been to evaluate the effects of changing political cleavages on left voting.

Political cleavages are usually regarded as reflecting broadly-based and long-standing social and economic divisions within society. Beginning with Marx and Weber's contradictory accounts of the character of class conflict, contemporary scholars have emphasised the central importance of other divisions such as those based on religious and ethnic differences. Most relevant to our current concerns is the seminal work by Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 1-64) on cleavage structures and the emergence of party systems. These two authors described cleavage structures as resulting from complex historical processes, triggered by the national and industrial revolutions. They distinguished four basic sets of cleavages that underly the party systems of Western countries: (1) subject versus dominant culture, (2) church(es) versus state, (3) primary versus secondary economy, and (4) workers versus employers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The findings of the project will be more fully reported in Franklin, Mackie, Valen et al., *Electoral Change: Responses to Changing Social and Attitudinal Structures in Western Countries* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 1990).

<sup>2</sup> However, their model is not deterministic. Political conflicts may differ substantially from one nation to the next, especially with respect to ethnic and religious matters, since cleavage structures vary between countries and, in any case, not all social cleavages necessarily become politicised (Schattschneider, 1960; Sartori, 1969; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986).

In this way, the establishment of national cleavage structures was assumed to have been completed soon after the First World War (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). Rose and Urwin's study (1970: 295) of 19 western nations demonstrated that 'the electoral strength of most parties [since 1945] had changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation.' So when Rose (1974) edited his masterly work describing the relationship between social structure and party choice, it was taken for granted that the picture being presented was one which would not soon be changed. Indeed, the very stability of party systems in periods of rapid social and economic change was seen as a confirmation of Lipset and Rokkan's argument.

Ironically, even by the time Rose's book appeared, the picture was already changing. Since that time many countries have seen important developments in the nature of their party systems, and in all countries voters have shown increasing unpredictability in their choice between parties, often to the extent of voting for parties new to the political scene. In Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and Britain new electoral support was given to parties based upon linguistic and ethnic cleavages long thought to have been depoliticized. In other countries new parties championed different causes that cut across existing party lines: constitutional reform for Dutch Democrats 66, traditional morality for new Christian Democratic parties in some Scandinavian countries, tax reductions for Glistrup's Progress Party in Denmark, and civil liberties for the Italian Radicals. In all countries a set of environmental issues were placed upon the political agenda, often by ecological or 'green' parties new to the political scene; and in most countries (whether or not new parties were involved) voter loyalties to established parties declined sharply so that no party could take the level of its vote for granted.

Precisely when these developments started is not clear, but in many countries it has become evident that the period of the Vietnam War was critical (Franklin

1985; Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1981). Because of the visibility of the Paris 'events' of May 1968, this year is often taken as the turning point. For instance Beer (1983) and Tarschys (1977) have pointed to the significance of 1968 in stimulating the growth of support for the 'New Populism' in Britain and the 'New Left' in Scandinavia.

The timing of these developments call into question some of the major theoretical underpinnings of traditional explanations of voting choice. For if the classical theorists who explained the origins of party systems were correct in supposing that social cleavages played a central role in mediating the influence of historical developments, then changes in party systems should be predicated upon changes in social structure. Yet changes in social structure were already well advanced by 1970. During the period since 1945 the world had seen technological, social and economic changes of a magnitude unparalleled since the industrial revolution. Consequential changes in occupational composition affecting the size of the manual working class should certainly have reduced the support for socialist parties. Similarly, in countries with agrarian parties, the decline in rural population should have reduced their electoral base. But in practice support for traditional parties remained largely unchanged until 1970.

Does this mean that the classical theorists were wrong? Unfortunately we do not have survey evidence from the period in which the party systems of the 1960s came into being. Indeed, mass surveys designed to establish the basis of voting choice were rare outside the United States before the middle 1960s. Certainly if the changes in electoral politics that started in the late 1960s proved to be unconnected with social change then we would be led to question whether the linkages posited by the theorists had ever existed. So our first research question became whether and to what extent changes in party support during the period for which we do have survey evidence could actually be connected with

changes in social structure. If such a linkage could be established, we would then be faced with a perhaps even more fundamental question: why were the electoral consequences of social and economic changes since World War II so long delayed?

