

# 1. Empirical Theories of Electoral Change

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# 1

## Empirical Theories of Electoral Change

This chapter reviews relatively recent literature on electoral change in various countries to uncover major sources of electoral change. Models of electoral competition can be divided into voter-led and party-led types (Rose and McAllister 1990, pp. 2–3). Bartolini and Mair (1990) combined the two to perform the most comprehensive analysis to date of the electoral volatility of European democracies in terms of: (1) voters' cleavage identities, (2) policy distance, (3) the number of political parties in competition, (4) electoral institutions, and (5) electoral participation.<sup>1</sup> As this study focuses on the tendency of voters to change their party support *under a given party system*, party-led models are not dealt with here.<sup>2</sup> The following review of electoral behavior in general shows that the major sources of “voter-led” electoral change and/or volatility are: (1) party identification, (2) social cleavages, (3) retrospective voting, and (4) values. These four variables are put in nearly chronological order regarding when each became a major research area.

### 1.1. Party Identification

The concept of party identification as an independent variable was developed after the discovery of a major vote swing in the American presidential elections of 1952 and 1956. In these Eisenhower elections, a significant part of the electorate changed their votes from the Democrats to the Republicans while still claiming loyalty to the Democrats. Campbell et al. (1960) assumed that candidates and issues triggered short-term vote swings but that party identification explained long-term party support.<sup>3</sup> Butler and Stokes (1969) were the first to employ the same concept to explain electoral behavior in Western Europe.

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, growing electoral volatility in Western Eu-

rope raised doubts on the assumption of stable party identification. Eurobarometer data from 1974 to 1988 showed that party attachment, a modest expression of party identification, had been declining in most parts of Western Europe (Schmitt 1989). Miller et al. (1990) concluded, based on panel surveys, that weaker party identification led to a higher probability of voting shifts at the individual level, although they did not explain what had weakened party identification. Brynin and Sanders (1997), relying on two waves of the British Household Panel Survey, demonstrated that party identification and vote choice were very similar in terms of their temporal variation and socioeconomic correlates, and asserted that both might be measuring the same phenomenon. There are relatively few scholars who argue that party loyalties are stable in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> Dalton's most recent evidence (2000) also attested to declining party identification across advanced industrial democracies.

## 1.2. Social Cleavages

Social cleavage approaches to electoral change center on the stability or fluidity of the relationship between the cleavage structure and the party system. Lipset and Rokkan's seminal study (1967) asserted that in Western democracies, four social cleavages (center-periphery, church-state, land-industry, and owner-worker) had historically institutionalized the present party systems by the 1920s.

Lipset and Rokkan's "freezing" hypothesis, however, has been challenged by those scholars who emphasized changing cleavage structures since the late 1960s.<sup>5</sup> They argued that variables such as embourgeoisement, social mobility, the mass society, community integration, cognitive mobilization, the aging party system, and value changes would function as dynamic processes, with some preceding and/or reinforcing others.<sup>6</sup> What these variables imply in common is that the preexisting party system became less able to reflect the changing social cleavages.

Franklin et al. (1992) found that social cleavages were becoming less important factors in party choice in Western democracies. Using the vote for left parties as a measure of electoral change, they also stressed different patterns of the relationship between the cleavage-party nexus and electoral change. In those countries where the relationship between social cleavages and the party system remained strong, electoral change was moderate. In those where the above relationship was weakening, a significant electoral change occurred due to other important variables (Franklin [1992, p. 403]). Ersson and Lane (1998, chap. 4) also concluded that growing electoral volatility in Western Europe in the 1990s invalidated the model of a frozen party system. Instead, they underlined the importance of the floating electorate.<sup>7</sup> At a more theoretical level, Mair (2001, pp. 33–35; 1993) criticized Lipset and Rokkan for taking the freezing as granted and devoting little attention to how and why the freezing persisted after the 1920s.

