

# Introduction: The Structure of Political Competition in Western Europe

ZSOLT ENYEDI and KEVIN DEEGAN-KRAUSE

Whether as model or foil, twentieth-century Western Europe sets the standard against which scholars in political science evaluate structures of political competition. It is therefore particularly important to have a detailed picture of those structures. But the diversity within the region, and the rapid changes in both the social context of politics and in the political articulation of society during the past decades have complicated the development of meaningful generalizations. The challenges of operationalization and measurement, and a still fluid conceptual vocabulary add to the complexity of the task and often make the communication across the field cumbersome.

The articles in this volume advance the field by presenting new empirical data on the power of most relevant attitudinal and socio-demographic variables and by suggesting novel methods and conceptual approaches. The volume has its roots in the 2003 Edinburgh and 2007 Helsinki workshops of the European Consortium on Political Research and a variety of panels at the American Political Science Association annual meetings. These gatherings brought together scholars with an interest in the interaction between political parties, socio-demographic characteristics and ideological orientations from many countries and many sub-disciplines. The emphasis is therefore on variety, with a range of theoretical approaches and conceptual vocabularies. The findings sometimes reinforce one another and sometimes do not, but even the disagreements provide material for the volume's concluding section of provocative commentaries by senior scholars in the field.

The empirical analyses presented in this volume provide a consistent picture of incremental change and weak-but-persistent relationships. They document that the issue space in most Western European countries

---

*Correspondence Address:* [kdk@wayne.edu](mailto:kdk@wayne.edu)

continues to be structured around two axes, with a relatively clear economic dimension and a far more diffuse cultural dimension whose content and significance fluctuates considerably depending on the period and context. They also show that the relationships between individuals' demographic characteristics, their values and their political choices are not insignificant and that education and occupation have eclipsed many of the traditional socio-demographic characteristics in structuring the vote.

The first group of contributions, Stoll (2010) and Bornschier (2010), research the value-defined space of party elites looking at party programs and media accounts across both space and time with multiple cases and multiple time periods. They find a continuing dominant socio-economic dimension of political competition but also, in almost all cases, a second dimension, though the authors disagree on the degree to which this dimension can be narrowed down to 'cultural-identity' politics. A related contribution by Henjak (2010) also looks at value orientations, but focuses on individual-level alignments between values and party vote in a large number of countries using public opinion survey data gathered during the early 2000s. Henjak finds a two-dimensional structure of competition but suggests a wide variety in the strength of the two dimensions as well as in the component elements of the second dimension from one country to the next. While Stoll and Bornschier ascribe an important role to parties in shaping the contours of the arena in which they compete, Henjak explores the interplay between deeper cultural and economic factors and the role of political leaders through their support for particular policies related to the welfare state.

A second group of contributions add direct consideration of socio-demographic characteristics to the value and institutional variables. Stubager's study (2010) takes advantage of the focused scope of the case study method to document shifts in the relationship between socio-demographic categories and value orientations and party preference in one country – Denmark – over more than two decades of public opinion data. Dolezal's (2010) contribution documents the relationship between socio-demographics and value orientations for a single family of parties – the Greens – across Europe in public opinion data collected during the early 2000s. Both articles suggest that shifts in underlying socio-demographic characteristics, particularly increases in the share of the population with higher education, help to create new alignments, though both also suggest an important role for party responses to the demographic change.

A third group of contributions look at the ways that the interactions among socio-demographic elements, value orientations and party choice are shaped by space and time. The article by Knutsen (2010) uses a combination of election results and opinion surveys from the early 2000s to test the degree to which regional patterns of party voting depend on various types of socio-demographic variables and value orientations. He finds that regional differences are to a considerable extent due to differences in class

composition. The contribution by Van der Brug (2010) uses four rounds of opinion surveys from across Europe between the late 1980s and mid-2000s to test the degree to which relationships depend on time-period, cohort and life-cycle. He finds that the influence of class, religion and left-right orientation is in decline, though the decline is not entirely secular. Finally, the contribution by Tóka and Gosselin (2010) uses survey data from the early 2000s to address the degree to which particular configurations of structural and value variables mobilize political behavior and stabilize political choices over time. They demonstrate that the voters who are attracted to parties because of party-specific social and attitudinal variables (the cleavage voters) are more loyal and politically more active than other citizens.

