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AGENCY AND THE STRUCTURE OF PARTY COMPETITION:
ALIGNMENT, STABILITY AND THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ELITES

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Alignment, Stability and the Role of Political Elites*

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Abstract

The study of cleavages focuses primarily on constraints imposed by socio-demographic factors. While scholars have not ignored the agency of political elites, such scholarship remains fragmented among sub-fields and lacks a coherent conceptual framework. This article explores both temporal stability and positional alignments linking vote choice with socio-demographic characteristics, values and group identity to distinguish among particular kinds of structural constraints. On the basis of those distinctions, it identifies various methods by which elites reshape structures, and it links those to a broader framework that allows more comprehensive research connecting political agents and structural constraints in the electoral realm.

Keywords

Political parties, cleavages, structure, agency, public opinion

Introduction*

The study of the structure of political competition in Western Europe is a mature field, with well-articulated questions, extensive data, and finely-honed methods for finding answers. It is safe to guess that the coming decades will bring more data and more advanced methods and allow for even more precise answers. But even scholars who find little other common ground agree that analysis must not stop with the voting behavior and that we must pay close attention to the relationship between structures and the actions of political agents. Evans calls “the institutional structuring of social cleavages” the “most interesting arena for [future] developments”(Evans 2010).

Calls for research on the role of political agency are not new. In fact they surface with notable regularity from prominent scholars (Sartori 1969; Urwin 1973; Zuckerman 1975; Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Mair 1997; Colomer and Puglisi 2005). Zuckerman’s 1975 work on cleavage, for example, explicitly invites scholars to develop and test “Hypotheses examining the independent affects of elite attitudes and behavior”(248). Although a few scholars have taken up Zuckerman’s challenge, their works have remained disconnected. Unlike those who emphasize structure, those who emphasize agency have not yet developed common vocabularies or theoretical frameworks for distinguishing between circumstances in which elite choices merely reflect social pressure from those in which choice is a decisive element in shaping outcomes. This article does not itself answer Zuckerman’s call for more empirical research regarding the role of agency, but it does address the barriers to such research. It offers a framework of party competition which integrates agency with structure, balancing the two and elaborating their interconnection. The framework provides a guide for identifying various opportunities for elite agency at various levels of analysis, and allows us to bring together findings from a variety of scholarly specializations and make specific suggestions for future research.

Structures, Agents and “Cleavage”

A venerable tradition in the social science distinguishes between structure-oriented and agency-oriented approaches, and some scholars even maintain that the agency-structure debate is the most important question of social sciences (Giddens 1986; Dessler 1989; Carlsnaes 1992; Hay 1995; McAnulla 2002; Archer 2003). The claim that structure and agency are two sides of the same coin, coexisting in a dialectic relationship is a useful corrective to reductionist approaches that regard political elites as “great men” on the one hand or mere superstructure on the other, but it yields few practical tools for researchers investigating empirical political phenomena. Having accepted the dialectic, we need a systematic understanding of the circumstances and mechanisms that give elites more or less freedom to shape the structures.

Lipset and Rokkan (1967), though often associated more closely with structural approaches, actively considered the role of agency on long-lasting political oppositions, especially through organizational resources, coalition-building, and mobilization-strategies. They did not, however, offer a systematic way of analyzing these phenomena or determined their theoretical status vis-à-vis socio-structural processes. In the years that followed, “sociological” analyses became increasingly sophisticated, but these efforts rarely addressed the role of political actors in shaping

* This is an extended version of an article that will be published in *West European Politics*, volume 33, number 3, 2010.

or undermining the structural relationships. Other scholars took a “voluntaristic turn,” and portrayed parties as ‘persuaders’ rather than ‘translators,’ but in seeking to combat what Panebianco called “sociological prejudice” (1988) these efforts rarely incorporated studies of mass political behavior. Later works by Przeworski and Sprague (1986), Mair (1997; 2001) and Colomer and Puglisi (2005) have done much to reinterpret independence of parties and their coalition choices in affecting the stability and change of the party systems and the broader social and cultural environments, though they too have stopped short of providing a catalogue of elite impacts on the social basis of party politics. Other recent related developments in political science have also had surprisingly little impact on the empirical study of political competition. Cleavage studies have been only marginally (if at all) influenced by the Machiavelli-Schumpeter-Riker (1986) line of elitist approaches or by constructivism, in spite of the former’s success in political theory and the latter’s in movement- and nationalism- studies. Naïve bottom-up models have been undermined by the advances of constructivism, but standard cleavage studies have not at all been influenced by these developments.

