1 A Cleavage Perspective on Contemporary Politics

Is contemporary politics shaped by fundamental social divisions, or by the extraordinary skills of politicians such as Boris Johnson, Marine Le Pen, or Emanuel Macron, who creatively unite heterogeneous electoral coalitions based on the issues of the day, galvanized by populist or emotional appeals? Interpretations of how and why electoral landscapes in Western Europe have transformed over the past decades have come to diverge widely. Emphasizing the role of party agency and strategy, one perspective sees new parties' issue-based challenges to the dominant position of mainstream parties as evidence of dissolving links between voters and parties and of growing party system fragmentation (e.g., Franklin 1992; Green-Pedersen 2007, 2019; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). On the other hand, researchers working in the cleavage tradition and comparative political economy scholars alike highlight the role of long-term structural changes of the economy and society at large that give rise to fundamentally new conflicts across advanced democracies (e.g., Inglehart 1984; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier 2010; Beramendi et al. 2015; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Hall 2020; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021; Kitschelt and Rehm 2023; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024).

The former perspective paints a fluid, fragmented, more volatile picture of "dealigned" contemporary voters, to whom political actors can strategically and voluntaristically appeal by means of issues or identities (Achen and Bartels 2016; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). The latter emphasizes patterns of realignment, implying a certain inertia and predictability of twenty-first-century politics that remains socio-structurally embedded. Although concerned with the same empirical reality, these strands of literature have to some extent been talking past each other. Indeed, that politics remains anchored in social divisions does not imply that Boris Johnson, Marine Le Pen, or Emanuel Macron do not matter, but rather, that their leeway in rallying coalitions of social groups is limited by the extent to which these groups share fundamental conceptions of who they are and what they want. In this Element, we present an account that reconciles the view that the structural roots of party systems in society incite stability, and that of an ever-increasing role of political entrepreneurship, which induces change.

This section of the Element lays out our overarching argument. We follow the idea of a cleavage reflecting a durable type of conflict in which a social divide is reflected in antagonistic group identities, and finds expression in a struggle over policies.[1] We advance the idea that focusing on collective identities as mediators between social structure and political action allows us

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[1] This definition reflects Bartolini and Mair's (1990) seminal threefold conception of a cleavage encompassing a social-structural, a collective identity, and an organizational element that we

to make sense of the apparent contradiction that party systems have become more volatile and fragmented, while at the same time remaining anchored in fundamental social divisions. A key to understanding how social structure continues to shape voter alignments and party competition is to think about party systems in terms of ideological blocks, rather than individual parties. While the fortunes of single parties depend ever more on issue emphasis, candidate image, and within-block rivalry, voters seldom switch between ideological party blocks. Focusing on alignments between social groups and ideological party blocks reveals degrees of stability and similarities across contexts that observers focused on fluidity and fragmentation fail to acknowledge.

But this view poses a challenge to established theories of partisanship: How do ideological party blocks rally specific constituencies, if they no longer encapsulate voters based in the dense partisan networks characteristic of the age of the traditional class and religious cleavages? In this Element, we focus on the crystallization of a "second dimension" of party competition that we label the universalism–particularism divide. We are interested in how durable links between social constituencies and party blocks emerge along this divide. While parties in the 1950s and 1960s routinely appealed to social groups in terms of their socio-structural ascription – think of "the working-class" or "Catholics" – contemporary categories used to accurately describe social structure in political sociology and political economy (such as "routine manual workers," "sociocultural professionals," or "non-college-educated") have become increasingly divorced from the appeals political parties use to mobilize these groups. The puzzle, then, is how class, education, or the ramifications of social status – that continue to shape party choice, as a vast literature demonstrates – translate into political alignments.

To shed light on these processes, we introduce two conceptual innovations. One is the role of group identities as the intermediate level connecting social structure and the organizational expression of cleavages. The second is to study alignments between identity-laden social groups and ideological blocks, rather than individual parties. This allows us to disentangle the increase in competition that results from the eroding grip of party organizations on voters from persistent regularities that structure voter alignments across countries and over time. Despite variation resulting from party strategy, we find that party systems are shaped by common divisions in social structure, and that similar group identities account for their translation into broader political alignments.

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elaborate on, but links these three elements more explicitly to political conflict between parties over policies (Bornschier 2010).