On the other hand, from a more long-term perspective, Bartolini and Mair (1990) contended that West European party systems were relatively stable from 1885 to 1985. Among the various institutional and socioeconomic variables they used to

account for (the limited) electoral change, deep-seated social cleavages were found to discourage electoral volatility. The strength of social cleavages, measured for each country using a composite index of four standardized variables (ethno-linguistic heterogeneity, religious heterogeneity, membership ratio of left parties, and trade-union density), turned out to be negatively correlated with electoral volatility (pp. 241–42).<sup>8</sup> This is because, they argued, the stronger the voter's group identification, the less likely he/she would be to change party support between elections.

Admittedly, the freezing hypothesis and the ensuing controversy focused on Western democracies. In other regions of the world, party systems were not frozen to begin with. Geddes (2003, chap. 4) demonstrated that the freezing hypothesis did not apply to the (pre-communist) Eastern European and Latin American countries that had been excluded by Lipset and Rokkan, although these countries satisfied their selection criteria. In 13 out of 18 of these countries, parties that existed in the first popular election were about to disappear, with none receiving more than 25 percent of the total vote. In pre-communist Eastern Europe, social cleavages were visible, but they were not reflected in the party systems. After the two world wars and the transition to communism, social cleavages and political parties were destroyed. Since democratization, neither have the old cleavages reappeared nor have new distinct cleavages emerged (Lawson 1999). In Latin America, and more generally in developing countries, social cleavages have been loosely associated with party systems since the service sector, rather than the manufacturing sector, succeeded agriculture in the stages of economic development. The working class thus was not organized on a mass basis and no parties represented them seriously. Instead, catch-all parties emerged that incorporated various social groups (Dix 1989).<sup>9</sup>

### 1.3. Retrospective Voting

The source of the volatility that reflects rational choice is retrospective, or economic, voting.<sup>10</sup> The retrospective voting model<sup>11</sup> assumes that individuals make a voting decision based on the previous socioeconomic gains/losses under the incumbent government rather than what the government promises. Although it shares a socioeconomic perspective with the cleavage model, the time span for the independent variable is shorter (most often one year or less<sup>12</sup>) than in the cleavage model.<sup>13</sup>

For single-country studies of retrospective voting, the choice of the independent variable between macro and micro levels is a major methodological issue. Some scholars have argued that gains and losses are perceived in terms of not individuals but the community/nation to which they belong. Johnston and others proposed explanations for the changing geographic patterns of voting in Britain from the late 1970s to the 1980s, by analyzing individual opinion poll data (Johnston, Pattie, and Allsopp [1988]; Pattie and Johnston [1997]; Johnston and Pattie [1998]). They found out that the widening geographical gaps in voting behavior were associated with growing variance in socioeconomic geography. In relatively affluent/deprived regions, people tended to vote for/against the party in power since they approved/

disapproved its policy outcome in the regions.<sup>14</sup> Their analytical framework rested on Agnew's view that emphasized place as a determinant of political behavior (Agnew 1987, Agnew and Duncan 1989). It was difficult, he argued, to account for political behavior by looking simply at socioeconomic variables of individuals as if these variables had the same meaning everywhere. According to Agnew, place is where individuals with these variables interact with each other before they make their own decisions. Place therefore imposes a contextual constraint on political behavior.<sup>15</sup> Reed and Brunk's time-series analysis of Japanese parliamentary elections supported the macro-criteria hypothesis (Reed and Brunk 1984).<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, Rose and McAllister (1990) as well as McAllister and Studlar (1992) showed using individual opinion-poll and survey data that once the socioeconomic status of a constituency was controlled for, the effect of constituency environment on voting behavior became insignificant. In other words, their results indicated that the probability of a person with a particular socioeconomic status voting for the Conservatives would not change if he or she moved to a constituency characterized by higher or lower socioeconomic status.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Brynin and Sanders showed that voters who felt that they were in good health were more likely to vote for the incumbent than for the opposition (1997, p. 66). In the meantime, it seems possible to incorporate both personal and collective aspects of gains/losses in the analysis of a specific country. Markus (1988) argued that in elections, voters took into consideration both their personal economic predicaments and the nation's economic condition. His analysis of pooled individual-level survey data from eight U.S. presidential election years provided support for his hypothesis.

