

Social Divisions, Party Positions, and Electoral Behaviour

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Abstract

The “new conventional wisdom” of a waning impact of social divisions on political choices has been subject to debate in recent years. This paper addresses the debate by assessing the relevance of parties’ political positions, using a novel approach to analysing it comparatively, based on a combination of data from the Eurobarometer with data of the Comparative Manifestos Project. The findings of this paper lend support to the claim that the decline in the relation between social divisions and voting behaviour, so far as it can be observed at all, is attributable to parties’ changing political positions. Once these changes are taken into account, the diagnosis of a persistent impact of social divisions prevails.

Key words: class, church-attendance, class voting, religious voting, social cleavages, parties, party manifestos, party competition, voting behaviour, electoral change

1. Introduction

It is close to a new conventional wisdom that the impact of social divisions on voting behaviour is on the wane (Dalton, 2002). While Lipset and Rokkan (1967) took for granted, in developing their model of the genesis of European party systems, that parties represent or even embody social segments or social strata — such as Protestants, Catholics, land owners, the working class etc., the now popular view is that social characteristics have lost much of their relevance for vote choice and continue doing so (Franklin et al., 1992; Clark and Lipset, 1993; Dogan, 1995; Lane and Ersson, 1997; Dalton and Wattenberg, 1993; Clark and Lipset, 2001; de Graaf et al., 2001; Dalton, 2002). Some authors even claim that social cleavages have become completely irrelevant (Lane and Ersson, 1997).

Nevertheless, the notion of a general decline of social cleavages has been disputed recently, especially with respect to the role of socio-economic class (Evans, 1999, 2000). Critics argue that the impact of class on voting behaviour rather shows “trendless fluctuations” (Heath and Jowell, 1987; Manza et al., 1995) than a general decline (see also Van Der Waal et al., 2007; Elff, 2007). Other critics hold that, while a decline of class differences in voting behaviour cannot be denied for some

countries, it reflects changes in the political arena rather than diminishing differences between citizens distinguished by social cleavages (Evans et al., 1999; Heath et al., 1991; Mair et al., 1999). Parties may have become more similar in terms of their ideological positions or in terms of the policies they propose while competing for citizens’ votes.

Lipset (1981 [1959]) already took parties’ political positions into account when he explained that “the lower-income groups support [left parties] to become economically better off, while the higher-income groups oppose them in order to maintain their economic advantages” with the fact that “leftist parties represent themselves as instruments of social change in the direction of equality” (Lipset, 1981 [1959], 239). But he also maintained that the primary axis of parties’ political division changed over time (Lipset, 1981 [1959], 233). Even more explicitly, Converse held that “the impact of status on vote decision is dependent on the degree to which the political parties proffer clear and equally polarised policy alternatives” (Converse, 1958, 397). Yet, most comparative analyses of the changing electoral role of social cleavages have relied on a fixed classification of parties as left vs. right parties (e.g. Alford, 1963; Franklin et al., 1992; Nieuwbeerta, 1995). Such an approach implies that the degree to which such parties “represent themselves as agents of social change” is essentially constant over time (and across countries) or obscures the degree

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to which parties vary in proffering “polarised policy alternatives.” But if voters from different income groups or different classes have become more similar in terms of their voting behaviour, this might as well happen because the choices they face in the voting booth have become more similar. And if a possible convergence between parties’ political offers to the voters is not taken into account, one will face the danger of over-estimating the degree to which different groups become more similar in terms of economic self-interest or values.

For scholars of party competition there is hardly anything more familiar than the notion that parties may change their positions to attract new voters and if there is one result that has gained prominence beyond the circles of public choice experts, then it is the “median voter theorem” (Black, 1958; Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929): In the long run, the competition for votes will draw parties or candidates to the position at the centre of the political spectrum, because from there a party or a candidate can attract the most voters.¹ Yet even scholars from a completely different tradition have remarked on a tendency especially of social democratic parties to become “catch-all parties” (Kirchheimer, 1966) or on the “dilemma of electoral socialism” facing labour parties (Przeworski, 1985; Przeworski and Sprague, 1986): If the industrial working class does not reach a majority in a country’s population, labour parties may need to broaden their appeal to other strata in order to get a chance to govern, but will then face the risk of alienating their traditional social base (see also Rose and Mackie, 1988; Sainsbury, 1990). What these considerations have in common is that the centripetal drive of party competition is independent of a convergence between social groups in terms of their economic self-interests or values. On the contrary, if e.g. Przeworski and Sprague’s dilemma of electoral socialism is real, then the pull of labour parties to the political centre may even be the stronger the more *different* in terms of their policy preferences other strata are from the industrial working class. This pull to the centre may also increase, if other strata, for example a new middle class of service-sector employees, increases in size relative to the industrial working class.

One may of course argue that parties converge in terms of their political positions, because voters from

different groups become more similar in terms of their policy preferences, self-interest, or values. This is not a necessary condition for a centripetal pull of party competition, but seems at least to be a sufficient condition for its increase. Nevertheless, because of the possibility that parties follow voters in their move to the centre, it is not enough to show that political polarisation between parties decreases in all countries were social differences in voting behaviour decrease, in order to make plausible that the latter process is a consequence of the former. Rather, one needs to take a closer look on how voters react to parties’ policy positions: If for example, class voting declines because working class voters and bourgeois voters become more similar in terms of their policy preferences, then this means that working-class voters’ tendency to favour parties with leftist policy positions over parties with centrist or rightist policy positions weakens or middle class voters’ tendency to favour parties with centrist or rightist policy positions over parties with leftist positions. In that case, a decline in class voting will be exasperated if parties’ policy positions converge, but the decline in class voting would occur also without such a convergence. Conversely, if a decline of the electoral impact of social cleavages occurs *only* because parties converge in their respective policy positions, then one will find that social groups’ tendencies of favouring or disfavouring parties with leftist positions over parties with rightist positions are changing.