The lack of integration between theoretical elite-oriented analyses and the methods of political sociology is unfortunate. Elite level studies of political parties demonstrate that party leaders devote considerable effort to shaping political (and non-political) preferences, forming and elaborating social identities, linking interests, values, cultural milieus and social networks, creating arenas for group-interactions, and widening emotional distances between their own voters and rival parties. It is unlikely that all of these efforts are futile. Nor is it likely that all of the effort is socially determined. Indeed, as the following sections demonstrate, there is extensive but widely scattered sociological evidence for an understanding of parties as independent variables in the shaping of competitive structures. A full assessment of the relative roles of agency and structure must begin, however, with the conceptual refinement at the structural end of the equation.

The Structure of Structure

“Structure” as indicated by its roots in the Latin word for “habitation” and “building” is a metaphor with at least two different aspects: a temporal one involving endurance and a spatial one involving fixed arrangement of parts. While these two dimensions frequently appear together—a structure with well-joined seams is more likely to remain upright—it is also possible to understand them separately. Structures may possess a rigid connection but lack permanence. The structure of a tent, for example, holds the canvas aloft but is easily dismantled. On the other hand, structures may also endure for long periods without fixed relationships among its parts. The elements in Alexander Calder’s kinetic sculptures, for example, offer a striking example of components that remain connected to one another even as the nature of their relationship shifts. We suggest using “stability” to refer to the temporal structure—continuity from one time period to the next—and using “alignment” to refer to the positional relationship—the tendency of one characteristic to appear in tandem with another.

This distinction between the temporal and the positional is fundamental to disagreements over political change during the last fifty years, but it is a distinction that often goes unnoticed. Indeed the terms that initially defined the field in the 1960’s—and have held an almost hypnotic hold over researchers ever since—are metaphors that implicitly link endurance with positional rigidity: “cleavage” began as geological term for cracks in rock and “frozen” party systems evoke large blocs of ice. New parties and new patterns emerging in Western Europe in the 1970’s and 1980’s

caused scholars to question the alignment and stability emphasized by the cleavage approach,¹ but the critiques differed significantly among themselves depending largely on the degree to which they focused on the positional or the temporal elements of structure.

A critique of both elements emerged in the scholarly literature that focused on *dealignment*,² whose advocates identified weakness in *both* the stability and the strength of past alignments. Not only did they find that past alignments had weakened, but they found few signs of new, strong or enduring relationships emerging in their place (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Other approaches emphasized the erosion of either temporal or positional structure but not of both. Advocates of the *realignment* approach note the weakening of old patterns of relationships among parties and between parties and socio-demographic groups, but find that new patterns appearing to take their place (though they disagree about their characteristics and their strength) (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart 1984; Kriesi 1998; Evans 1999; Kitschelt and Rehm 2004). Another approach emphasizes the role of habit, socialization, party identification in establishing the *inertia* of a particular pattern of political behavior Van der Eijk, Franklin, Mackie and Valen, for example, argue that political preference may endure even when it no longer depended on positional ties to socio-demographics or ideology: “longstanding loyalties to political parties do not always require the underpinning of social cleavages... In such a situation individuals may still seemingly retain identifications with established cleavage-based parties, but these would increasingly rest upon inertia and be subject to change without notice” (1992: 421). Table 1 arrays these approaches in terms of the temporal and positional aspects of structure. The erosion of positional structure (voters who once voted for parties because of their socio-demographic position or values no longer do) shifts a case to the bottom in the Table 1, while an erosion of stability (voters whose votes were once predictable now change their minds) shifts a case toward the right.