1.1 Electoral Realignment or Issue Entrepreneurship?

The debate on whether we have been witnessing dealignment and the end of an era in which politics was shaped by fundamental social divisions, or whether processes of realignment between social groups and parties create new cleavages is far from new (e.g., Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Inglehart 1984). There is abundant evidence that the traditional class and religious cleavages have weakened dramatically (e.g., Rose and McAllister 1986; Franklin et al. 1992; Kriesi et al. 2008; Dassonneville 2022). There is less of a consensus on how to characterize the post-Lipset–Rokkan age (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), especially after the rise of populism. Have the waning of classic cleavages, the weakening of the associated group identities, and increasing cross-pressures faced by voters in complex societies given way to a more individualized and volatile form of politics that places issues at the center of politics (Green-Pedersen 2007; Spoon and Klüver 2019, 2020; Dassonneville 2022), and that offers substantial leeway to populist anti-establishment messages of "issue entrepreneurs" (De Vries and Hobolt 2020)? Likewise, the literature on populism suggests that anti-establishment appeals can unite seemingly diverse coalitions of voters who have little more in common than the rejection of the political establishment (e.g., Hawkins et al. 2018; for discussions, see Kriesi 2014; Bornschier 2017). In a similar vein, influential accounts portray contemporary polarization as detached from social reality and substantive policy preferences. Instead, Achen and Bartels (2016) suggest that polarization reflects the effects of politics or partisanship itself (see also Iyengar et al. 2019; Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021; Reiljan 2020).

The diagnosis of increasing fragmentation and instability runs counter to the realignment perspective.[2] This strand of research suggested early on that value change, educational expansion, and economic modernization are reconfiguring the links between voters and parties, rather than disrupting them (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984; Inglehart 1984; Kitschelt 1994; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Kriesi 1998).[3] In other words, voting behavior and party preferences are still strongly and stably structured by voters' position in the social structure, but the social groups that are key to voter alignments have changed, and they relate to different parties. Although there tends to be disagreement as to the exact structural basis of the resulting antagonism (Bornschier 2018), the basic contours of the political divide that results from these social divisions are less disputed. In this Element, we adopt a broad conception of the relevant structural transformations of

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[2] For reviews of this debate, see Kitschelt and Rehm (2014) and Evans (1999).

[3] Indeed, there is no uniform decline in the degree to which social location shapes voting behavior (e.g., Evans 1999; Knutsen 2004; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015; Marks et al. 2023).

advanced capitalist democracies, which highlights not only educational expansion
and occupational change but also the feminization of labor markets, concentration
of high value-added economic activity in cities, as well as the multifaceted process
of globalization and supranational integration (Bartolini 2005a; Kriesi et al. 2008;
Kitschelt and Rehm 2014; Dalton 2018; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Oesch and
Rennwald 2018; Helbling and Jungkunz 2019; de Wilde et al. 2019; Steiner,
Mader, and Schoen 2024). Our analysis will focus on Western Europe, where
these transformations toward emerging knowledge economies are most advanced,
and which constitutes the region most extensively studied from a cleavage per-
spective. Although broadly similar dimensions of conflict structure party competi-
tion in East-Central Europe, their roots in social structure are likely to be different,
given differences in the underlying macro-social processes (see Section 3). Our
realignment perspective in electoral sociology concurs with research in compara-
tive political economy showing that class, educational background, and the relative
position of social groups in the knowledge economy continue to shape individual
preferences and policy outcomes, though in new ways (e.g., Esping-Andersen
1999; Rueda 2005; Beramendi et al. 2015; Dancygier and Walter 2015;
Häusermann, Kemmerling, and Rueda 2020; Iversen and Soskice 2019). Finally,
the recent literature ever more strongly suggests that subjective social status and
cultural worldviews work together in shaping voting behavior (Gidron and Hall
2017; Burgoon et al. 2019; Bolet 2020; Carella and Ford 2020; Engler and
Weisstanner 2021; Hall 2020; Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021; Ares and Ditmars
2023; Kurer and Staalduinen 2022). As we discuss in more detail in Section 3,
these different strands of the literature concur in suggesting that, as structural
developments change the composition of society, they benefit some groups more
than others, providing political opportunities for party mobilization.

The literature identifies several waves through which the dimension of party
competition resulting from these structural transformations gained political traction,
with the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s finding expression in the
emergence of the New Left and Green party family (Kitschelt 1988, 1994; Kriesi
1989, 1998, 1999), followed by a countermobilization on the part of the Far Right
(Ignazi 1992; Minkenberg 2000; Bornschier 2010; Häusermann and Kriesi 2015).
Leaving aside more fine-grained distinctions, we use the term "Far Right" as an
umbrella term to encompass parties that have been referred to as "Radical Right,"
"Populist Radical Right," and "Extreme Right" based on their distinctive program-
matic position regarding socioculturally traditionalist, nativist, and authoritarian
stances (Golder 2016, Pirro 2023). Similarly, we use the term "New Left" to denote
parties that combine progressive stances on both economic-distributive and socio-
cultural policies. Hence, the New Left can encompass radical left, green,
left-libertarian or social democratic parties (Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024).