In the present paper, I address the question which of these two scenarios applies for West European countries during the last couple of decades. That is, I examine whether parties’ political convergence may account for changes in the electoral relevance of cleavages or whether a decline of social cleavages occurs that takes place independently from parties’ changing political positions. I will not only address class voting but also voting differences along religious/secular lines, which have proved to be at least as important for voting patterns in Western Europe (Elf, 2007).

There are already some pioneering studies that take into account the impact of parties’ changing political positions on the electoral salience of social cleavages. Thus Evans et al. (1999) find that much of the change in class voting in Britain can be attributed to the changing left-right position of the Labour party, whereas de Graaf et al. (2001) show how the amalgamation of the three large confessional parties in the Netherlands has led to the diminishment of voting differences between religious denominations. Chhibber and Torcal (1997) show how strategies of Spanish parties have led to a polarisation of electoral behaviour along class lines, but not religious/secular lines. While these studies have lent con-

¹Ironically, this median voter theorem is contested in the public choice literature. The need for political reputation may counteract the centripetal tendency of competition, and if there is more than one dimension on which political positions can be located, the median voter theorem does not hold (Berger et al., 2000; Hinich, 1977; McKelvey, 1976; Wittman, 1973)

siderable plausibility to the importance of party political factors for changes in the patterns of voting, they focus only on single countries. But to assess general claims about the decline or resilience of social cleavages in the electoral politics of Western Europe, a cross-national study is more appropriate.

One reason why comparative approaches have disregarded parties' changing political positions and studies that took party competition into account have focused on single countries, is the difficulty to analyse parties' policy positions and voters characteristics in their joint impact on voting behaviour in a cross-national perspective. However, as I show in my paper, discrete-choice modelling can be used to overcome this difficulty. With the help of appropriate discrete-choice models I test two competing hypotheses that correspond to the abovementioned scenarios, using data on parties' political positions taken from the Comparative Manifestos Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006) and data from the Eurobarometer on citizens' social characteristics and vote intentions for the period from 1974 to 2002 and for Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands.

In the next section I will explain what discrete choice models can add to our understanding of the interrelation between social cleavages, parties' positions and voting behaviour. Thereafter I will explain the decisions concerning the research design pertaining to the formulation and testing of the hypotheses. That section is followed by a presentation of model estimates and their discussion in terms of their support for the two competing hypotheses. I conclude the paper by pointing out the relevance of the results for the debate on the nature and extend of cleavage decline in voting behaviour in Western Europe and what future directions electoral research in this area may take.²

2. Social Divisions, Party Positions, and Voting as a Discrete Choice

When a voter has cast a ballot in a democratic election, he or she has made a choice between two or more alternatives. In Western Europe it usually is a choice between candidates nominated by parties or lists of candidates for parliamentary seats. These alternatives may differ in various ways. Candidates may differ in rhetorical prowess or personal attractiveness, parties may differ

²A web appendix presents some technical details concerning the reconstruction of parties' political positions from Comparative Manifestos Project data and concerning the operationalisation of cleavage variables based on Eurobarometer data.

in the performance of governments recruited by them or in their ideological stance and policy positions. Those properties of the alternatives relevant for the choices of the voters are henceforth called their *attributes*. The attributes that are of main importance in the context of this paper are of course the parties' respective policy positions.

Discrete choice models express the probability that an individual voter chooses a specific alternative *as function only of its attributes*, without the need to take into account the names or identities of the specific alternatives. The simplest discrete choice model is McFadden's (1974) conditional logit model, which in principle even allows for the set of alternatives available — the *choice set* — to vary from chooser to chooser. This model is an excellent tool to fulfil a desideratum of scientific analysis, that is, the “substitution of variables for proper names” (Przeworski and Teune, 1970, 25), and therefore is taken as a point of departure for the modelling approach of this paper. In the following I will develop how this model can be adapted to the question whether changes in the role of social cleavages for electoral behaviour can be attributed to movements in parties' political positions or are independent from these.

I start with the simplest form of this type of models, which contains only one attribute variable. Such a model takes the form

$$\pi_i = \frac{\exp(\eta_i)}{\sum_{j \in \mathcal{S}} \exp(\eta_j)} \quad \text{with } \eta_i = \beta x_i \quad (1)$$

where π_i is the probability that an individual chooses alternative i from the choice set \mathcal{S} , x_i is the value of the attribute variable x for alternative i and coefficient β expresses the impact of x on the choice of an alternative in an individuals' choice set \mathcal{S} . For later reference, it is useful to consider what this model implies for the log-odds of an alternative i being chosen from a pair i, k of alternatives:

$$\log \frac{\pi_i}{\pi_k} = \eta_i - \eta_k = \beta x_i - \beta x_k = \beta(x_i - x_k) \quad (2)$$

The influence of parties' political positions is straightforward here: The larger the difference between in political positions, the higher the log-odds, and this applies for *all* voters and all pairs of parties.

Clearly, this model is too simple to address voting patterns in different groups. To make this possible, one needs to include group dummy variables into the model: If there are, for the purpose of exposition, only two relevant groups in a hypothetically given country and individual j 's group membership can be indicated by the value g_j of a dummy variable g , e.g. such that $g_j = 0$ for

members of the industrial working class and $g_j = 1$ for members of the middle class. The coefficient β can then be considered to vary with individuals' group membership according to $\beta = \beta_0 + \beta_1 g$. Substituting this into equation (2) leads to

$$\log \frac{\pi_{ij}}{\pi_{kj}} = \beta_0(x_i - x_k) + \beta_1 g_j(x_i - x_k) \quad (3)$$

If party i is a labour party and party k is a bourgeois party and the dummy variable represents class differences, then the log-odds ratio that describes class voting becomes

$$\log \left(\frac{\pi_{i,g=1}}{\pi_{k,g=1}} \middle/ \frac{\pi_{i,g=0}}{\pi_{k,g=0}} \right) = \beta_1(x_i - x_k). \quad (4)$$

That is, the log-odds ratio that expresses the level of class voting depends directly on the difference between the policy positions x_i and x_j of the respective parties. If the difference between the policy positions diminishes over time, so will the level of class voting.

