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“This book is a breakthrough in the existing literature on the politics of social inequality. Not merely is the analysis intensively data-based, it goes beyond the usual confines of a small number of western democracies to a set of fifty democracies (or semi-democracies) in different continents over many decades. The analysis throughout is highly sensible, informative, and insightful.”

—**PRANAB BARDHAN**, University of California, Berkeley

“This monumental book presents the first international and historical analysis of political cleavages and of their interplay with inequality. This is a must-read book for anyone wanting to understand electoral politics in today’s democracies—the rise of ‘identity politics’ in some countries but not others, and the multiplicity of possible futures for the dynamic of inequality.”

—**GABRIEL ZUCMAN**, University of California, Berkeley

“This impressive book will rapidly become the central reference point for systematically charting trends in voting alignment across the globe. By including nations from the global South alongside established liberal democracies, Gethin and his colleagues challenge endemic Western biases in political research and reveal the systematic ways that inequality and credentialism have redrawn voting patterns over recent decades. Gethin and his coauthors offer exactly the kind of big picture perspective which political activists and campaigners, as much as academic social scientists of all hues, will hugely appreciate.”

—**MIKE SAVAGE**, author of *The Return of Inequality*

“This ambitious collection tackles a set of timely questions about the interplay among inequality levels and trends, political preferences and electoral behavior, and voters’ demographic and economic characteristics. Ideally, the volume will land in the hands of diverse audiences concerned with political polarization and social inequalities—including multidisciplinary social scientists, political actors, and social activists.”

—**JANET C. GORNICK**, Director, Stone Center on Socio-Economic Inequality at The Graduate Center, City University of New York

“Here is a welcome throwback to the ambitious political sociology of the mid-twentieth century. The analyses are solid and the geographical range is appealingly broad. The authors’ portraits of shifting social cleavages raise fascinating questions about the nature and implications of ‘class politics’ in the contemporary world.”

—**LARRY M. BARTELS**, Vanderbilt University



**POLITICAL
CLEAVAGES
AND
SOCIAL
INEQUALITIES**

—
**GETHIN
MARTÍNEZ-TOLEDANO
PIKETTY**

**POLITICAL
CLEAVAGES
AND
SOCIAL
INEQUALITIES**
A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020

EDITED BY

AMORY GETHIN

CLARA MARTÍNEZ-TOLEDANO

THOMAS PIKETTY



“Combining ambition with humility, this volume explores cross-national and temporal variation in the structure of political cleavages with an eye to explaining the conditions under which income and wealth inequality becomes a topic of political contestation (or not). Refreshingly, the volume sidesteps longstanding debates among political scientists and illustrates how looking for patterns in macro data can yield new insights. The database assembled by Piketty and his collaborators itself represents a major contribution.”

—**JONAS PONTUSSON**, University of Geneva

WHO VOTES for whom and why? Why has growing inequality in many parts of the world not led to renewed class-based conflicts, seeming instead to have come with the emergence of new divides over identity and integration? News analysts, scholars, and citizens interested in exploring those questions inevitably lack relevant data, in particular the kinds of data that establish historical and international context. *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities* provides the missing empirical background, collecting and examining a treasure trove of information on the dynamics of polarization in modern democracies.

The chapters draw on a unique set of surveys conducted between 1948 and 2020 in fifty countries on five continents, analyzing the links between voters’ political preferences and socioeconomic characteristics, such as income, education, wealth, occupation, religion, ethnicity, age, and gender. This analysis sheds new light on how political movements succeed in coalescing multiple interests and identities in contemporary democracies. It also helps us understand the conditions under which conflicts over inequality become politically salient, as well as the similarities and constraints of voters supporting ethnonationalist politicians like Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump.

Bringing together cutting-edge data and historical analysis, editors Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty offer a vital resource for understanding the voting patterns of the present and the likely sources of future political conflict.

POLITICAL CLEAVAGES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020

AMORY GETHIN

CLARA MARTÍNEZ-TOLEDANO

THOMAS PIKETTY

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POLITICAL CLEAVAGES AND
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Introduction

AMORY GETHIN, CLARA MARTÍNEZ-TOLEDANO, AND THOMAS PIKETTY

Electoral Democracies, Electoral Surveys: Objectives and Methods

This volume presents the results of a collective research program on the structure of political cleavages and social inequalities in fifty electoral democracies, located on the five continents, from 1948 to 2020. The purpose of this introduction is to succinctly describe the program's objectives and methods, as well as to briefly outline the organization of the volume and its different chapters.