### **Data sources**

If social cleavages were the only long-term determinants of voting choice, then changes in social structure (changes in the distribution of social characteristics) would necessarily explain all secular change in the electoral fortunes of political parties (though of course individual election outcomes might well deviate from this long term trend for idiosyncratic reasons). In other words, the ability to predict the voting behaviour of individuals on the basis of their social and other characteristics would also provide us with the ability to predict change at the societal level on the basis of changes in the distribution of these characteristics. So our research question led us to look for data in the form of sample surveys of the electorates of western nations going back to the 1960s, and for collaborators with sufficient expertise to be able to work sensitively with the data for particular countries.

The project set out to cover as wide a range of Western industrial countries as possible. However, we were limited to those countries where comparable election surveys had been regularly conducted since the late 1960s, broadened by including European countries for which Eurobarometer surveys have been conducted since the early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> For many of these countries, the Eurobarometer series are simply the only source of suitable data.<sup>4</sup> So the

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<sup>3</sup> The Eurobarometer series was initiated by the Commission of the European Communities in response to suggestions from the academic community, led by Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan. It was established under the direction of Jean Rabier, who remained its director during all the years covered by this study.

<sup>4</sup> This long-term coverage does not include Greece, Spain or Portugal which joined the

present paper covers fourteen countries. In addition to eight countries of the European Community, we include Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United States.

Using the Eurobarometer studies gave us the enormous advantage of comparability between countries and over time, but the number of variables suited to our research design was fewer than for other countries where typically we had the advantage of large scale academic surveys. So in Community countries where such academic studies existed -- Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Italy (for 1968) -- we employed them in preference to the Eurobarometer studies.

### **Research design**

All comparative research (whether between different countries or between different periods) involves a fundamental dilemma. Unless concepts are standardised, comparison rests upon shifting sands; but to the extent that standardisation is actually achieved it will reduce the number of countries and concepts over which comparisons can be made. In this study we adopted a unique procedure in order to maximise both comparability and coverage. A core analysis was conducted in identical terms for every country, focussing upon variables that were generally available. For some countries, additional analyses were conducted with extra variables that were widely but not universally available.<sup>5</sup> So the analysis conducted for each country has the structure of an

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EEC in more recent years. Although we include Greece and Spain in our book, in order to maximise coverage of EC countries, those two countries are not relevant here. We do not include Luxembourg or Northern Ireland partly because of the small sizes of samples taken in those countries.

<sup>5</sup> Every country study was rounded off with an analysis of variables important to an understanding of party choice within that country, but which are either not germane to the study of other countries or not available in an identical form elsewhere.

inverted pyramid, whose apex consists of variables analysed in identical terms within each chapter, in Franklin, Mackie, Valen *et al.* (1990) and whose base consists of rather more variables particular to specific countries in one way or another.

Country chapters are generally based on three national surveys, linked wherever possible to general elections. The surveys were chosen so as to span as long a period as possible, though without moving too far before the 'events' of 1968.

### **The Dependent Variable: left voting**

In order to be able to apportion the causes of changes in political alignment, we need to know how much change of this kind has occurred. Given that each of the countries studied has different numbers of political parties with different primary characteristics, we first of all had to establish a common measure of political support at the start of our period that would be comparable across countries. The measure chosen was support for left parties. Such parties have declined in electoral strength almost everywhere, and thus provide a common point of reference in evaluating what electoral change in different countries has in common. Many changes that might appear country-specific (for example, the rise of a green party) will have been reflected in our common measure to the extent that votes are taken from traditional left parties. In any case, our primary interest lies with the fortunes of left parties in an era which has seen the widespread erosion of their traditional electoral clientele as a result of economic change.

Identifying the party (or parties) of the left in each country proved to be quite straightforward. However, it should be borne in mind that their political



complexion is by no means the same in all countries. At one extreme, in Italy the dominant component of the left block is communist (with a strong minority socialist presence). Elsewhere the dominant component is social democratic except in Canada and the United States where the left is dominated by parties which elsewhere might be considered liberal rather than socialist. For some purposes such diversity would make comparative analysis impossible, but our principal focus lies not so much in the ideological complexion of particular parties as in their relative positions within the spectrum of political choice available to voters in each country.