Consider now that the level of class voting changes independently from the parties' political positions. In that case β_1 is not constant over time, but e.g. changes according to $\beta_1 = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}t$. The log-odds ratio then will also change, even if the difference between the parties' positions is constant:

$$\log \left(\frac{\pi_{i,g=1}}{\pi_{k,g=1}} \middle/ \frac{\pi_{i,g=0}}{\pi_{k,g=0}} \right) = (\beta_{10} + \beta_{11}t)(x_i - x_k). \quad (5)$$

If one supplements this with a trend in β_0 , that is $\beta_0 = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}t$, then the linear component η of the conditional logit model in (2) becomes:

$$\eta = \beta_{00}x + \beta_{01}tx + \beta_{10}gx + \beta_{11}gtx. \quad (6)$$

In case of the class voting example, the *main effect* of parties' political positions β_{00} expresses how they influence party choice in the industrial working class, the *first-order interaction* effect of parties' positions with time β_{01} expresses how this influence changes over time, while another first-order interaction effect, that of the class dummy variable with parties' positions β_{10} , represents how the middle class differs from the industrial working class in weighing parties' positions. A *second-order interaction effect* β_{11} of the class dummy g with parties' positions x and time t then describes how this difference changes over time.

In this simplified exposition it is presupposed so far that voters follow a *directional* model of voting (Rabinowitz and MacDonald, 1989): If, e.g. negative values of x denote leftist positions and positive values of

x rightist positions, and if β_0 in equation (3) is negative while $\beta_0 + \beta_1$ is positive, then the support for a party from the industrial working class will increase, the more leftist its position is, and the support for a party from the middle class will increase, the more rightist its position is (holding the positions of other parties constant). Yet also a *proximity* model of voting (Davis et al., 1970; Westholm, 1997) can be expressed with this model (see also Johnston et al., 2000): If one starts again with the simplest model 1, but lets x represent, instead of parties' political positions themselves, the *utility* of the respective parties' political positions for the voters, which declines with the squared distance $(z - \alpha)^2$ of a parties policy position (now denoted by z) from the voters' ideal point (denoted by α), that is $x = -(z - \alpha)^2$, one obtains the following equation for η :

$$\eta = \beta x = -\beta(z - \alpha)^2 = -\beta z^2 + 2\beta\alpha z - \alpha^2. \quad (7)$$

Since the term α^2 is constant across alternatives and drops out of the conditional logit model, because of

$$\begin{aligned} \pi_i &= \frac{\exp(\eta_i + c)}{\sum_{j \in S} \exp(\eta_j + c)} = \frac{\exp(\eta_i) \exp(c)}{\sum_{j \in S} \exp(\eta_j) \exp(c)} \\ &= \frac{\exp(\eta_i)}{\sum_{j \in S} \exp(\eta_j)}, \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

specification (7) is equivalent to one from which the term α^2 is dropped.

To accommodate for differences between ideal points of voters from different social groups, one can set $\alpha = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 g$, where g again is a group-membership dummy-variable. Trends in the idealpoints of the groups can then be expressed as $\alpha = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 g = (\alpha_{00} + \alpha_{01}t) + (\alpha_{10} + \alpha_{11}t)g$. Substituting this into (7) and dropping constant terms leads to:

$$\eta = \beta_{00}z + \beta_{01}tz + \beta_{10}gz + \beta_{11}gtz + \beta_{20}z^2 \quad (9)$$

where $\beta_{00} = 2\beta\alpha_{00}$, $\beta_{01} = 2\beta\alpha_{01}$, $\beta_{10} = 2\beta\alpha_{10}$, $\beta_{11} = 2\beta\alpha_{11}$, and $\beta_{20} = -\beta$. This specification thus differs from the directional one in equation (6) only by the presence of the term $\beta_{20}z^2$, that is, by an *quadratic main effect* of the parties' political positions (see also Johnston et al., 2000). Thus, it becomes clear that for the research question it is immaterial whether voters follow a directional or proximity model of voting. Nevertheless, the models used later in this paper include quadratic main effects in order to allow for the possibility that voters follow a proximity rather than a directional model.

Users of discrete choice models often are concerned about the assumption of independence from irrelevant alternatives, which will be violated if certain attributes

of these variables are relevant for choice behaviour but are not present in the model (McFadden, 1984; Alvarez and Nagler, 1998). Of course, parties' political positions and voters' reactions to these are not the only kind of attributes that are relevant for party choice. Other such attributes are e.g. candidates' rhetorical prowess or personal attractiveness, past performance of governments recruited by a party, a party's recognition due to a long history of its presence in the electoral arena etc. Since such attributes are difficult to measure and are not relevant in the present context, it is more suitable to represent their impact by *random effects*, as proposed by McFadden and Train (2000). For the purposes of this paper, two levels of random effects are considered, one level representing party-specific attributes that are constant over time, and party-specific attributes that may change from one point in time to the next. Including these random effects into the model leads to

$$\eta = \beta_{00}z + \beta_{01}tz + \beta_{10}gz + \beta_{11}gtz + \beta_{20}z^2 + u_1 + u_2. \quad (10)$$

Including such random effects has the advantage of accounting for unobserved heterogeneity on the part of the choice alternatives, without the need for including alternative-specific parameters. Instead, only the variances σ_1^2 and σ_2^2 are parameters to be estimated, apart from the coefficients $\beta_{00}, \beta_{01}, \beta_{10}, \beta_{11}$, and β_{20} .