Cross-national studies have highlighted political contexts in which voters evaluate the incumbent. A collection of country studies edited by Norpoth, Lewis-Beck, and Lafay (1991) on the whole attested to the validity of the retrospective voting model, whereas Paldam's chapter on cross-national studies in the same book failed to provide substantive evidence to support it (Paldam 1991). This was the puzzle that Powell and Whitten (1993) tried to find an answer to by making an improvement on Paldam's work. They pointed to the importance of the political context of the election when considering the effect of economic performance on voting behavior.

Their cross-national analysis of 102 elections in 19 democracies in the 1969-88 period showed, first, that the partisan nature of the incumbent government made a difference in economic variables that affected popular support for the government. While right-wing governments gained/lost support if inflation was higher/lower than the current international standard, left-wing and centrist governments were rewarded/punished for lower/higher unemployment. Second, and more importantly, the context of political responsibility affected the degree to which voters held the incumbent government accountable for economic performance. Although all incumbent governments tended to lose votes in elections, minority governments (the least responsible) were likely to lose the least while single-party majority governments (the most responsible) were likely to lose the most. Anderson's separate analysis (1995) of five democracies concurred with Powell and Whitten's work (1993). Anderson, who concluded that popular support for the government was a function of both economic

performance and political responsibility, applied the most appropriate measurement of political responsibility to each country according to its constitutional setting.

Retrospective voting is not exclusive to Western democracies. Norpoth (1996) showed that for 38 countries, including both established and emerging democracies in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, there was a significant correlation between GDP growth and the vote received by the major party in government. He assumed that voters held the major party in government, rather than its minor-party partners, responsible for economic management. Pacek and Radcliff (1995) investigated economic voting in developing countries using macro data instead of opinion polls. They contended that economic decline brought about a loss of support for incumbent governments while economic growth did not increase their votes.

For Latin America in the 1980s, Remmer measured political responses to economic performance. In particular, the incumbent loss/vote turned out to be responsive to short-term economic indicators and electoral volatility to medium-term indicators. In other words, “incumbents pay the price for short-term economic setbacks,” while “deeper crises may be translated into broader political shifts and high overall levels of electoral volatility” (Remmer 1991, p. 785). Both the incumbent loss/vote and electoral volatility thus seemed to significantly reflect the economic impact on electoral behavior. Roberts and Wibbels (1999) analyzed the high level of electoral volatility in Latin America during the 1980s and the 1990s. They found that short-term economic disturbances as well as institutional discontinuities, party system fragmentation, and (to a lesser extent) loose cleavage structures increased electoral volatility. Roberts and Wibbels also made distinctions between total electoral volatility and incumbent vote change, which produced different results between legislative and presidential elections. In Mexico’s ebbing one-party system, the primary determinant of the voter’s party choice was retrospective voting. The poll data also showed that social cleavages had a limited effect, only explaining voter choice among the opposition parties (Dominguez and McCann 1995).

#### **1.4. Values**

Value change has become a major theme since the 1980s, when traditional social-cleavage accounts, such as class voting, increasingly lost their explanatory power.<sup>18</sup> The most influential argument about value change was developed by Inglehart (1981). He initially drew attention to a value change in postindustrial society from materialism, which emphasized economic and physical security, to postmaterialism, which emphasized self-expression and quality of life (p. 880). He sought the main reason in the fact that younger generations had experienced relatively high economic security during their formative years, and were thus inclined to seek alternative values. Inglehart and his collaborators later demonstrated this hypothesis using larger cross-national studies that included industrializing as well as industrialized countries (Abramson and Inglehart 1995, Inglehart 1997).