### **The Independent Variables: social attributes and political attitudes**

Placing particular voters on one side or other of a social cleavage is not totally straightforward, and earlier researchers have employed different indicators of particular cleavage locations. In this study we start from the pioneering identification of salient political cleavages by Lipset and Rokkan who saw a dominant culture cleavage as being reflected in linguistic, religious or regional identity; and where salient we have measures of each of these characteristics. We view their church versus state cleavage not only in terms of religious denomination (Catholic or Protestant) but also in terms of religiosity (measured by frequency of church attendance). Their primary versus secondary economy is seen by us in terms of urban versus rural residence. Finally, the class cleavage is seen in terms of occupation (working versus middle or blue-collar versus white-collar).

Most of these variables have been operationalised in virtually identical terms for all the countries included in this study. Two exceptions (language and ethnicity) pose no problems of comparability since, in countries where they are not measured, virtually all voters have the same characteristics so that no effects

from language or ethnicity would have been found. Thus we were able to include these variables in the core analyses for all countries. For analogous reasons, religious denomination is included in the core analyses, despite the absence of this variable in surveys in five countries where it had little significance.

Figure 1 places these variables within the pyramid structure of comparability across countries that was referred to earlier (see page 10).

### **Projecting the consequences of social change**

In order to decide how much electoral change is due to changing social structure we had to be able to estimate the left vote from the aggregate proportions of voters in each social group. Having done this for our first election in each country, changes in the size of each group at subsequent elections would determine the extent of the resulting changes in left voting that were to be expected at those elections. A regression analysis of the effects of social structure on party choice provided appropriate estimates, since the regression equation for the first election specifies the connection between social characteristics and left vote at that time. To the extent that this connection is a stable one, we could then predict the left vote in subsequent elections on the basis of the social characteristics of the electorate at those later points in time. Any differences between predicted and actual outcomes at such subsequent elections would have to be explained on grounds other than those of changing social structure. A full description of the analysis procedures employed can be found in Franklin, Mackie, Valen *et al.* (1990).

**FIGURE 1.2 THE PYRAMID ARRANGEMENT OF THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSES CONDUCTED IN THIS BOOK\***

<u>STEP IN THE ANALYSIS SEQUENCE</u>	<u>SOCIAL STRUCTURE</u>	<u>ATTITUDINAL STRUCTURE</u>
CORE ANALYSIS (SOCIAL):	OCCUP AGE UNION INCOME EDUC SEX RURAL REGION	
CORE ANALYSIS (ATTITUDINAL):	OCCUP AGE UNION INCOME EDUC SEX RURAL REGION	CLASS RELIGS
[ COUNTRY SUBSET ANALYSIS:	PROT CATH HOME OCCUP AGE UNION INCOME EDUC SEX RURAL REGION	CLASS RELIGS ]
COUNTRY-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS:	[PROT CATH HOME] OCCUP AGE UNION INCOME EDUC SEX RURAL REGION	CLASS RELIGS LEFT MATERIALIST

\* Each row of the pyramid lists the independent variables (in bold text) included in each analysis (in plain text). In each analysis the dependent variable is votes cast for the left party or parties

[ ] Variables (and the country-subset analysis which adds these variables) contained in square brackets are only available in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, USA, and West Germany

## Can social change explain changes in left voting?

A strong implication of earlier scholarship was that any decline in left voting would be explicable very largely on the basis of changes in social structure, and this indeed seems to be the case in most countries. However, in some countries actual electoral change reflects only poorly the evolution of social cleavages. As shown in Table 1, projections overestimate actual left voting in three countries, and underestimate it in two others. These divergences are considerable: 24 per cent in Canada, 14 per cent in France and Britain, 13 per cent in Australia and 11 per cent in Ireland.

**Table 1** Deviations from projected changes in left voting

Deviations from projections				
		NEGATIVE (less than -0.11)	SMALL ( $\pm 0.06$ )	POSITIVE (more than +0.13)
Projected changes	CONSTANT		U. S. A.	
		Canada	West Germany	
		Ireland	Denmark	France
			Netherlands	
	DOWN		Sweden	
		Britain	Norway	Australia
			Belgium	
			New Zealand	

Nevertheless, in eight other countries projections are accurate to within six per cent (within two per cent in all but the Netherlands), and it turns out that the countries in which projections fail are none of them countries in which we should have expected such projections to succeed, for reasons to which we now turn.