In the introduction I presented two contrasting accounts of changes in the relation between social divisions and voting behaviour: According to the first account, voters from different social groups or strata become more similar politically, because they become more similar socially—they differ less in terms of values or self-interest. According to the second account, voters from different social groups or strata become more similar politically, because options available give them less incentives to choose differently. The model proposed in this section allows to put these competing claims to an empirical test. If the second account is correct, then the second-order interaction effects of social-group membership, parties' political positions, and time will be empirically indistinguishable from zero. However, if the first account is correct, then second-order interaction effects will be substantially different from zero and will have a different sign than the first-order interaction effects of social-group membership and parties' political positions. In the following section I describe the data used to test these competing hypotheses.

3. Data and Operationalisation

It is the aim of the present paper to apply the model presented in the previous section to the question

whether changes in the relations between social cleavages and voting can be attributed to changes in parties' policy positions or whether they occur independently from them. I will now turn to the data used to address this question.

Policy positions of parties and candidates may play a central role for many political science research questions, but data on such positions are relatively hard to come by. For the purpose of this paper, data on policy positions are needed that do not only capture positions at a specific point in time,³ but track them over a longer period. Given this requirement, the data produced and published by the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006) are the only option. The CMP data are based on an impressive collection of texts produced by most of the major parties of almost all established democracies since World War II. These texts are mainly party manifestos, but in some instances also press releases or public speeches on occasion of an upcoming general election, in which parties or their main candidates declare their policy objectives. In their published version, the CMP data consist of the percentages of the respective texts' "quasi-sentences" that deal with 57 policy objectives.

The assignment of "quasi-sentences" to policy objectives has been justified by CMP authors (Budge et al., 2001) with the "valency and saliency theory" of party competition. This theory holds that competing parties "talk past each other" by selectively emphasising political goals for which they successfully claim competence (Budge and Farlie, 1983). But if all political issues addressed in party manifestos were, as this theory seems to suggest, "valence issues" rather than "position issues" (Stokes, 1973), then the CMP data would be unsuitable for the reconstruction of parties' policy positions. Yet the CMP data have several times been used for this even by core authors of the Comparative Manifestos Project (Budge et al., 1987, 2001). Further, the CMP data contain political goals that can hardly be seen as pure "valence issue" objectives, for example objectives like nationalisation of business enterprises or the protection of freedom of enterprise. Of course, the salience of policy objectives in party manifestos will be influenced by the urgency of certain problems in the policy area to which they belong, that is, policy objectives in the area of economic policy will gain salience if a country faces

³Expert surveys that have been used to pinpoint parties' policy positions (e.g. Castles and Mair, 1984; Huber and Inglehart, 1995; Benoit and Laver, 2006) generally apply only to one point in time or a limited period.

economic problems, but parties may differ in terms of which economic objectives they emphasise rather than others. That is, the emphasis given to a specific policy objective reflects both the saliency of the policy area to which it belongs and the position that it represents *within* this policy area (Laver, 2001). For this reason, I take the *relative* emphasis of policy objectives as point of departure, which is the emphasis relative to other objectives within the same policy area, e.g. economic policy. This relative emphasis is then interpreted as reflecting the proximity of the party’s policy position to this objective and the distance to other objectives. It is operationalised by the ratio of the text percentage of a specific objective to the sum of the text percentages of all objectives that belong to the same policy area.

Given measures of distances between parties’ policy positions and specific policy objectives covered by the CMP data, it is possible to use metric multidimensional unfolding (Schönemann, 1970) to reconstruct positions both of parties and of policy objectives within the respective policy spaces. However, since there is no mathematically consistent linear relation between distances and emphases (see e.g. van der Brug, 2001), I use a non-linear transformation as point of departure of the unfolding procedure that rests on the assumption that the relation between a distance d and a relative emphasis r is $r \propto \exp(-d^2)$, which implies that the emphasis declines with the distance and increases with the proximity between a parties’ position and a policy objective.

Following Laver and Garry (2000) I examine two different policy areas, economic policy and (non-economic) societal policy. The position of policy objectives that result from the unfolded space of these policy areas are shown in Table 1. The dimension characterising the space of economic policy can be interpreted as the traditional left/right dimension contrasting interventionist with “laissez-faire” positions, as becomes obvious from the positions of objectives such as “free enterprise,” “controlled economy,” and “nationalisation.” Although Laver and Garry (2000) assume the spaces of both policy areas to be unidimensional, unfolding analysis suggests the the space of societal policy has at least two dimensions.⁴ The first dimension can be interpreted as a libertarian/authoritarian dimension. It contrasts objectives such as enhancing (participatory) democracy to objectives that relate to state authority, such as “law and order” and positive mentions of a “national way of life.” The second dimension can

⁴The unfolding solution supports up to four dimensions, yet only the first two dimensions allow, after a suitable orthogonal rotation, for a substantive interpretation.

Table 1: Positions of policy goals on the economic left/right, libertarian/authoritarian, and modern/traditionalist dimensions

(a) Economic policy domain		
	econdim	
Free enterprise	1.59	
Economic orthodoxy	1.36	
Incentives	0.67	
Market regulation	-1.02	
Economic planning	-1.24	
Nationalisation	-1.40	
Controlled economy	-1.46	
(b) Non-economic policy domain		
	authlib	tradmod
Law and order	0.83	-0.17
National way of life pos.	0.45	-0.56
National way of life neg.	0.03	-0.29
Traditional morality pos.	-0.13	1.56
Traditional morality neg.	-0.02	-0.20
Democracy	-1.16	-0.34

The entries in the tables are positions of policy goals reconstructed on the basis of a metric multidimensional unfolding procedure of transformed CMP data. The CMP data cover mainly only established democracies. For the analysis reported here, parties from countries are covered for which it is expected that they share the political dimensions of party competition specific for major established democracies. A list of these countries can be found in the web appendix.

be interpreted as a modern/traditional dimension, which contrasts the objective of protecting or promoting “traditional morals” or traditional ways of life to most of the other objectives in this area. While most theories of political divisions over societal policy assume its space to be one-dimensional (Flanagan, 1987; Inglehart, 1977; Middendorp, 1989; Laver and Garry, 2000), this finding is consistent with the existence of two “Rights,” a secular-conservative or nationalist one, exemplified by British and Scandinavian conservative parties, and a traditionalist one, exemplified by Christian democrat parties in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands (von Beyme, 1985; Ware, 1996; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967).