These eight contributions serve as the basis for the volume's second section containing reviews of the volume and the field by four leading experts: Geoffrey Evans (2010), Mark Franklin (2010), Herbert Kitschelt (2010), and Hanspeter Kriesi (2010). These commentators graciously accepted our request not only for their synthetic thoughts on the volume and its relationship to their own work in the field but also for more polemic and speculative thoughts on four big questions: 'the most useful generalization we can make about the structure of political competition', 'the most misleading current misconception about structure', 'the most promising but not yet fully proven hypothesis' and 'the kind of research and data that we now need the most.' Their reflections make it evident that the empirical studies presented in the volume have been conducted in a methodological and conceptual minefield. We are grateful both to the senior scholars for their valuable comments and to the authors of the empirical articles for their readiness to expose themselves to the sharp and often polemic observations in the commentaries. By asking the commentators not only to give their subjective assessment of the current scholarship but also to point out what bothers them most, we encouraged diverging views – typically latently – to come to the surface and hope that the open contention can serve as a basis for future work in the field. Finally, toward that same end, the editors (Deegan-Krause and Enyedi 2010) offer concluding thoughts of their own which address the impact of political agency on the types of structures discussed in this volume and offer a theoretical framework designed to help to integrate the excellent but fragmented efforts of scholars who explore the ways in which political leaders shape structural constraints.

The editors wish to heartily thank the contributors to this volume for their diligent effort and active cooperation, but our thanks go beyond those whose names are listed in the table of contents. Each article benefited from the comments of multiple anonymous reviewers and the editors were aided in their task by other scholars including Jennifer Fitzgerald, Staffan Kumlin, Stratos Patrikios, Eleanor Scarbrough, Hermann Schmitt, and Sara Svensson, who reviewed aspects of particular texts. The other participants of the ECPR Joint Sessions in Helsinki, Finland – Asher Arian, Daniele

Caramani, Goran Čular, Ivan Gregurić, Youngmi Kim, Shahaeen Mozaffar, Oleh Protsyk, James Scarritt, Gunes Tezcur, and Joost van Spanje – also contributed to the project through their insightful comments on agency and cleavage. We are particularly grateful to Peter Mair who encouraged and supported the idea of the volume. Finally, we are thankful for the support of our families; it is strangely appropriate that our meetings to prepare this volume led our wives and children to form their own enduring social relationships.

## References

- Bornschier, Simon (2010). 'The New Cultural Divide and the Two-Dimensional Political Space in Western Europe', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 419–44.
- Deegan-Krause, Kevin, and Zsolt Enyedi (2010). 'Agency and the Structure of Party Competition: Alignment, Stability and the Role of Political Elites', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 686–710.
- Dolezal, Martin (2010). 'Exploring the Stabilization of a Political Force: The Social and Attitudinal Basis of Green Parties in the Age of Globalization', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 534–52.
- Evans, Geoffrey (2010). 'Models, Measures and Mechanisms: An Agenda for Progress in Cleavage Research', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 634–47.
- Franklin, Mark N. (2010). 'Cleavage Research: A Critical Appraisal', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 648–58.
- Henjak, Andrija (2010). 'Political Cleavages and Socio-economic Context: How Welfare Regimes and Historical Divisions Shape Political Cleavages', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 474–504.
- Kitschelt, Herbert (2010). 'The Comparative Analysis of Electoral and Partisan Politics: A Comment on a Special Issue of *West European Politics*', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 659–72.
- Knutsen, Oddbjørn (2010). 'The Regional Cleavage in Western Europe: Can Social Composition, Value Orientations and Territorial Identities explain the Impact of Region on Party Choice?', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 553–85.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter (2010). 'Restructuration of Partisan Politics and the Emergence of a New Cleavage based on Values', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 673–85.
- Stoll, Heather (2010). 'Elite-Level Conflict Salience and Dimensionality in Western Europe: Concepts and Empirical Findings', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 445–73.
- Stubager, Rune (2010). 'The Development of the Education Cleavage: Denmark as a Critical Case', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 505–33.
- Tóka, Gábor, and Tania Gosselin (2010). 'Persistent Political Divides, Electoral Volatility and Citizen Involvement: The Freezing Hypothesis in the 2004 European Election', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 608–33.
- van der Brug, Wouter (2010). 'Structural and Ideological Voting in Age Cohorts', *West European Politics*, 33:3, 586–607.