The notion that developments in social structure should condition developments in left voting at the level of the party system rests on the prior assumption that social structure is linked to partisanship at the level of the individual, but this assumption turns out not to hold true for all countries. While Lipset and Rokkan may well have been right in supposing that social structure was once a fundamental determinant of partisanship, nevertheless there were only five countries in our study where this was found to be true in the 1980s; and in countries where social structure does not condition individual partisanship to any appreciable extent, we would not expect it to condition developments in left voting. On the contrary, in those countries where individual voting choice is largely independent of social structure, we would precisely expect the development of party systems to reflect other influences or to be random in nature. From this perspective it comes as no surprise to discover that those countries where social structure still largely determines partisanship are also the countries where compositional changes in the traditional cleavage structure still largely determine the extent of left voting. On the other hand, the group of countries where social structure has become largely irrelevant to party choice turns out to include all five of those which show large deviations from projected left voting, as shown in Table 2.

Four countries (Belgium, Denmark, New Zealand and the United States) show low deviations from projected left voting in Table 2 despite the fact that social structure is a poor predictor of partisanship in those countries, but the fact that there are some countries in this situation is only to be expected. Our proposition is not symmetrical: although large changes in party support may require low variance explained by cleavage politics, low variance explained does not guarantee large changes in party support. It merely opens the way for such changes to occur. In this context it is noteworthy to observe that at its most recent election New Zealand has joined Australia in showing a large deviation from expected left voting.

**Table 2 Effects of social structure on left voting**

		Deviations from projected left voting*	
		Small	Large
Extent of Variance Explained**	Low	Belgium	Australia
		Denmark	Britain
		New Zealand	Canada
		U.S.A.	France
			Ireland
	High		
		Germany	
		Italy	
		Netherlands	
		Norway	
		Sweden	

\* Small 0-6%, Large 11%+ at last time point. No country shows deviations between 7 and 11 per cent.

\*\* Low 0-13%, High 17%+ at last time point. No country shows variance explained between 13 and 17 per cent.

Some surprises in Table 2 deserve comment. It has not been customary to group together within a single category countries where the left has done surprisingly well in recent years (Australia, France) and those where it has done particularly badly (Britain, Canada, Ireland). The point is that where social structure no longer conditions voting choice to any great extent, new developments of any other kind (if they occur at all) can as easily benefit the left as harm it.

A seeming anomaly occurs within the group of countries that show high deviations from expected left voting. This group is largely Anglo-Saxon, but Table 2 shows the Anglo-Saxon countries being joined by France. However, the position of this country in Table 2 derives from the data, and it must be said

that France is not a marginal member of the category since we are talking about under 9 per cent of variance explained by social structure in that country during the contemporary period.

These surprises are actually very reassuring. They serve to confirm that Table 2 does not simply reflect cultural peculiarities but, on the contrary, tells us important things about the impact of social cleavages on electoral politics in different countries. In the light of this table it is clear that some recent developments in individual countries that were quite surprising to observers (particularly in France, Australia and New Zealand) would probably not have occurred in the presence of more politically salient social cleavages which constrained the rate of change in party support to the relatively more glacial rate of change in social structure.

However, the fact that there are any countries at all to be found in this situation still raises a question about the applicability of classical theories relating to the formation of party systems. For if most countries now find themselves in a situation where the development of their party system is unconnected to developments in social structure, perhaps the linkages we see in other countries are unusual, and perhaps the classical theorists were basing their stress on the centrality of cleavage structures on a few atypical instances.

### **The process of electoral change**

Although Tables 1 and 2 tell us about the situation that exists today, there is a considerable literature that would lead us to suppose that the picture has changed considerably over the past twenty years (Crewe, Alt and Sarlvik, 1977; Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1981; Franklin, 1985); and our project was designed in

### *Electoral Change*

such a way as to enable us to evaluate this proposition in comparative perspective. The outcome of our researches is reassuring for proponents of classical theories of cleavage politics.