I complement these data on parties’ policy positions with data from the Eurobarometer on vote intentions and social positions of citizens from several Western European countries. While in later surveys of the Eurobarometer much more countries were included, this analysis considers only countries that were covered by the Eurobarometer since the earliest surveys of 1973, that is, Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and West Germany. Thus it is possible to make comparisons simultaneously across countries and across time, thereby maximising the number of

countries *and* the number of time points. That way the statistical power for identifying *general* trends is maximised. If there are any general trends characterising the politics of Western advanced industrial/post-industrial countries, they should show up in a cumulated data set built from these series of surveys.

Two dimensions of social division are considered in this paper: social class and religious vs. secular orientations. The operationalisation of these divisions follows Elff (2007), that is, class is measured based on respondents' occupations or those of their households' main bread-winner, or if respondents or main bread-winners are retired or unemployed, on the last occupation of respondents or main bread-winners.⁵ The Eurobarometer occupation categories are grouped into manual workers, intermediate class (routine non-manual and qualified employees), service class, self-employed, and farmers. Farmers, however, are excluded from the analyses because their numbers in the Eurobarometer samples is too small to allow for reliable results on trends. The distinction between religious and secular orientation is measured via respondents' frequency of church attendance. In this paper, I distinguish between those who never attend church, which I also will call "non-churchgoers," those who attend church a few times a year, which I also will call "occasional churchgoers," and those who attend church once a week or more often, which I will also call "weekly-churchgoers."⁶

Until 2002, the Eurobarometer included questions about which party to vote for in an upcoming election. This vote intention forms the main dependent variable in the analyses of this paper. Respondents' occupations and/or their head of household are included in almost all Eurobarometer surveys. Questions on church attendance appear considerably less often in the Eurobarometer, the last time in 1996 and 1999. Unfortunately, these surveys do not include questions on vote intentions. While the impact of class on vote intention can be tracked up to 2002, it is possible to track the impact of church attendance only up to 1994.

4. Results

Based on data described in the previous section and the model discussed earlier, it is now possible to ex-

⁵The details on how respondents' and main bread-winners' occupations are combined into the class variable are described in the web appendix.

⁶The Eurobarometer surveys distinguish between those who attend church once a week and those who do so even more often. The latter category has very low frequency, so these two categories are collapsed.

amine which of the two competing accounts of the development in the relation between social structure and voting behaviour finds more empirical support. The two competing accounts correspond to estimates of the first- and second-order interactions present in a discrete-choice model fitted to a combination of CMP data on parties' policy positions and Eurobarometer data on individuals' social characteristics and their vote intentions, where parties' positions taken on occasion of the election of the current year or the last preceding election are matched to the parties in the choice sets of the individuals, that is, to the answer categories of the survey questions about respondents' vote intentions.⁷

If changes in the impact of class and church attendance on voting behaviour can be solely attributed to changes in parties' policy positions, second-order interactions of class with parties' positions and time and of church attendance with parties' positions and time will be statistically indistinguishable from zero. Conversely, if there is a decline in the impact of class and of church attendance on vote intention that occurs independently from changes in the political positions of parties, estimates of the second-order interactions will be substantially different from zero and have opposite sign than the first-order interactions of class, church attendance, and time, respectively, with parties' political positions.

Of course, the discrete choice model as applied to Eurobarometer data on individuals' class, church attendance, and vote intentions and on CMP data on parties' political positions is a little more complex than the somewhat simplified exposition in the second section of this paper. Instead of just one dummy variable distinguishing between two groups, it contains up to two sets of dummy variables, three dummy variables that distinguish between manual workers, the intermediate class, the service class and the self-employed and two dummy variables that distinguish between non-churchgoers, occasional churchgoers and weekly-churchgoers. In addition, in the abstract exposition the time variable was not specified in terms of range and unit of measurement. In the present application the time variable is constructed such that it has length one and is centred on the midpoint of the period of observation. In case of the model discussed next, the period of observation runs from 1975 to 1994. Consequently, first- and second-order interaction effects that involve the time variable represent the total change of log-odds and log-odds ratios, respectively,

⁷Parties on whose positions no data exists in the CMP data are dropped from the individuals' choice sets, yet these are mostly minor parties with very limited support. The inclusion of random effects into the model also helps avoid distortions caused by excluding these parties from the choice sets.

while first-order interaction effects that do not involve the time variable represent log-odds at the midpoint of the observation period.

Table 2 shows estimates⁸ for the discrete choice model of the impact of parties policy positions on vote intentions of individuals from different classes and with varying frequencies of church-attendance and of changes in this impact. A comparison of estimated first-order interaction effects of class with parties' positions on the three dimensions of policy positions reveals that classes differ especially in their reactions to parties' positions on the economic left/right scale. This is consistent with the notion that lower classes prefer socialist or social democratic parties, which differ from liberal, conservative, and other parties by their positions on economic policy. A comparison of estimated first-order interaction effects of church attendance with parties' positions on the three dimensions of policy positions makes also clear that religiosity especially affects how voters react to parties' positions on the modern/traditionalist dimension. This result corroborates the finding reported earlier that there are two dimensions of societal policy, one related to the stance towards the authority of the state and one related to the bindingness of traditional morals and values, where this second dimension, rather than the first, distinguishes Christian democrat parties from other parties.⁹

The estimates of the second-order interaction effects do not completely support the notion of stability, yet they do not lend much support to the notion of a decline in the impact of social cleavages on electoral behaviour. Second-order interaction effects of class with economic left/right positions and time have the same sign as the corresponding first interaction effects of class with economic left/right positions. Similarly, second-order interaction effects of class with modernist/traditionalist positions and time have the same sign as first-order interaction effects of these positions with class alone. There-

⁸The estimates are based on the penalised quasi-likelihood approximation to the maximum likelihood procedure (Breslow and Clayton, 1993). P-values for the random-effect variances are computed based on Lagrange-Multiplier tests of the null hypothesis that these variances are zero (Lin, 1997). Given the fact that the cluster sizes of the random effects are quite large, the approximation can be expected to work well enough not to prevent misled inferences. To reduce the computational cost (or rather, to make estimation feasible at all) without losing information the data are compressed into covariate classes. That is, the minimal sufficient statistics of the choices within covariate classes are used for computations. For details see the web appendix. The estimation was conducted by software written in R (R Development Core Team, 2008), which will be made publicly available after publication of the paper.