“Electoral democracies”: this notion must immediately be clarified so as to circumscribe our object of enquiry. None of the countries studied in this book are perfect democracies, far from it, and some of them notably depart from being so, in particular when it comes to freedom of the press or to neutrality of the state in organizing electoral operations. All these countries, however, have at some point held plural and disputed elections, in the sense that the results were not entirely known in advance and could have determined access to political power. For our purpose, these elections allow us to study how different social groups have decided to cast their votes for existing parties and coalitions, thereby offering an imperfect yet tangible window on citizens' beliefs, their political and ideological visions, and the electoral choices that derive from them, given the limited options they face.

Such is, above all, the central objective of this volume: the study in a systematic manner of how electoral choices vary according to social attributes such as income, education, wealth, occupation, gender, age, national origin, or ethno-religious identity. To do so, we have relied on a quasi-unique source: electoral surveys conducted in a number of countries that have organized plural elections since the end of World War II. These surveys, carried out on representative samples of generally a few

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thousand voters, most often in the days or weeks following the corresponding election, have collected information on both respondents' electoral behaviors and their socioeconomic characteristics. In spite of their imperfections, they constitute one of the most precious sources at our disposal for studying the relationships between the structures of political cleavages and social inequalities.¹

Thanks to the collaboration of about twenty researchers participating to this project, we have been able to assemble and exploit on a homogeneous and comparable basis nearly all electoral surveys conducted in fifty electoral democracies throughout the world from 1948 to 2020. This has allowed us to establish a global and historical mapping of the ways by which different dimensions of social inequalities are or are not, within a given party or coalition, subject to common political mobilizations.

Among the numerous questions that we have attempted to tackle is the following: to what extent are voters from underprivileged backgrounds—whether in terms of income, education, or wealth—prone to support a common electoral bloc, independent of their other characteristics such as national or regional origin or ethnoreligious identity? In other words, what is the relative importance of “class-based” and “identity-based” factors in structuring political cleavages and determining electoral behaviors? As we shall see, the answers to this question vary considerably across time and space, including within a given country. In practice, these different factors combine in multiple ways, depending on specific historical and political constructions and deconstructions, which should be analyzed as such.

Let us take an example. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Democratic Party in the United States drew to a large extent the votes of the lower classes, regardless of the criteria adopted to define them (income, education, wealth, or occupation), and independent of their origins or racial affiliations. Over the 2000–2020 period, by contrast, lower classes belonging to Black or Latino “minorities” continue to predominantly vote for the Democratic Party, but White lower classes have clearly shifted toward the Republican Party. Another type of fragmentation also seems

1. These surveys are sometimes referred to as “postelectoral surveys.” They generally differ from exit polls in that they are conducted some time after the election (rather than outside polling stations), collect more detailed information on the socioeconomic characteristics of voters, and have been developed by academic research centers. All details on the surveys used are provided in the different chapters of this volume.

to have occurred at the top of the social hierarchy: higher-educated voters are now strongly supportive of the Democratic Party, while those with highest levels of wealth (and to a lesser extent those with highest levels of income) continue to support the Republican Party, albeit not as clearly as they used to in the postwar era.

A somewhat comparable transformation seems to have taken place in Europe, where divides related to origins and ethno-religious identities have recently taken unprecedented importance. As a result, European democracies are now gradually coming closer to the case of the United States, despite extremely different initial configurations, in particular regarding the historically stronger influence of “class-based” cleavages (and correlatively the weaker influence of racial and ethno-religious divides) in Europe. On the contrary, we shall see that in other parts of the world, notably in Asia, Latin America, or Africa, the “class-based” dimension of political conflicts has in some cases intensified in recent decades. These results call into question the Western view that sometimes favors a narrow “ethnacist” vision of electoral conflicts in non-Western democracies. In reality, it is the West that appears to be undergoing a process of “ethnicization” and “tribalization,” at a time where a number of other democracies are moving toward class-based conflicts. These results also and most importantly invite us to take a closer look at the programmatic and politico-ideological platforms allowing specific parties and coalitions to bring together, with varying degrees of success, voters from different origins.