Until the 1960s, social structure turns out to have been a dominant influence on voting choice in most countries, explaining more than 16 per cent of variance in left voting in eleven out of the fourteen countries for which we have data going back that far (and above 20 per cent in seven countries). Since that time its importance has almost everywhere declined, as shown in Figure 2, and in the 1980s, the percentage of variance explained by social structure was only above 16 per cent in five countries (and above 20 per cent only in Norway).

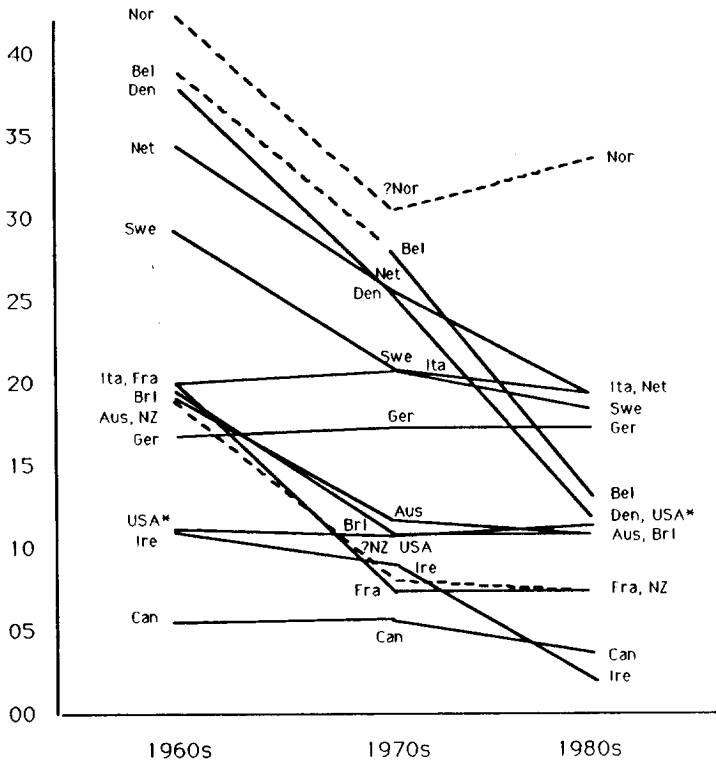
Figure 2 shows five basic patterns.

- 1) In two countries (Sweden and the Netherlands) variance explained by social structure was high in the 1960s and remained at least medium in strength twenty years later, after some decline.
- 2) In two countries (Belgium and Denmark) variance explained was high in the 1960s and declined precipitously, so that by the 1980s it was low.
- 3) In two countries (Italy and Germany) variance explained was medium in the 1960s and remained unchanged twenty years later.
- 4) In three countries (France, Australia and Britain) variance explained was medium in the 1960s, but dropped sharply between the 1960s and the 1970s and then remained the same thereafter (New Zealand is probably a member of the same group, though we cannot place the timing of its fall definitively because no suitable survey was fielded in that country during the 1970s).



FIGURE 2 Variance in left voting\* explained by social structure in 14 countries, 1960s to 1980s

% Variance explained



\* Left party identification, for USA (see text)

--- Not strictly comparable with other trends (see below)

?Bel Estimated from evidence in Hill (1974)

?NZ Extrapolated by analogy to Britain and Australia

?Nor Actual variance explained for the 1970s depressed because of EEC issue (see text)

5) In two countries (Canada and U.S.A.) variance explained was low in the 1960s and remained low thereafter.

Two countries fit none of these patterns. In Norway there is a drop in the effects of social structure between the 1960s and 1970s followed by a unique rise thereafter, and in Ireland the effects of social structure are initially low, but nevertheless drop precipitously between the 1970s and 1980s. Both of these anomalies are easily explained. In Norway the decline in the structuring properties of social cleavages in the 1970s, and recovery thereafter, is easily explained by reference to the controversy over joining the European Economic Community, which in the early 1970s became a major issue that cut across existing cleavages. These, however, reasserted themselves once the decision not to join was taken. It is impossible to say whether, in the absence of these local circumstances, the effects of social structure would have declined gradually over the twenty year period or whether the drop to the level shown in the 1980s would have happened only since the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The low variance explained in Ireland in the 1960s has to be seen in context of the fact that Ireland's two major parties would both be considered 'non-left' anywhere else, and the variance we explain in Ireland is in the votes for a very small party. Variance explained by social structure in such a case will necessarily be low.<sup>7</sup>