We conceive the conflict resulting from the sequential mobilization of the New Left and the Far Right as opposing universalistic and particularistic values, as well as their corresponding conceptions of community. The adoption of these labels reflects the gradual broadening of the issues and struggles associated with the new cleavage: Originally conceived as an antagonism between materialism and post-materialism or "new" and "old" political issues and styles (Inglehart 1984), the political expression of the new cleavage has subsequently been described as opposing libertarian and authoritarian values (Kitschelt 1994), or, with an emphasis on differing conceptions of community, as libertarian-universalistic versus traditionalist-communitarian (Bornschier 2010), or cosmopolitanism-communitarianism (de Wilde et al. 2019). The integration-demarcation label, on the other hand, explicitly highlighted the transnational component of the divide, driven by the weakening of nation-states by supra-national integration (Bartolini 2005a) and the multifaceted process of global-ization (Kriesi et al. 2008), resulting in an encompassing transnational cleavage expressed in terms of GAL-TAN (Hooghe and Marks 2018). More recently, it has become evident that the "second dimension" structuring party competition in knowledge economies encompasses distributive conflicts as well (see, for example, Beramendi et al. 2015; Attewell 2021: 20; Enggist and Pinggera 2021; Häusermann et al. 2022a; Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022; Zollinger 2022). We refer to the universalism–particularistic conflict to reflect the value-based as well as material foundations of the new cleavage.

1.2 Changes in Party Appeals and Organization

Despite providing robust evidence on persistent links between socio-structural groups and political parties, the realignment perspective leaves us with a puzzle: How are the links between social structure and political parties fostered and perpetuated in a world in which parties' ideological appeals address broad segments of the electorate, and where party organizations no longer encapsulate specific classes or groups? Indeed, those postulating the emergence of new cleavages have tended to ignore the important literature analyzing how the organization of parties has evolved, putting in evidence a dramatic erosion of parties' links to their core constituencies (Katz and Mair 1994; Poguntke 2002; Katz and Mair 2018; Ignazi 2020). This development is mirrored in a trend of declining party identification (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Not surprisingly, then, aggregate party system volatility has been on the rise (e.g., Dassonneville and Hooghe 2017; Dassonneville 2022), in part due to the more frequent emergence of completely new parties (Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2018).

Katz and Mair (2018: 14–15) plausibly argue that parties have evolved from being the political expression of social groups to becoming brokers that build coalitions between social groups on ideological grounds. These changes imply their declining ability to encapsulate voters in the way they did in the age of Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) classical cleavages. Historically, close ties between parties and trade unions, the church, and related social clubs had embedded voters in political networks that linked identities and organizations (Gingrich and Lynch 2019). In step with this trend, the strategic action of party leaders has gained more weight (Garzia, Ferreira da Silva, and De Angelis 2022), although the extent to which this has occurred is debated (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Kriesi et al. 2012; Marino, Martocchia Diodati, and Verzichelli 2022). Recent scholarship on issue competition and political entrepreneurs interprets the ability of new actors to enter party competition as (indirect) evidence that voters no longer base their vote choice on stable cleavage lines (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2019; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021).

Relatedly, a dynamically expanding strand of research studying how parties use group appeals and how they combine them with policy appeals also tends to adopt a more short-term strategic perspective, focusing on individual campaigns, on appeals to voters beyond parties' core electorates, on valence politics, and typically on mentions of narrowly defined sociodemographic groups (such as "employees," "the highly educated," or "women") rather than on the emergence of long-term party–group relations or on the political construction of new forms of collective consciousness. This includes research on identity frames, which can be viewed as explicit efforts to cast grievances and issues in terms of in-groups and out-groups (an example is the discussion of populist identity frames in Bos et al. 2020). Over time, such strategies might cumulatively contribute to the formation of "groups" in the more strictly political-sociological sense encompassing collective mobilization – and this is how this work connects to our argument (see also Stuckelberger and Tresch 2022). However, this perspective is not per se at the core of the burgeoning literature on the strategic use of group appeals (e.g., Robison et al. 2021; Huber 2022).

By contrast, we suggest that a focus on the role of social identities in *connecting* social structure and partisan alignments can reconcile the seemingly contradictory findings between the long-term realigned voter–party links and an increased role of short-term party agency. To understand the success of specific group appeals used by political parties, we need to understand how voters think of themselves and of their group belongings in relation to others. We contend that appeals only resonate with individuals when they fall on "fertile soil," that is, when individuals share a collective identity, or at least frameworks of understanding and worldviews that can provide the basis for one. In that

sense, studying the social structuration of collective group identities is a precondition for understanding the differential effects of politicians' use of appeals.