Table 1. Typology of “structure” as used in social science discussions of cleavage

		Temporal Structure: Stability Relationship between past and present political behavior:	
		Yes	No
Positional Structure: Alignment Relationship between political behavior and particular social characteristics	Yes	Cleavage	Realignment
	No	Inertia	Dealignment

Having established this framework we must look more closely at the way in which its component elements—positional alignment and temporal stability—involve the interplay of the political and social elements.

¹ This is of course a very “minimalist” definition of cleavage, “thicker” definitions (e.g. Bartolini and Mair’s) include socio-demographic characteristics, values and various aspects of political behavior.

² The term ‘dealignment’ is not ideally suited to the phenomenon described here—because it suggests process instead of a condition—but the more suitable term “non-alignment” already has another meaning.

The Political

We use both the terms alignment and stability with regard to political behavior³ but that term itself requires clarification. Scholarly literature on the behavior tends to identify it in the very narrow sense of “voting.” While parties are vitally important to political life in most countries, the political manifestation of conflicts may involve much more than a vote choice. “Party,” furthermore, is not as obvious as it might seem since the boundaries of parties are typically unstable and unclear, complicated by politically-active social movements, non-governmental organizations, party splits and mergers, cooperation agreements and a variety of other institutional interplay. An approach that looks at any one element (or even one type of element) of political orientation will often record greater levels of fragility or instability than an approach that looks at broader, if less precise, categories of “sides” or “camps” or “blocs” which may be less prone to rapid change (Mair 2006). Neither category of analysis is *a priori* better than the other, but those who attend only to one or the other may miss critical aspects of political development. The choice, of course, depends on context: in some countries citizens are “politicized”, in others they are “particized”, and these differences may apply not only across party systems but across parties and blocs as well. But in all cases party choice must be understood as residing within a broader and more diffuse political orientation and allegiance, which usually changes far less quickly or idiosyncratically than the roster of available parties.

The Social

Traditions of scholarly inquiry differ regarding what social characteristics are worthy of attention when considering the relationship between the social and the political. In dealing with the relationship between society and politics, three useful but overlapping categories commonly emerge:

Socio-demographics. Most scholars writing about the relationship between structure and politics focus on the degree to which voting varies with particular socio-demographic characteristics. Such analysis is well-established but not without controversy. Most scholarship explores the relationship between political choice and a variety of major characteristics such as region, ethnicity, religion, and class that correspond to some degree to the cleavages defined by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Although numerous analyses demonstrate their decline, the traditional categories continue to play a small but meaningful role in most countries, sometimes through intermediate variables such as region (Knutsen 2010), and studies also suggest an increasingly consequential role for other socio-demographic categories such as education and occupation that played only a minor role in the Lipset and Rokkan framework (Stubager 2010; Dolezal 2010). Yet although some traditional socio-demographic categories are losing their relevance, it is risky to claim that the overall social content of politics is declining. The debate about this issue will go on for long partly because the advocates of the various approaches begin from different baselines and hold different understandings about what is important. Those who want to predict vote or party preference are prone to see the weakness of socio-demographic characteristics when compared to all other influences. Since the utility of the established categories will almost always be diminished by social change, the vote-predictors are likely to find that any particular

³ This figure depicts this structure at the level of individual citizens, emphasizing the relationship between their party choice and their societal roots and past behaviors. The model is not inapplicable to question of “structure” at the level of party competition. While the specific dynamics are obviously quite different between party-party relationships and voter-party relationships, the same questions of rootedness and stability can be extended to coalition choice (Mair 1997; Mair 2001; Mair 2006).

sociological approach will have a relatively low—and declining—utility. By contrast, since social groups with meaningful political manifestation will always exist—particularly if one conceptualizes social groups partly on the basis of their political behavior—those interested in the political behavior of social groups will usually find significant relationships between political choice and underlying factors.