### **Towards a theory of electoral change in western countries**

The different patterns of change exhibited in Figure 2 are closely bound up with matters of timing. To clarify this point, in Table 3 countries are differentiated

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<sup>6</sup> However, the pattern seen elsewhere suggests that when declines occur they are generally rapid, so Norway should probably be considered a "late decline" country, in terms of the schema we are about to propose.

<sup>7</sup> The decline seen in Ireland between the 1970s and 1980s is thus precisely what would be expected in the case of such a country. Because of the timing of the decline, Ireland should also be considered a "late decline" country in the typology to which we now turn.

both by the timing of the decline (across the chart) and also by the extent of impact when first observed, designated by 'L' for low (under 13 per cent of variance in left voting explained by social structure), 'M' for medium (13 to 23 per cent) and 'H' for high (over 24 per cent). It is immediately obvious that countries where the decline occurred in different decades also show evidence of different degrees of cleavage politics at the earliest stage. Countries where the decline of cleavage politics is a relatively recent phenomenon (starting or continuing during the 1970s and 1980s) are generally those with the strongest initial impact of social structure. Countries where the effects of social structure

**Table 3** Timing of changes in electoral impact of social structure, by country and extent of initial effects

	No decline	1960s- 1970s	1960s- 1980s
	-----	-----	-----
Canada	L		
U.S.A.	L		
Germany	M		
Italy	M		
Australia		M	
Britain		M	
France		M	
New Zealand		M	
Norway			H
Sweden			H
Ireland			L*
Denmark			H
Belgium			H
Netherlands			H

-----  
L = under 12 per cent of variance explained in the 1960s

M = 12 to 24 per cent of variance explained in the 1960s

H = 25 per cent or more of variance explained in the 1960s

\* The extent of variance explained in Ireland in the 1960s would be considered high elsewhere (see footnote 7 above).

were already in decline during the 1960s are also generally those where cleavage politics appear to have been less important when we first observe them. More

than one reason can be adduced for this finding, but the theory we would like to put forward is that we are observing a developmental process that started later in some countries than in others.

Of the countries in the first column, it seems likely that Canada and the United States had already seen a decline in the importance of social structure before the start of our period. Certainly in the case of the United States, the importance of religious and ethnic cleavages upon partisanship in earlier years is well documented (Jensen, 1971; Kleppner, 1979, 1987); and the same may well be true of Canada. In these countries, therefore, the decline of cleavage politics may already by the 1960s have reached a level which other countries are only now approaching. We will deal with the German and Italian case below.

The countries in the second column may well be countries in which the decline of social structuring had already begun before the start of our period, but was not yet complete. A prior decline unobserved in our data would explain the relatively lower starting position of these countries compared to those in the third column, where, by contrast, the declining effects of social structure appear not yet to have started at the beginning of our period. In some of these countries the decline of cleavage politics may not yet be complete, and in particular there is room for Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands to see a further decline during the 1990s to a level more comparable with France and New Zealand. Indeed, Norway is a country in which the decline of cleavage politics had hardly started, with variance explained remaining high by any standards into the 1980s.

Germany and Italy may also be countries in which the decline of cleavage politics had not yet started during the period under study. Unlike other European countries, their cleavage structures may have been weakened by the experience of National Socialism in Germany (Dahrendorf, 1967) and Fascism