In terms of political polarization, Inglehart argued that the conventional axis of

political polarization, i.e., the left-right axis, based on social class and religiosity, was being challenged by an emerging axis based on materialist-postmaterialist polarization. According to Inglehart, since the new axis had not yet been institutionalized, it was superimposed on the conventional axis, with the left-right axis thus conveying two different meanings. Methodologically, Inglehart claimed that for gauging change in voting behavior, left-right *self-placement* is a better indicator than left-right *voting*. He explained that the former is more neutral and independent of static party loyalties than is the latter.

Inglehart (1984) then showed that value priorities (materialism-postmaterialism) were a more important determinant of left-right self-placement than was social class in Western Europe in the late 1970s.<sup>19</sup> This last point was shared by Rose and McAllister (1990), who demonstrated for Britain in 1987 that among all the variables in a lifetime of learning, political values had the most important effect (27.9 percent of variance explained) on voting behavior, followed by family loyalties (19.7 percent), current performance of parties and leaders (10.5 percent), and socioeconomic interests (9.7 percent). Party identification (3.4 percent) and the social and political context (1.7 percent) had very little effect.

In developing democracies, values seem to be a more important factor in party choice than are cleavages. Certain embryonic links between values and parties can be observed in emerging democracies. The common denominator of these values is support for reform vs. support for the old system. The World Values Survey data suggested that whereas the most significant axis of polarization in Western democracies was on the left-right dimension, in the emerging democracies of Latin America and Eastern Europe, major political divisions cut across democratic vs. authoritarian values, support for political and economic reform vs. the status quo, and liberalism vs. conservatism (Moreno 1999). In Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, the emerging party systems were based on the comprehensive “reform vs. old-regime” axis, rather than multiple segmented cleavages (Miller et al. 2000).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, however, a global shift in values can be pointed out. Norris (1999) found that by the mid-1990s, people had come to lose their trust in the government while still supporting the democratic form of government. A major reason lies, according to Inglehart, in the fact that postmodernization processes lead to weaker respect for authority but to stronger trust in democracy (Inglehart 1999).

## 1.5. Summary

The preceding literature review suggests that social cleavages, retrospective voting, and values provided clues across countries to electoral change in general, while party identification had little explanatory power outside the United States. Table 1-1 summarizes the four models reviewed above by dependent variable, independent variables, time span, and ubiquity.

Both the cleavage and value approaches assume that the party system represented an underlying cleavage/value structure. Thus, it is possible to regard these two ap-

TABLE 1-1  
FOUR MODELS OF ELECTORAL CHANGE

Model	Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	Time Span	Ubiquity
Party identification	Party support	Party identification	Long	Low
Social cleavages	Party support	Socioeconomic groupings	Long	High
Retrospective voting	Incumbent support	Recent change in affluence	Short	High
Values	Party support	Values	Long	Medium

Source: Compiled by the author in light of the above discussions.

proaches as representational accounts. While such accounts can explain relatively long-term volatility, the retrospective voting approach is concerned with short-term volatility. Electoral change thus is seen as stemming from voters' search for better representation as well as from their resentment toward the incumbent government. In recent years, retrospective voting and values give a better account of electoral change than do social cleavages (and party identification). Methodologically, the measurement of electoral change differs among the four models. While the retrospective voting model uses incumbent support as the dependent variable, the other three models treat party support as such.

## Notes

- 1 Since their analysis is cross-national, some of their independent variables such as the number of political parties in competition, electoral institutions, and electoral participation are not relevant to this study.
- 2 This is not to deny the importance of the party system variable in the explanation of electoral change in general. The new institutionalism perspective in the 1990s asserts that electoral results fluctuate due not so much to changes in the electorate as to changes in the party system or to institutional reforms. See Norris (1998, pp. xix–xxii).
- 3 See also Niemi and Weisberg (1993, pp. 275–76) and Budge (1991).
- 4 For such an example, see Richardson (1991).
- 5 For an opposite view that party realignment did not occur in this period, see for instance Gallagher (1992, chap. 4). Relatedly, Evans (1999) concluded that decline in class voting was less prevalent and uniform as it had been asserted. He also argued that class voting declined due to party strategy changes that reflected social change, rather than to the social change itself (p. 333).
- 6 See a review by Dalton, Beck, and Flanagan (1984).
- 7 See also Lane and Ersson (1999, chap. 4).
- 8 Bartolini and Mair's definition of social cleavages is conceptually more precise than those of most others. They contended that social cleavages must have three factors, i.e., objective