⁹See also the extended discussion of party families' policy positions in the web appendix.

Table 2: Class, church-attendance and voters' responses to parties' positions on the economic left/right, authoritarian/liberal, and traditionalist/modern dimensions in Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and West Germany, 1975-1994.

	Econ. L/R	Lib./auth.	Mod./trad.
<i>Coefficients</i>			
Squared effect	-0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Linear effect	-0.35*** (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.17*** (0.03)
× Intermediate/ Manual worker	0.30*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.07*** (0.02)
× Service class/ Manual worker	0.56*** (0.02)	0.09** (0.03)	-0.12*** (0.02)
× Self-employed/ Manual worker	0.62*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)
× Occasional/Non- churchgoer	0.22*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.22*** (0.02)
× Weekly/Non- churchgoer	0.18*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.79*** (0.02)
× Time	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.08)	-0.03 (0.07)
× Time × Intermediate/ Manual worker	0.03 (0.04)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.10* (0.04)
× Time × Service class/ Manual worker	0.10 (0.07)	-0.19* (0.08)	-0.16* (0.07)
× Time × Self-employed /Manual worker	0.18** (0.06)	-0.26*** (0.07)	-0.20*** (0.05)
× Time × Occasional/ Non-churchgoer	0.13*** (0.04)	-0.18*** (0.05)	0.10** (0.04)
× Time × Weekly/ Non-churchgoer	0.24*** (0.06)	-0.60*** (0.07)	0.32*** (0.05)
<i>Variance parameters</i>			
Party	1.13*** (0.00)		
Party × EB wave	0.11*** (0.00)		
<i>Model summary</i>			
Dispersion	1.69		
Deviance	19992.7		
N	89242		

The entries are coefficients and variance parameters (with standard errors in parentheses) of a conditional logit model of party choice (vote intention) with random effects. Model estimates were computed by a penalized quasi-likelihood procedure (Breslow and Clayton, 1993). P-values of the variance parameters are based on Lagrange-multiplier tests of a fixed-effects-only model. Data come from Eurobarometer surveys and from the Comparative Manifestos Project. * = statistically significant at 5 per cent level; ** = statistically significant at 1 per cent level; *** = statistically significant at 0.1 per cent level.

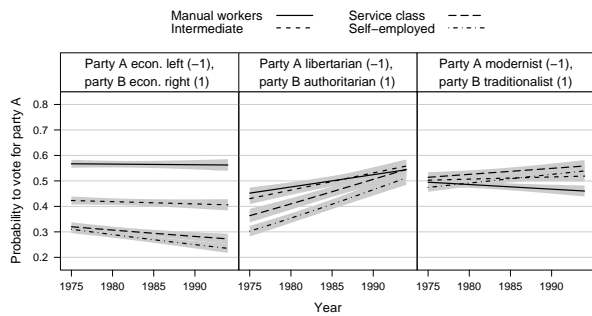


Figure 1: Predicted support among occasional churchgoers for a for a hypothetical party A that competes with party B broken down by class, 1975-1994. In each panel, parties differ from one another only on one dimension. Predictions are based on the model in Table 2. Shaded areas denote 95 per cent confidence bands.

fore they point into the direction of an *increase* in class differences rather than of a decrease. But not all of these second-order interaction effects are statistically significant. With regards to church-attendance, a comparison of the signs of second-order with first-order interactions leads to a similar conclusion. Second-order interaction effects with economic left/right dimension and time and with modernist/traditionalist positions and time have the same signs than corresponding first-order interaction effects involving church-attendance. This points into the direction of increasing rather than decreasing differences related to church-attendance. The notion of declining social divisions nevertheless seems to find some support with regards to the libertarian/authoritarian dimension. Estimated second-order interaction effects of class and of church-attendance with time and parties' positions on this dimension are all statistically significant and have different signs than the corresponding first-order interaction effects. Since some of the second-order interaction effects are larger in absolute size than the first-order interaction effects, especially if church-attendance is involved, this could also indicate a kind of realignment instead of a dealignment.

Models containing complex interaction effects are not always easy to grasp. This is especially true for discrete choice models, where the dependent variable is not just a set of metric values but a set of choices among alternatives. The interpretation of the interaction effects will become more obvious by their visualisation.¹⁰ Such a visualisation is given by Figures 1 and 2.

Each panel in Figures 1 and 2 plots the support that one of two hypothetical parties A and B gets from mem-

bers of various social groups, with 95 per cent confidence bands marked by shaded areas. The leftmost panels in both figures, entitled "economic left/right," are based on the assumption that party A has position -1 on this dimension and 0 on the remaining dimensions, while party B has position 1 on this dimension and 0 on the remaining dimensions. In the middle panels it is supposed that party A has position -1 on the liberal/authoritarian dimension while party B has position 1 on this dimension, both parties scoring again zero on the other two dimensions. In the rightmost panels it is assumed that party A has position -1 and party B has position 1 on the modern/traditional dimension, but have a zero position on the other two dimensions. That is, party A is either the leftist, libertarian, or modernist party, respectively, and party B is either the rightist, authoritarian, or traditionalist party, while both party differ only along the indicated political dimension. These settings allow to isolate the effects of parties' positions on the respective dimensions.