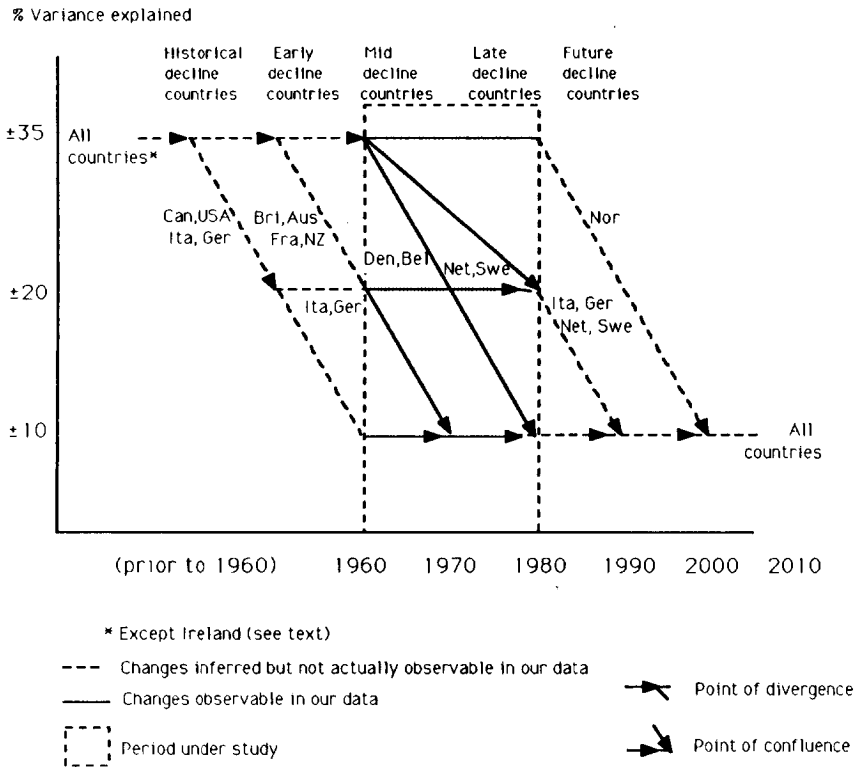
in Italy; and this same historical experience may perhaps also explain why further decline in cleavage politics in these countries has been so long delayed.

A twenty-year process of decline in cleavage politics, already complete in some countries even before the 1960s and only starting in some countries after the 1970s, would provide a framework into which our findings fit quite neatly. As illustrated in Figure 3, we can imagine that 'in the beginning' most countries saw cleavage politics whose extent would have yielded variance explained in the region of 30 per cent or more, if only we had had the surveys with which to measure it. This level of cleavage politics did not necessarily begin to decline at the same time in both Canada and the United States, but we have no survey evidence that allows us to distinguish between these countries, which are thus taken together in Figure 3 as 'historical decline' countries.<sup>8</sup> The next group of countries distinguished in Figure 3 are the 'early decline' countries (France, Britain, Australia and New Zealand). Again we cannot be sure that they started their decline together, but since they move together during the period in which their development is observed it is not unreasonable to suppose that they also began together. Then there are four 'middle decline' countries (Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands and Sweden) of which two (Belgium and Denmark) appear to complete the entire process of declining cleavage politics during the period under study (shaded area in the diagram). Moving further to the right, the last segment of the shaded area is labeled 'late decline', but contains only Netherlands and Sweden, which have already figured in the 'mid decline' group. This is a category in which Ireland would have been placed, had its initial extent of cleavage politics placed it with other countries (see footnote 7 above), and in which Norway might turn out eventually to belong if the lower

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, we have no evidence that any decline at all took place in Canada, though the evidence for such a decline in the United States is compelling. However, Figure 3 only presents an idealized picture. We have already seen that Germany and Italy are clear exceptions which are nevertheless explicable within the framework of the theory we are putting forward, and there is no reason why Canada should not be treated similarly if the need arises. Social reality is not like the reality of natural laws: even the most general of social processes take on idiosyncratic features in particular social settings.

FIGURE 3 Idealized view of a twenty-year developmental process in declining cleavage politics, extrapolated to encompass the years 1940 to 2010



extent of cleavage politics observed there in the 1980s turns out to be the start of a long term trend rather than a stage in the recovery from its 1970s dip (see footnote 6 above). Finally, Germany, Italy and (for the moment) Norway are countries for which the decline of cleavage politics must be anticipated in the future, if the process we are observing is indeed to prove a general one.