social-structural attributes, sources of identity, and organizational links (p. 215). They refined the concept of cleavage in line with Lipset and Rokkan's framework (1967), stating that "the strength of cleavages depends on social homogeneity, organizational density, and cultural distinctiveness" (Bartolini and Mair 1990, p. 224).

- 9 As elections are repeated, the catch-all party, which typically exists in democracies in developing countries, may give way to more cleavage-based parties. However, the transformation of the (political) superstructure does not automatically lead to a consolidation of democracy unless civil society becomes robust. In India, the decline of the catch-all Congress Party brought social cleavages to the surface of the party system. At the same time, however, the lack of organized social groups enabled the party system, rather than social groups, to determine the party-cleavage nexus. Inter-party conflict thus tended to aggravate tensions along social cleavages (Chhibber 1999).
- 10 Retrospective voting is a type of issue voting. Issue voting extends on a time dimension (retrospective and prospective) and a content dimension (position, performance, and attributes). See Dalton (1996, pp. 222–25).
- 11 The retrospective voting model was initially formulated by Fiorina (1981). He demonstrated, using American national election data from 1956 to 1976, that retrospective evaluations had not only a direct effect on voting decisions but also an indirect effect through party identification, issue concerns, and future expectations. For a review, see Niemi and Weisberg (1993, pp. 137–51). For the most recent and comprehensive treatment of the theme, see Dorussen and Taylor (2002).
- 12 For instance, the six-month average prior to the election month. See Stevenson (2002)
- 13 Johnston and Pattie (2001), however, recently drew attention to a more long-term voter calculation. It was found for the 1997 British general election that the voters' evaluation of government policy since the last general election also affected their "punish or reward" consideration.
- 14 Regional variations in voting behavior began to decrease in the early 1990s, however, as support for Labour increased while the Conservatives lost ground. See Pattie and Johnston (1997) and Johnston and Pattie (1998).
- 15 Agnew, however, did not empirically demonstrate the net effect of place on political behavior. Although he described various patterns of electoral behavior across regions in Scotland and the United States, he ended up explaining these patterns in terms of socioeconomic variables. See Agnew (1987). His explanation thus did not demonstrate that place had a stronger effect on political behavior than did the aggregated effect of socioeconomic variables that represented the place.
- 16 However, their study did not seem to reject the individual-criteria hypothesis as they claimed. They found that only for the post-oil shock period did their model show a significant relationship between the incumbent vote and macroeconomic indicators. The insignificant relationship during the consistent economic-growth period (1960–73), they argued, suggested that personal grievances, which had definitely existed at the time, had not affected the incumbent vote. The last point may support the macro-criteria hypothesis but does not necessarily reject the individual-criteria hypothesis.
- 17 Nevertheless, they found that government performance had significantly influenced voting behavior.
- 18 Norris argued that it was a renewed interest in the role of values. The earliest attempt to study democratic values was conducted in the 1940s by Lazarsfeld and others. See Norris (1998, pp. xiii–xiv).
- 19 Inglehart argued that religiosity, which constituted the conventional polarization axis, sur-

vived the value change since the materialism-postmaterialism axis conformed to the clerical-anticlerical divide. The right is clerical on the conventional axis and is resistant to change on the new axis while the left is anticlerical on the conventional axis and advocates social change on the new axis (p. 57).

- 20 Incidentally, these findings are not very different from Lipset's observation (1988) that the major social cleavage for developing democracies after the Second World War was reform (modernists) vs. conservatism (traditionalists).