Values. Scholars of structure often give secondary status to “values,” regarding them either as the product of social structure and therefore epiphenomenal, or as lacking social roots and therefore ephemeral. But in fact values have a role even in the most “bottom-up” approaches. First, some evidence suggests that values may have deep roots in upbringing, personality or even, some hypothesize, in genetics (Kroh 2008; Alford *et al.* 2005). Second, the relationship between the two categories is not one-directional: values may have a significant effect on some socio-demographic categories, influencing education level, career choice, marital status, and residence, among others. Finally, empirical research has shown repeatedly that values can anchor political behavior in a very solid way (Inglehart 1977; Flanagan 1987; Tóka 1998; etc.). It is important, however, to acknowledge a high degree of overlap between values and socio-demographic characteristics which makes it difficult to separate them completely. Religion, for example, may appear as a structure, or as a value or in some cases as both (Van der Brug 2010; Knutsen 2010; Dolezal 2010).

Group Consciousness. Socio-demographic categories may exist not only as units of description but also as collective actors in their own right (not only the “class-in-itself” but also the “class-for-itself”). Bartolini and Mair (1990), who particularly emphasize group identification, link it to the degree of social closure, which corresponds to the lack of mobility across its borders. Early studies showed that the continuous interaction with a politically homogeneous environment is a principal micro-level mechanism behind long term partisan attachments (Berelson *et al.* 1954). There is little doubt in the scholarly literature that traditional group identities, closure and encapsulation declined during the second half of the twentieth century. The apparent collapse in many countries of once significant subcultures—the working class, Catholic, Protestant—is indeed one of the most important developments of 20th century Western European politics and a significant source of doubts about the classical cleavage approach (Franklin 2010). Unfortunately, it is difficult to substantiate claims about the profound individualization of voting behaviour because we lack solid time-series or comparative data on the strength of various group identities and the degree of closure, especially in a post-industrial context. The key to group closure consists of the exposure to relatively homogeneous inputs in areas such as mass media, occupational environment, educational experience, and consumption patterns (Enyedi 2008, Kriesi 2010). The decline of many past sources of closure—exemplified by factory neighborhoods, Catholic parish life and party newspapers—is marked, and newly emerging socio-demographic differences—humanities education vs. engineering-finance-science, state vs. public sector employment, home/car ownership vs. apartment rental/public transport, secure v. precarious employment—do not seem to enforce the same kind of homogeneity. Yet to the extent that these difference overlap with other developments such gated communities and electronically-mediated social networks, they may take on the characteristics of closed environments and offer opportunities for a degree of group-consciousness. Even if the changes do not produce a new kind of socio-demographic closure, changes in technology and social interaction may strengthen the degree of closure within some *value-based* communities and alter the role of socio-demographic homogeneity in producing group consciousness.

Group consciousness may also take on other novel forms. Instead of explicit solidarity among members of a particular category, a common solidarity with another reference group may form the basis of similar political attitudes and behavior. “Other-regarding” preferences may thus

eclipse self-regarding ones. The middle class in many Western societies, for example, is split between those who feel solidarity with immigrants and those who support the native workers whose jobs are said to be threatened by the immigrants. In other cases the divisive issue may involve solidarity with groups in other countries (whether one sides with the Jews or the Arabs in the Middle East, for example). For some groups a common opinion about “others” may be the principal way in which a latent common identity manifests itself.

The Temporal

The interaction between the social and political is complicated enough without adding the element of time. But Heraclitus’ observation about ever-changing rivers applies exceedingly well to political parties: voting for a particular party may mean something very different today than it did a decade ago, parties may change ideology without changing their institutional form, or they may merge and split without changing ideology, and judgments made about individual parties may apply to party blocs. Assessing stability, therefore, requires careful attention to finding the right measure.

The social level introduces other difficulties. One reason for the scholarly emphasis on socio-demographic characteristics discussed above is that they are difficult for individuals to change. Alignments involving socio-demographic characteristics thus become surrogates for temporal stability. But, as noted above, alignment and stability are not the same and it is critically important to separate the definitional aspects of socio-demographic indicators from testable hypotheses about their stability.