Figure 1 shows how such an either purely (economically) leftist, libertarian, or modernist party A would fare over time relative to an either purely rightist, authoritarian, or traditionalist party B in terms of voting support from members of the four classes who go to church only a few times a year, that is, who fall in the middle category of church-attendance. It becomes obvious that a hypothetical leftist party A would lose support in the service class and among the self-employed, whereas its support among the manual workers and in the intermediate class would be remain almost constant. Consequently, class differences in support for a party that is leftist exclusively in economic terms relative to an economically rightist party, will not decrease but *increase*. A purely libertarian party A, however, would gain increasing support from all four classes, where class differences would decrease, because the increase in support is the strongest where the support is the lowest to begin with. A purely modernist party A would gain slightly among all classes except for the manual working class, which again would lead to an increase in class differences.

Figure shows 2 how the support for an either purely rightist, authoritarian, or traditionalist party B would be develop relative to an either purely (economically) leftist, libertarian, or modernist party A among regular churchgoers, occasional churchgoers, and non-churchgoers from the intermediate class. A purely rightist party would lose among the non-churchgoers, and gain among the occasional churchgoers to the degree that its support reaches that of the regular churchgoers, which would remain almost constant. A purely authoritarian

¹⁰I am indebted to one of the reviewers of an earlier draft of this manuscript for suggesting me this.

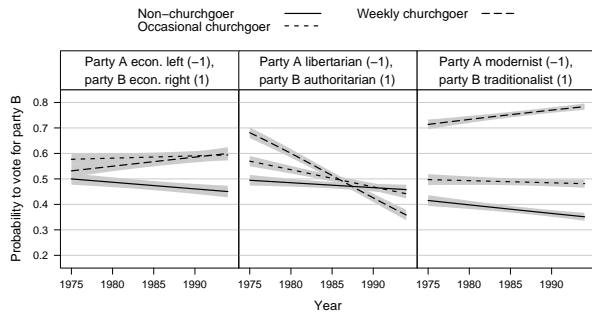


Figure 2: Predicted support in the intermediate class for a for a hypothetical party A that competes with party B broken down by church-attendance, 1975-1994. In each panel, parties differ from one another only on one dimension. Predictions are based on the model in Table 2. Shaded areas denote 95 per cent confidence bands.

party would lose mostly among the regular churchgoers, to the degree that a support that was the highest of all groups to a level that is the lowest of all groups. Support among the occasional churchgoers would drop to a level of support among the non-churchgoers, which declines only slightly. As the rightmost panel in Figure 2 shows, the church-attendance groups would differ the most in terms of their support for a traditionalist party and their differences would even increase over time as the party would gain among the regular churchgoers and lose among the non-churchgoers.

As mentioned in the previous section, the availability of data on respondents' church-attendance is much scarcer than that of data on respondents' vote intentions and occupations. Given that data on class voting are available until 2002 and the fact that class voting plays a more central role than religious/secular divisions in the debate about a decline of social cleavages in voting behaviour, one may ask whether the claim of a decline in class voting will find more support if the period of observation is longer than until 1994. I address this question by presenting estimates of a model that does not contain church-attendance but that is fitted to data from the period from 1975 to 2002. These estimates are shown in Table 3.

The estimates shown in Table 3 lead to conclusions with regards to the development of class voting similar to those derived from Table 2. The only differences are that in this table none of the second-order interaction effects of class with time and parties' economic left/right positions is statistically significant and that one of the first-order interaction effects of class with parties' position on the libertarian/authoritarian dimension has a different sign than in Table 2. What these estimates would imply for the development of the support for an purely

Table 3: Class and voters' responses to parties' positions on the economic left/right, authoritarian/liberal, and traditionalist/modern dimensions in Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, and West Germany, 1975-2002.

	Econ. L/R	Lib./auth.	Mod./trad.
<i>Coefficients</i>			
Squared effect	-0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)
Linear effect	-0.25*** (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.04* (0.02)
× Intermediate/ Manual worker	0.26*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)
× Service class/ Manual worker	0.52*** (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.11*** (0.02)
× Self-employed/ Manual worker	0.56*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.01)
× Time	-0.03 (0.07)	0.06 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.06)
× Time × Intermediate/ Manual worker	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.12*** (0.04)
× Time × Service class/ Manual worker	0.01 (0.06)	-0.22** (0.07)	-0.19** (0.06)
× Time × Self-employed/ Manual worker	0.07 (0.05)	-0.30*** (0.06)	-0.25*** (0.05)
<i>Variance parameters</i>			
Party	1.09*** (0.00)		
Party × EB wave	0.13*** (0.00)		
<i>Model summary</i>			
Dispersion	1.58		
Deviance	14253.7		
N	202079		

The entries are coefficients and variance parameters (with standard errors in parentheses) of a conditional logit model of party choice (vote intention) with random effects. Model estimates were computed by a penalized quasi-likelihood procedure (Breslow and Clayton, 1993). P-values of the variance parameters are based on Lagrange-multiplier tests of a fixed-effects-only model. Data come from Eurobarometer surveys and from the Comparative Manifestos Project. * = statistically significant at 5 per cent level; ** = statistically significant at 1 per cent level; *** = statistically significant at 0.1 per cent level.

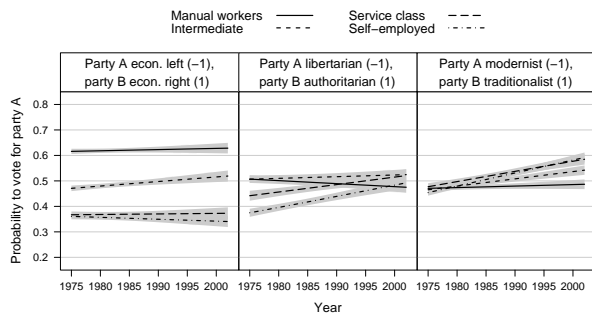


Figure 3: Predicted support for a for a hypothetical party *A* that competes with party *B* broken down by class, 1975-1994. In each panel, parties differ from one another only on one dimension. Predictions are based on the model in Table 3. Shaded areas denote 95 per cent confidence bands.

economically leftist party *A*, purely libertarian party *A* or modernist party *A*, that competes with a purely economically rightist, authoritarian or traditionalist party *B*, respectively, is shown in Figure 3.

