

Define the term 'cleavage'. Outline the main cleavages found in modern Europe.

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Introduction

A social cleavage is more than an important division within society. To be called a cleavage such a division must fulfil three defining requirements. Firstly, it must involve one of the primary determinants of social identity, for example religion, employment, or ethnicity. Secondly the (usually two) groups opposed by the cleavage must be aware of and prepared to act on the basis of their conflicting identities. Thirdly the social division must lead to the creation of organisations/formal institutions (e.g.: trade unions, political parties), which represent and defend the collective identity, and confront those organisations which inherently or explicitly represent the opposing identity across the cleavage.

Origin & Explanation of Social Cleavages in Europe

Social cleavages have defined the underlying structure and composition of democratic European party systems since the advent of universal suffrage, when newly franchised sections of society with widely differing loyalties and collective identities were for the first time able to express them through the ballot box.

Lipset and Rokkan first outlined the theory of Social Cleavages in the seminal 'Party Systems and Voter Alignments' (1967). They theorised that the core Political loyalties in European politics had become frozen by the 1920's as new parties tied ideologies to the growing awareness of cleavage identity articulated by the franchise (e.g.: the British Labour party and Socialism).

Lipset and Rokkan gave four reasons why these party loyalties might remain largely frozen. (i) That the issues around cleavages remained divisive, providing a continued collective identity, which could be politically appealed to. (ii) That enduring political alignments occurred when an electorate was newly mobilised, and were unlikely to change without large changes in the composition of the population. (iii) That the very processes of election were developed by existing political parties to help maintain their influence. (iv) That parties became socially integrated, involving themselves in communities through welfare and social events, engendering belonging in order to decrease the appeal of new or alternative parties.

Four central cleavages have formed the political landscape of modern Europe. However the cleavages which became dominant have differed from nation to nation; depending on how each country dealt with the basic social conflicts present at the time of nation building, on its religious constitution, and on whether the cleavages present were cross-cutting, further subdividing each others support (as in France, where Church-State, Class, and Centre-Periphery cleavages divided each other), or reinforcing, doubling the tensions across cleavage lines.

Church-State Cleavages

The secular state resulting from the French revolution of 1789 posed a challenge, not just in France but many European countries, to the churches dictation of public morality and domination of education. In primarily Catholic countries such as France and Italy, a major Church-State cleavage developed between the anti-clerical liberal and radical parties and the powerful influence of the Church. An exception being the Republic of Ireland, with no large secular or radical tradition, where the constitution gave legal force to much of Catholic morality, and the church controlled the vast majority of schools. The Church-State cleavage also developed in countries that had large Catholic minorities, such as the Netherlands and Germany, leading to the development of important Christian democratic parties.

Conflict failed to emerge in many of the newly Protestant countries, where Protestantism had been allowed to flourish in order to free the ruling strata from the dictates of the Vatican (through the Roman Catholic Church), making the Protestant state churches largely instruments of the governments that granted them legitimacy.

Centre-Periphery Cleavages

Centre-Periphery cleavages developed when nations were formed, and minority ethnicities that had developed in geographically remote or ethnically distinct areas were brought under the control of the centralising nation. How the nation dealt with these tensions dictated whether or not they would remain relevant and divisive. In some cases these peripheral areas were allowed to secede and form their own nation, as happened in Ireland. In others, such as the Walloon ethnicity in Belgium, a certain amount of autonomy was allowed within the confines of the state, through the processes of devolution. Some regional identities were absorbed into the centralised nation, for example the Bretons in France. Most commonly these minority cultures resulted in the development of a politically relevant Centre-Periphery cleavage within the nation, for example the Basque region in Spain.

Class-Cleavages

Class cleavages emerged from the conflicts between (primarily) urban factory workers, and capitalist ruling elites, which developed as a result of the industrial revolution. Subjugated workers developed trade unions and political parties to represent their interests, and where more pragmatic ruling classes improved working conditions (e.g.: Great Britain) these Socialist parties tended to remain popular and integrate into the political system. But in countries where workers demands were met with repression by ruling elites resistant to reform (such as Germany and Spain) workers became more

radical, and later Communist parties tended to find support over their Socialist alternatives.

Rural-Urban Cleavages

European Rural-Urban cleavages formed along the medieval and later post industrial lines which separated the interests of residents of the agricultural countryside from those of the developed town and city. Since the urban areas were usually dependant for food on the agricultural, it was natural that the economy of the countryside would develop to feed the towns and cities. However as countries traded more widely, threatening the market for national agricultural produce, and instituted political policies which benefited urban areas and threatened rural lifestyles, Agrarian parties sometimes developed to represent rural interests (e.g.: Sweden).

After the Second World War and the development of the European Union, public services were extended to rural areas, and the common agricultural policy subsidised rural losses from international trade, weakening the rural-urban cleavage throughout Europe.

Conclusion - The Unfreezing of European Social Cleavages

Almost as soon as Lipset and Rokkan had published their theory of freezing cleavages, European political glaciers had begun to shift. Changes have occurred over the last 40 years in the structure of society (through immigration, greater numbers of working women, and class shifts), in collective identity, as homogenised global culture has altered the degree to which people identify (and vote according to) their class or religion, and in the organisation and appeal of parties as traditional ideologies have decreased in significance and been replaced with pragmatic centrism and far right populism. Pressure from countries within the EU with relatively small rural populations to decrease farming subsidies, together with a migration of the wealthy middle class from decaying urban centres, has strengthened dormant rural urban cleavages in countries such as Britain and France.

The structure of Church-State cleavages has altered due to the decline of mainstream churches and increasingly secularised voting patterns. For example support for Catholic KVP in the Netherlands dropped from 95% in 1956 to 67% in 1977.

The significance of class cleavages has decreased due to the growth of the middle classes, and the decline of manufacturing industry and union power across Europe.

Leaving a new urban poor too divided and unrepresented to vote. The Alford index reveals a decline of the working class left wing vote in every European country except the Netherlands between 1960's and 90's. This has led traditional socialist parties in Britain and France to become more centrist, seeking to appeal to the widest number possible.

Finally the development of the European Union has encouraged formerly dormant centre periphery identities to seek independence within Europe (e.g.: Scotland and Wales); and new centre-periphery cleavages have developed through immigration (for example Muslims in Britain).

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