It should, however, be clear that the ambition of this volume is limited and circumscribed. In no way do we pretend to explain in a perfectly convincing way *why* these different voters vote in the way they do or *the reasons* underlying the evolutions we observe. Our primary objective is modestly descriptive: we aim first and foremost to establish a number of factual regularities and transformations in the socioeconomic structure of electoral coalitions, political cleavages, and social inequalities by adopting a historical, transnational, and global perspective.

We also attempt in the chapters of this volume to analyze some of the many potential hypotheses that could explain the observed evolutions, depending on the specific contexts of each country, and following the general principle that the multiplication of case studies and comparisons can contribute to enriching our understanding of the processes at stake. We insist on the fact that the structure of political cleavages is never frozen. It evolves as the result of numerous factors, including the mobilizational strategies pursued by different political movements, which,

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depending on the nature of the proffered project, may or may not succeed in gathering large coalitions of voters despite their differences.

It goes without saying that a satisfactory analysis of the conjunction of these processes, for such long periods of time and such a large number of countries, would require piecing together sources, methods, and capacities that go far beyond those mobilized in this volume. We keenly hope that the mainly descriptive and historical work proposed in this book will be used and extended by further research and discussions, so as to allow us to better understand the documented transformations. It is with this collective and participatory perspective in mind that all the data assembled in this volume have been made available to all interested readers (whether researchers, journalists or other citizens), in the form of the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (wpid.world).

Organization of the Volume

Chapter 1 starts by proposing a synthesis of the main results of the different case studies. Among the fifty democracies considered (see Table 1.1), seventeen are located in Western Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), three are in postcommunist Eastern Europe (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland), four are in North America and Oceania (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States), ten are in Asia (Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand), seven are in Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Peru), and nine are in Africa (Algeria, Botswana, Ghana, Iraq, Israel, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Turkey). Our choice to study these countries has mainly been dictated by the availability of sufficiently rich electoral surveys, with well enough preserved and documented files, to allow for satisfactory exploitation and homogeneous cross-country comparisons.

The following chapters expose in greater detail the results obtained by approximately following this geographical order. Chapter 2 analyzes the cases of France, the United States, and the United Kingdom, revealing important commonalities between these three countries, notably the reversal of the educational cleavage, the emergence of “multi-elite” party systems, and the evolution of identity-based cleavages in the past decades. The next chapters evaluate to what extent this general scheme applies to

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other Western democracies. Chapter 3 examines the case of Germany. Chapter 4 delves into the trajectories of northern countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden). Chapter 5 studies the similarities and specificities of the dynamics observed in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the cases of Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland. Chapter 7 focuses on the transformations visible in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Despite noticeable differences between these countries, this exploration of political cleavages in Western democracies (Europe, North America, and Oceania) suggests relatively similar evolutions to those observed in France, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

Chapter 8 broadens the perspective by studying three countries of postcommunist Eastern Europe (the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland), unveiling specific yet informative structures of political cleavages, characterized in particular by the nearly complete disappearance of social democratic and socialist parties.

Chapter 9 enlarges even further the perspective by considering the case of India. As the world's largest democracy, with a number of voters exceeding the cumulated total of all the abovementioned countries, India provides a useful counterpoint to the democracies studied in previous chapters. We shall see, for instance, that in contrast to what we observe with increasing clarity in Europe and the United States, lower classes from majority (Hindus) and minority (Muslims) ethnoreligious groups are still inclined to vote for the same parties and coalitions in India. Chapter 10 turns to the case of Pakistan, where the politicization of ethnolinguistic divides and social inequalities has taken equally specific and varying forms. Chapter 11 documents the evolution of electoral divides in Japan, notably insisting on the historical role of the rural-urban cleavage and on the exceptional weakening of class cleavages in recent years. Chapter 12, dedicated to Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, investigates how the structure of regional and ethnic inequalities has contributed to generate diverse and evolving forms of class divides. Chapter 13 compares the cases of South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, focusing on the articulation between socioeconomic cleavages and diverging attitudes toward the North Korean (South Korea) and Chinese (Hong Kong and Taiwan) regimes.

Chapter 14 examines the case of Brazil and documents a remarkable intensification of class cleavages in the past decades, in the context of the new post-dictatorship democratic system. The Brazilian example

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illustrates the role played by the concrete implementation of public policies in fostering class-based electoral divides. Chapter 15 proposes a comparative analysis of several other Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Peru), insisting in particular on the interaction between class cleavages, ethnic cleavages, and the personalization of electoral politics.