1.3 The Argument: The Role of Group Identities and Ideological Party Blocks

Two contributions of this Element help us make sense of the puzzling coincidence of realignment and fragmentation in contemporary party politics. First, building and expanding on classical cleavage approaches, we suggest that social identities are important to understanding how party systems are rooted in social structure. We commonly use the concept of identities to describe who we are and what is important to us. The degree to which social groups share such conceptions shapes the extent to which the framing of contemporary conflicts by political parties resonates with them. Second, the fact that allegiances to individual parties and their organizations have eroded, and the resulting increase in competition, implies that we should find more regularities across space and time if we focus on ideological blocks, rather than individual parties. In what follows, we begin by elaborating on the first contribution of our Element. Afterward, we explain the analytical leverage we gain by distinguishing between party competition within and across ideological blocks.

1.3.1 Group Identities and Cleavage Formation

The importance of social identities is implicitly acknowledged in classical cleavage accounts (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990; Weakliem 1993; Knutsen and Scarbrough 1995; Bartolini 2005b). Yet those who insist that cleavages continue to matter have not devoted much attention to answering the question of what constitutes the "glue" linking social groups and political parties. While we have learned a lot about the socio-structural groups underlying the universalism–particularism divide, as well as on the discourse of the political actors mobilizing it,[4] the link between structure and consciousness is far from evident. This is of course an idea as old as the social sciences themselves: a "class in itself" is not yet a "class for itself" (cf. Marx 1937 [1852], 192), and "categories of analysis" (e.g., based on socio-structural conditions) are potentially far from being "categories of practice" (through which people experience group belonging) (Bourdieu 1985).

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[4] On the structural basis of the far right, see, among others, Minkenberg and Perrineau (2007), Arzheimer (2009), the contributions in Rydgren (2013), and Oesch and Rennwald (2018). On the political discourse of the Radical Populist Right, see Betz (2004), Betz and Johnson (2004), Minkenberg (2000), Mudde (2000), Rydgren (2005), Bornschier (2010), and Damhuis (2020).

There are also specific reasons for focusing on collective identities when it comes to the universalism–particularism cleavage. We argue that a focus on group identities can help us make sense of some particularities in the emergence of this cleavage. In the absence of a clear-cut link between political discourse and the markers of socio-structural position we use to describe these groups, the link between the two still represents something of a black box. This is particularly true for the (counterintuitive) working-class realignment in favor of the Far Right (see, for example, Rydgren 2007, the contributions in Rydgren 2013, and Evans and Tilley 2011), as well as with respect to recent work that relates subjective structural position, such as status anxiety (e.g., Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017; Fitzgerald 2018; Bolet 2020), relative economic deprivation (e.g., Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Kurer 2020; Kurer and Staalduinen 2022; Breyer, Palmtag, and Zollinger 2023), or the perception of economic and social opportunities (Häusermann, Kurer, and Zollinger 2023) to Far Right support. Why exactly do such feelings and perceptions of grievance and vulnerability translate into support for the Far Right, rather than for other parties that cater to economic vulnerability more directly? To understand why culturally connoted appeals resonate with economically defined groups, the next section draws centrally on psychological and sociological approaches that highlight the importance of *positive* group identifications for individuals (Bornschier et al. 2021; Zollinger 2022). This accounts for the propensity of the "losers" of economic and social change to seek identification based on categories that correspond only loosely to their objective social position.

The construction of a positive self-image is more self-evident for the relative "winners" of the social changes of the past decades. Indeed, in the initial mobilization of the New Social Movements of the 1970s and 1980s, personal and group identity in the quest for the recognition of difference in terms of gender, sexual orientation, as well as the free choice of lifestyles were closely linked. In a process corresponding to what Snow and McAdam (2000) have called the "general diffusion" of movement identities, solidarity with the drivers of protest then expanded within broader universalistically minded sectors of society. As movement activists flocked into the emerging Green parties, bottom-up and top-down processes of mobilization and identity construction were intimately related.[5] But explaining the inclination of parts of the middle class to vote for the New Left is by no means trivial either. While the literature has identified education and work logic as determinants of universalism (Kriesi 1998; Oesch 2006a; Kitschelt and Rehm 2014), an ethnographic approach reveals how these

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[5] For discussions of the interaction between the New Social Movements and political parties, see Poguntke (1987), and Kriesi (1999).

groups' economic preferences are embedded in broader, culturally defined world-views of deservingness and fairness, as well (Westheuser 2021; Damhuis and Westheuser 2023).