In fact, the relationship between alignment and stability is rather complex. The relationship between a voter and a party (or side) may endure even when the voter’s relevant positional characteristics change or when the party decides to appeal to different positional characteristics. Simple habitual voting and family socialization may play a smaller role in transmitting party preference from one generation to the next than it did in the past, but this phenomenon has by no means disappeared, and the erosion in positional alignments actually brings inertial voting patterns into greater relief.

Socio-demographic change introduces further tension between alignment and stability. Parties with a changing voter base face a choice between accommodating the shift by changing the party so as not to offend its habitual voters (and sometimes even their socialized offspring) or by staying consistent to the established party identity and seeking out new voters who fit the profile (Mair 2001); (Kriesi 2010). Social change can thus coexist with voters’ temporal stability—habitual support from some individuals—or their positional alignments—support by certain kinds of people—but not with both.

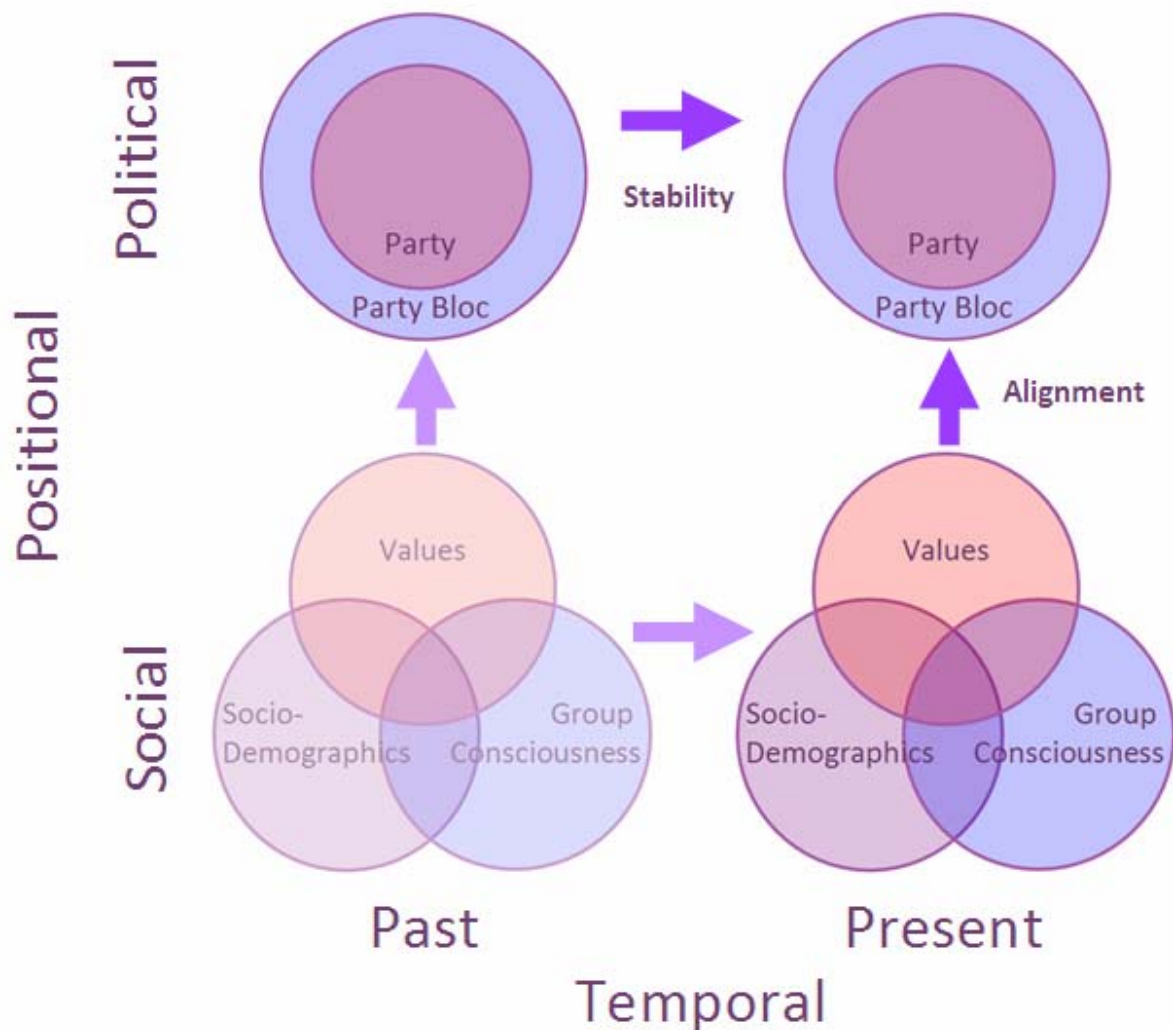
Examples of both patterns are easy to find. Social-democratic parties in many Western European countries moved to the right in economic policies and became more liberal in cultural policies parallel with the embourgeoisement of their original voters. These changes in profile cost in some instances the support of the low-skilled working class *groups*, but in many cases social-democratic parties were able to maintain their relationship to formerly working class voters who moved over time into the middle class. On the other hand, the shifting socio-demographic status of a group may undermine the stability of individual voting patterns while maintaining the positional alignments between socio-demographic position and party choice. In the United States, for example, increasingly middle-class descendents of Irish immigrants shifted to the Republican Party as their wealth increased, resulting in lower temporal stability of individual voting habits, but stable positional alignments between class and party (Gimpel and Cho 2004). Similarly it can