Chapter 16 is dedicated to the structure of political cleavages in South Africa, in a context marked by extreme racial inequalities but where the politicization of inequalities beyond race has been slowly gaining traction. Chapter 17 studies the processes underlying the political representation of social inequalities and ethnic cleavages in Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. Unlike what common stereotypes suggest, class-based cleavages appear to some extent in the course of emerging in Africa, in particular in Botswana and Nigeria. Chapter 18 analyzes the transformation of the structure of political cleavages in Israel. Chapter 19 investigates the formation of sociopolitical cleavages in Algeria, Iraq, and Turkey, insisting on the diverse and changing relationships between religious and class mobilizations. It should be stressed that the lack of historical depth and the insufficiencies of available electoral surveys considerably limit the scope of the analyses that can be developed in African and Middle Eastern countries. Nevertheless, we considered it essential to include them in our inquiry to illustrate the specific forms taken by the interactions between political cleavages and social inequalities in these different contexts.

Finally, a brief Conclusion recalls some of the key lessons of this volume and more importantly outlines a number of prospects for future research.

Conclusion

AMORY GETHIN, CLARA MARTÍNEZ-TOLEDANO, AND THOMAS PIKETTY

We would like to conclude this volume by insisting once more on the limitations of our project. We have attempted to develop an analytical framework to study the evolution of the socioeconomic structure of electorates in fifty countries from 1948 to 2020. While multiple lessons have emerged from the different chapters of this volume, it is quite clear that the sources, methods, and capacities brought together remain insufficient to satisfactorily answer the interrogations that have motivated our work. We hope first and foremost that this book will help to inspire further research on these questions among the social sciences research community, and that it will have allowed the reader-citizen interested in them to better understand the interaction between political cleavages and social inequalities in comparative and historical perspective. We encourage interested readers to visit the website accompanying this volume (wpid.world), which also includes for each country a large number of supplementary data series and figures that we have not been able to present in this volume for reasons of length.

How do political parties and electoral blocs succeed in aggregating voters from different backgrounds or ethnoreligious identities within large coalitions? What is the relative importance of “class-based” and “identity-based” cleavages in determining the structure of cleavages, electoral behaviors, and political affiliations? As we progressively covered a large variety of countries, experiences, and trajectories, we discovered how crucial multiplying points of view, and more importantly, decentering and de-Westernizing our perspective, they were to answering these questions. Nostalgia for the class-based structure of electoral conflicts in postwar Western democracies is not a good guide. The era of the comforting opposition between social democratic (and affiliated) parties

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and conservative (and affiliated) parties, once perceived as seemingly eternal, is long gone. It was tied to politico-ideological and sociohistorical circumstances that will not come back, or at least not in the same form. And within European nation-states, it also came with a homogeneity of origins and ethnoreligious identities that should not be idealized. The postcommunist and postcolonial world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brings into play other cleavages and requires building other platforms of social and economic transformation if it is to succeed in overcoming the divisions of people from diverse origins and convincing them that what unites them is more important than what divides them.

Throughout this volume, we have had a tendency to express a certain preference for “class-based” cleavages over “identity-based” cleavages. The reason for this is quite simple: conflicts mediated by social class are always potentially soluble into social and economic change, whether in the form of redistribution of income and wages, circulation of wealth and power, improvements in working conditions and participation, or egalitarian access to education and health. It is admittedly not always easy to position the cursor at the right level. Yet, a straightforward democratic confrontation between different class-based parties offering complementary viewpoints and experiences can contribute to moving in this direction. In contrast, conflicts over national origin or ethnoreligious identities do not often admit solutions other than further exacerbation or persecution of one side by the other. We would, however, be mistaken to dismiss all identity-based conflicts as forms of irresolvable tribalism. Recognizing the multiplicity of sociocultural and ethnoreligious identities requires inventing new policies based on the respect of diversity and common rules, the fight against discrimination, and in some instances, compensation for past injustices. Such issues have been neglected far too long by Western democracies, which were quick to forget their colonial pasts and the international insertion that was once key to their enrichment. At a theoretical level, one might also imagine a democratic world where class-based and identity-based cleavages would have both disappeared, and where diverging opinions and beliefs would depend entirely on the deliberative process itself rather than on socioeconomic or ethnoreligious determinants. Yet, nothing indicates that this configuration could materialize in a foreseeable future. In this context, it seems more reasonable to take the persisting importance of class-based and identity-based cleavages as given, and envision the conditions of

CONCLUSION

their transformation within concrete coalitions and tangible political prospects.

