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Party Choice and Social Structure: Theory, the Party Choice Variable and Statistical Measures

1.1 Introduction: the study of the relationship between party choice and social structure

The study of the relationship between social structural variables and voters’ party choice is a classic topic within political science and political sociology. In their seminal essay on the development of the conflict structure in western democracies, Lipset and Rokkan (1967a) focused on the historical origins of the structural party conflicts. They saw the main political cleavages as direct products of two revolutions: national and industrial. The four cleavages which they identified all had clear structural anchorage. The centre–periphery cleavage was anchored in geographical regions and related to different ethnic and linguistic groups, as well as religious minorities (confessions). The conflict between the Church and the State pitted the secular state against the historical privileges of the churches; and over control of the important educational institutions. This cleavage has more specifically polarised the religious section against the secular section of the population. The conflict in the labour market involved owners and employers versus tenants, labourers and workers. Finally, the conflict in the commodity market was between buyers and sellers of agricultural products or, more generally, between the urban and the rural population (Lipset & Rokkan 1967a: 15–23).

Lipset and Rokkan’s work was the theoretical basis for a large number of subsequent empirical analyses of the relationship between (changes in) social structure and party choice, and such analyses became a central part of electoral research in many countries where election studies are carried out on a regular basis. These studies often have a longitudinal component, but they seldom include comparison between countries.

Common to all these comparative works and others is that they are based on contributions from national experts who write about ‘their’ respective countries, with the available data that exists for each. In addition to country-specific chapters, these volumes also include chapters that combine the perspectives and empirical findings to reach some overall perspectives on change and comparative patterns of differences in change. Variables are often differently operationalised in the different countries, and the comparative elements are often few and somewhat problematic.

This study takes a more explicit comparative approach by employing a genuine cumulative data set based on all Eurobarometers from 1970 to 1997. The analysis comprises eight of the nine countries that were members of the (then) European Economic Community: Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, (West) Germany, Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands.

In this work we use a traditional notion of social cleavage. A cleavage basically reflects broadly based and long-standing social and economic divisions within society, and the political cleavage structure is thought of in terms of social groups, the loyalties of individuals to their social group and how these loyalties influence party choice and political action (Franklin, Mackie & Valen 1992: 5).

One important perspective in Lipset and Rokkan’s work was the persistent impact of social structure on party choice, which they called the ‘freezing of party alignments’. Later research has documented considerable decline in the impact of at least some of the structural variables that they considered important, and in the literature there has been a focus on defreezing of party alignments, structural or secular dealignment (Dalton, Flanagan & Beck 1984b) and the decline of cleavage politics (Franklin 1992). This research will be reviewed in the next section.

Our analysis comprises two aspects that may influence the strength of the various parties and the relationship between social structure and party choice, referred to in the literature as two main aspects of secular realignment: ecological and sectoral realignment (Flanagan 1984: 95–96). The first aspect is the changes in the social structure. Given that social structure changes in important ways, this may increase the support for parties which appeal to the social group that is increasing in size.