## **Conclusions**

The discovery of a developmental process that links changes in social structure to the evolution of party systems clarifies much that has happened in recent elections around the world. In those countries where cleavage politics continue to dominate (despite recent reductions in their influence in some cases), changes in the electoral fortunes of left parties are modest, and linked to changes in social structure. In those countries where cleavage politics no longer dominate, party choice depends on other factors. A natural concomitant of this liberation (where it has occurred) is that the fortunes of individual political parties have become much less certain, and dependent more largely on variations in leadership skills and other contingencies (see Bean and Mughan, 1989). In some countries (Australia, New Zealand and France) left parties have benefited from their new freedom to appeal to voters beyond their traditional client groups; in other countries (Britain, Canada and Ireland) they have suffered from a haemorrhage of votes, as right wing parties have succeeded in appealing beyond the bounds of their traditional electorates.

We are fortunate that these developments are taking place later in some countries than in others. This gives us the ability to see evidence in some countries during the recent past of linkages which had already vanished elsewhere. If all countries had moved together, in step perhaps with Britain,

## *Electoral Change*

there might have been no countries in which the linkage between social structure and partisanship remained strong in our period. And our ability to look for earlier evidence of such a linkage (say pre-1960) would have been critically restricted by the paucity of academic election studies before that date. The only way we can draw conclusions about the early post-war period is by being able to project backwards from trends that we can detect today. If only the final stage of the development that we are studying had been visible in any country, we might never have known it for what it was.

We cannot prove on the basis of our data that the same developmental process occurs in all countries, but the process we infer does provide a plausible explanation for the straight-jacketing of party systems until the late 1960s, and for the rapidity of changes in certain countries since that time. On the basis of our reasoning it seems clear that social structure did once condition party choice in most countries, and changes in social structure were once linked almost everywhere to changes in party support. But these changes in the balance of party support were slow, compared to the changes that become possible where social structure ceases to condition partisanship, and they were hardly noticed even in an era of rapid social change.<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of this reasoning, our ironic answer to the research question with which we started must be that the classical theorists were right in seeing a link between social cleavages and party systems, and Rose and Urwin were right in attributing the stability of party systems to the presence of those

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<sup>9</sup> A decline in the proportion of working class voters from (say) 55 per cent to (say) 45 per cent in thirty years represents an enormous amount of social change, but a consequential decline in left party support from (say) 50 per cent to (say) 40 per cent of votes cast over a period of eight elections is small (less than 1.5 per cent per election) in relation to the normal variability in election results, and could easily be masked by short term and election-specific factors. Moreover, whether we are talking about 50 per cent or 40 percent of "natural" left voters, the important thing turns out to be the fact that such a group exists at all. When left voting ceases to be a "natural" outcome of cleavage location, then the anchor of group loyalties ceases to operate; and in those countries where this has happened the consequences in terms of electoral volatility and the rise of new parties has been marked.



cleavages. The changes that occurred in some countries shortly afterwards were however not due to changes in cleavage structures, but rather to the fact that social cleavages had by then finally become irrelevant to partisanship in those countries. The electoral impact of social cleavages may well have been already in decline before the 1970s in those countries, but that decline had not yet reached the threshold at which cleavages become irrelevant. This of course leads to an even more exciting research question, which is to explain the declining political importance of cleavage structures. This question is a central preoccupation of the study from which these results are drawn (Franklin, Mackie, Valen et al, 1990) but there is not space to do it justice here.

In closing we should emphasise that there are some countries (five out of the fourteen we studied) in which electoral choices have not yet been liberated from the straightjacket of traditional cleavage politics. However, if we are right in deducing from our evidence the fact that Western countries are all subject to the same historical developments, then we can expect the new patterns of behaviour eventually to become the rule: in Sweden and the Netherlands during the coming decade, and in Germany, Italy and Norway thereafter.

On the other hand, it must always be borne in mind that crass projections of visible trends can be falsified at any time. We have seen how the demise of cleavage politics opens the way to major electoral change; but it should be remembered that among the many things that can happen with the decline of traditional cleavages is the establishment of new ones. It is possible that new developments as yet unimagined (and perhaps unimaginable) are about to begin, so the process we have theorized may not in fact have the chance to run its course in all countries. However, if the process does not run its course this is likely to be because of new developments quite as surprising as those we have already seen in France and elsewhere; so politicians in all countries can eventually expect to find themselves faced with the uncertainties (and also the opportunities) of politics in the post-industrial world.

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