In a nutshell, then, the key question is how the winners and losers of the social transformations of the past four to five decades see and describe themselves. We believe such a perspective can go a long way in explaining why certain party appeals resonate with specific social groups, while others fail to do so.

1.3.2 The Role of Agency

Creating and reproducing these nonevident links between social groups and parties obviously assigns a nontrivial role to political agency.[6] We believe that the level of social identities – the intermediate level in Bartolini and Mair's (1990) much-noted threefold conception of cleavages – is a good place to study agency.[7] It is here that the self-definitions of social groups intersect with the appeals by political parties to give meaning to grievances. In grasping this link, we can draw on the literature on social movements that highlights how collective action frames point to injustices and combine them with a definition of the group or social category in question (Gamson 1992; Klandermans 2001).[8] Klandermans (2001) theorizes two processes that translate the "raw material" of a cleavage into collective action. On the one hand, meaning is constructed bottom-up at the interface between networks of personal interaction and media-based public discourse. On the other hand, these interpretations are reinforced during campaigns, where social actors undertake deliberate attempts to persuade voters and where they stake out who the group's antagonists are. The latter process is crucial because the social movement literature as well as the more classical sociological literature both highlight the group-binding effects of conflict (Coser 1956; Stryker 1980; Marks 1989; Gamson 1992). Combined, these two processes result in what Snow et al. (1986) refer to as "frame alignment," meaning in our case that individuals' and parties' interpretations of grievances come to overlap. Incorporating the idea that party appeals resonate with the way groups would describe themselves also helps us understand how Far Right parties succeed in mobilizing diverse structural groups

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[6] Research on class voting shows that agency clearly matters in that the link between social class and political behavior is stronger in contexts in which parties offer more strongly diverging economic policy appeals (Adams, de Vries, and Leiter 2011; Evans and Tilley 2011; Evans and de Graaf 2013; for an application in a two-dimensional policy space, see Rennwald and Evans 2014).

[7] See also Deegan-Krause and Enyedi (2010: 697), who highlight that political parties can make some group identities salient at the expense of others.

[8] See also Thijssen and Verheyen (2022) for a conceptualization of different ways to frame solidarity. For an adaptation to the mobilization of the far right, see Elgenius and Rydgren (2019). Our discussion is broader in that it applies to all party families.

(as emphasized in the recent literature on different logics of Far Right voting, for example, Damhuis 2020; Harteveld et al. 2022).

Both the bottom-up processes in which group identities are constructed, as well as the role of political agency in reinforcing and nourishing these identities, lead us to expect fundamental similarities between countries:

(a) *Similarities in Terms of the Raw Materials for a New Cleavage.* We start here from the insight that each individual holds multiple identities with the potential of being politically relevant. Building on Stryker (2000), as well as the classical literature on cross-cutting cleavages (e.g., Lijphart 1979; Rokkan 1999), the relative salience of these identities should determine which of them will shape political alignments. Identity salience increases, according to Stryker (1980), as individuals interact with members of the same group. Because our personal interactions are patterned by social structural position – chiefly in terms of class, education, and urban-rural residence – identity salience is not entirely voluntaristic. Instead, it is biased toward those identities that are most strongly reinforced at the workplace and in everyday life. The resulting expectation is that the grievances resulting from the transition to a knowledge economy will lead to similar identity potentials across the set of advanced democracies that we study.

(b) *Convergence of Mobilization Frames.* Framing constitutes a creative, collective effort at meaning construction. It "draw[s] on the cultural stock of images of what is an injustice, of what is a violation of what ought to be" (Zald 1996: 266). At the anti-universalistic pole of the cleavage, the Far Right has converged on a particularistic frame that emphasizes the preservation of traditional (national) communities and status hierarchies (e.g., Antonio 2000; Minkenberg 2000; Betz 2004; Bornschier 2010; Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). One of the core elements of the Far Right's ideology is indeed its nostalgic component, as several scholars have highlighted (Betz and Johnson 2004; Duyvendak 2011; Elgenius and Rydgren 2019, 2022). This discourse can be expected to resonate strongly with social groups that feel deprived relative to a supposedly better past (e.g., Elchardus and Spruyt 2012; Burgoon et al. 2019; Engler and Weisstanner 2021). Combined with the large literature that has pointed to a fundamental similarity in the competitive spaces in West European party systems (e.g., Kitschelt 1994; Marks et al. 2006; Kriesi et al. 2008; Bornschier 2010; Kriesi et al. 2012; Hutter and Kriesi 2019) this again leads us to expect a fundamental similarity in terms of the group identities underlying the universalism–particularism cleavage.