Perhaps more relevant to our purpose, one may also imagine a democratic universe structured by new forms of cleavages, starting with the future of the environment and the conditions of a durable cohabitation between humans and nature. We have encountered green and environmentalist parties in several instances in the course of our enquiry, and we have seen the role that they played in accelerating the decline of class cleavages and the rise of “multi-elite” party systems. This, however, represents only the first visible steps of a much longer process. Environmental issues will most likely continue to gain prominence in the coming decades. As the consequences of the current deterioration of the environment on the conditions of social life eventually unfold, they will likely play a structuring role in generating new coalitions with constructive political visions.

To move beyond the research program developed in this volume, it is not enough to simply wait for the next elections and electoral surveys. Other sources and methods, far beyond those we have used here, need to be mobilized. Let us say it once again: this volume relies on a quasi-unique source, namely electoral surveys conducted in fifty electoral democracies from 1948 to 2020. The advantage of this approach is that it has allowed us to apply homogeneous methods to a large number of countries and to reveal a certain number of regularities and transformations. Its disadvantages are equally evident: the complexity of the questions asked calls for the exploitation of many other forms of research materials. We have naturally relied on many studies conducted by researchers in the social sciences, and in particular in political science, to specify the historical contexts and the origins of the party systems of the different countries considered. Our characterizations of the various parties and movements we encountered, however, remain in many cases extremely schematic, if not impressionistic. To go further, one would need to assemble and use in a systematic manner a number of other sources, related for instance to political discourses and electoral platforms,¹ to the policies implemented by parties when they assume power, and to their mobilizational and funding strategies, to name a few. This would arguably require limiting the scope to a smaller number of countries.

1. See, for instance, the impressive database assembled in the context of the Manifesto Project (Manifesto Research on Political Representation, <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>).

Lastly, one should highlight the importance of broadening even further the historical perspective and the nature of the electoral data used. The surveys exploited in this volume have a major advantage: they allow us to observe, for the same voters, both their electoral behaviors and their socioeconomic characteristics. They also suffer from two significant drawbacks. First, no survey of this kind existed before the 1940s or 1950s, or even the 1980s or 1990s in a large number of electoral democracies. Second, even when they do exist, they pose a number of challenges related to self-reporting² and, more importantly, to the limited size of the samples used. The electoral surveys exploited in this volume indeed rely on samples of a few thousand voters. This is sufficient to reveal major trends at the national level, but forbids more refined analyses. Small election-to-election variations, for instance, are often not statistically significant, especially when one tries to interact several explanatory variables or if one aims to study narrow regional variations. This also prevents us from precisely identifying the impact of a given proposition or public policy on the perceptions of various groups of voters.

Engaging in more granular analyses, as well as gaining historical depth, requires going back to localized election results (whether at the level of districts, constituencies, or even polling stations) and matching them with administrative, tax, or social data available at this same level (such as census data). This methodology poses multiple challenges related to the inference process too, as it does not cover electoral behaviors and socioeconomic characteristics at the individual level, but only provides averages at a given local level. However, it has the immense benefit of allowing us to adopt a much larger temporal perspective, as data have generally been preserved since the nineteenth century and the first elections held by universal suffrage.³ This would make it possible to examine even more diversified politico-ideological families and situate the study of political cleavages and social inequalities within a considerably

2. Even if this should not be a major problem, at least when it comes to self-reporting of voting behaviors. We have reweighed electoral surveys to make them representative of official election results, but generally this has very minor implications. See Chapter 1. Biases linked to self-reporting of income and wealth sometimes create more serious difficulties, notably at the top of the distribution, particularly given the imprecision of survey questionnaires.

3. For a particularly fruitful (yet unfortunately not often followed) example, see the classic study by André Siegfried, *Tableau politique de la France de l'ouest sous la Troisième République* (Armand Colin, 1913).

CONCLUSION

wider historical scope. The lessons arising from such study would likely lead us to relativize even further the supposedly universal character of the postwar Western class-based cleavage, and thereby to better apprehend the conditions of the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of more complex political coalitions. Here again, such an initiative could only be reasonably conducted in a first step at the level of monographs focusing on a small number of countries, if not a single country. We hope that the results presented in this volume will contribute to stimulating new research in these multiple directions.

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