Again one does not find that the classes become less polarised in terms of their support for an economically leftist party relative to an economically rightist party. They seem to converge in their support for a libertarian party and they seem to become more polarised (but only slightly so) in their support for a modernist party.

In sum, neither of the two accounts of electoral change gets complete support by the findings reported in this section. The effects of parties' positions on class differences and on differences related to church-attendance are not constant. That is, some of the changes in the patterns of voting behaviour may occur independently from parties' changes in policy positions. Yet the notion that a general decline of social cleavages occurs does not get support either. The only aspect of the findings consistent with an expectation of a decline of social cleavages is that classes converge in their support for libertarian parties vs. authoritarian parties (other positions of the parties held constant). Yet class differences in this respect were only modest to begin with. No convergence occurs, however, with respect to dimensions of political divisions between parties that have the strongest impact on divisions between social groupings in terms of voting behaviour. To the contrary: Classes increasingly differ in the way they react to parties' positions on the economic left/right dimension and groups distinguished by church-attendance increasingly differ in the way they react to parties' positions on the modernist/traditionalist dimension. That is, if one focuses on those political divisions between parties that matter the most for the specific social cleavages, one has

to conclude that traditional social cleavages neither have lost nor are losing their impact on electoral behaviour.

5. Conclusion

In the present paper I set out to make a contribution to the debate about the existence and nature of a long-term change in the relation between social structure and voting. Somewhat over-accentuated, the two polar positions in this debate can be rephrased as follows: (1) Social divisions, from which modern party systems had emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, are in a irreversible decline — if not in all of their social aspects, then at least in their political consequences. The decline in the social pattern of voting is mainly the outcome of large-scale long-term changes in Western societies associated with processes such as post-industrialisation, secularisation, value change, and individualisation (Inglehart and Rabier, 1986; Dogan, 1995; Lipset, 1999; Dalton, 2002). If voters from different social groups or strata become more similar politically, they do so because they become more similar socially. (2) Voters can decide politically as they are socially only to the degree that available political options reflect or appeal to the voters' specific values or economic interests. If voters from different social groups or strata become more similar in their choices, it is because the alternatives become more similar — parties become more similar in their appeals to the voters' values and economic interests. Since a political convergence of parties' political positions is a joint outcome of decisions of each of the major parties in a country, the pace and direction of change in the relation between social structure and voting behaviour is by no means irreversible and also contingent on the strategies of parties in each democratic country (Mair et al., 1999; Evans et al., 1999; Evans, 2000; Elff, 2007). Of course, these two stylized positions present black and white in a debate that in fact shows all shades of grey, but nevertheless they help to situate the results of this paper and to point to possible implications.

The results of this paper add very much plausibility to the second of the two stylized positions. If the alternatives that voters face are not sorted into fixed categories with pre-assigned labels, but the variability of parties' political positions is taken into account, the inter-group differences of vote intentions show stability rather than a decline in the relevance of social divisions. Citizens that differ in social class differ especially with respect to their responses to parties' positions on a economic left/right dimension: Respondents of manual-worker background tend to favour parties relatively leftist on this dimension while voters with ser-

vice class or self-employed background tend to favour parties relatively to the right. Church-attendance is especially relevant for voters' responses to parties' positions on a traditionalist/modern dimension: Weekly-churchgoers prefer parties with relative traditionalist positions, while non-churchgoers prefer parties with relative modern/secular positions. Of course, such findings will not surprise any participant of the debate about changes in the patterns of voting. But what should surprise those that attribute such changes to a decline of social divisions *per se* is that the differences just mentioned persist over time. So far, the results of this paper corroborate and generalise findings reported by Evans et al. (1999) and vindicate suggestions made by Mair et al. (1999) and Evans (2000) and speculations by Elff (2007).

While it turns out that some changes in the patterns of voters' responses to parties' political positions do occur, these changes concern political dimensions that are in a certain sense marginal for the social divisions in focus here: For example, classes become somewhat more similar in terms of their responses to parties' positions on the libertarian/authoritarian dimension. This finding may indicate that some sort of value change as claimed by Inglehart (1977) indeed takes place in the middle classes. However a finding such as that the pattern of how church-attendance is related to the support for libertarian vs. authoritarian reverses is quite difficult to account for in this way. It may rather be a side-effect of unchanging vote-intentions of hard-core religious or secular people: Parties' positions on the modernist/traditionalist dimension may be so salient for these voters that changes along other dimensions are just ignored, which leads to an apparent change in the responses to positions on these dimensions. Unfortunately, the model employed in this paper does not allow to identify such side-effects. A further refinement of this model may lead to an answer to the question about such possible side-effects, but since it leads out of the focus of this paper, I refer it to further research.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the reviewers of the previous version for their comments, which very much helped in improving the manuscript.

Major parts of the pooled data set used in the analyses of this article were compiled during my work on the research project "Political Interest, Engagement, and Affect" conducted 1998-2000 at the Mannheim Center for European Social Research (MZES), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG Grant DE 630/2-1), see

van Deth and Elff (2000). I would like to thank Jan W. van Deth, the director of the research project, for allowing me to use the data for this publication. Further thanks go to Evi Scholz from the Centre of European Survey Studies (ZEUS) at MZES for support in obtaining the data and Peter Kotzian for assistance in constructing the pooled data set. Data on later Eurobarometer surveys were obtained from the former Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (ZA) at University of Cologne (now GESIS), with helpful support from Meinhard Moschner, which is also gratefully acknowledged.

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