be argued that the secularization of voters in Western Europe caused some Christian Democratic parties to shift away from religious themes, while in other cases, the parties retained their religious focus, maintaining a strong positional relationship with the (shrinking pool of) religious voters but causing the more secular party supporters to break their voting habits and look elsewhere.

Political, Social and Temporal Together

The beauty and usefulness of parsimony are well understood, but political scientists have spent much of the 1990's and 2000's "bringing things back in," and this framework follows in that vein by identifying three separate (yet overlapping) types of social characteristics and adding a distinct time element. Figure 1 offers a rough visual representation of structural elements of political choice at the level of an individual's political choice. Such a choice (whether for specific party or broader bloc) may depend both on the cluster of social characteristics discussed above—socio-demographic characteristics, values and group-consciousness—and on past political choices. Both of these, in turn depend on past social characteristics. Figure 1 clusters the social characteristics into three distinct but overlapping circles as a way of suggesting both the distinctiveness of the categories and their potential interrelationship.

Figure 1. Summary diagram of structural relationships as related to political choice



As a result, Figure 1 departs from the “triangular” (demographic-value-party) model of cleavage used in numerous studies (Bartolini and Mair, Knutsen and Scarbrough, as well as the authors themselves, see Enyedi 2005, Deegan-Krause 2006, 2007). Of course juggling the three elements of demography, values and parties is complicated enough without adding in difficult-to-measure characteristics of group identity, party bloc, and temporal continuity of choice. But a simpler model omits or conflates important factors. Empirical research has focused more on individual parties than broader blocs and has too often used socio-demographic characteristics as surrogates for group consciousness or stability or both. The triangular model (and the ongoing debate about what deserves the name “cleavage”) has at times diverted attention from relationships that endure without a socio-demographic anchor and those which reflect clear positional alignments but do not last for more than one or two elections. As the next section indicates, these limitations have inadvertently restricted and fragmented the study of the role of agency. As the scholarship cited below demonstrates, the answer lies not in omitting key elements from the overall framework but rather in creating specific research designs that control for more elements, and then in assembling a broader understanding from a mosaic of the various tests.

The Roles of Agency

The framework above allows us to identify specific instances of agency and aggregate them according to broader patterns. In this context we refer to agency in terms of significant elite actions in which the actors faced a relatively high degree of choice. In the cases explored below, we are especially interested in cases where agents find room for maneuver but use the opportunity to constrain the space of choice for subsequent agency (often including their own). An actor’s degree of choice is typically constrained in any context, but the degree of constraint differs markedly across the three areas (institutions, the sociological characteristics of political conflicts and the social structure itself). Political elites exert a relatively independent influence over the structure of competition through their control over intra party organization and strategy, coalition choices (and types of coalition choice), through efforts to reshape relationships with voters and voters’ groups, and sometimes through efforts to change the underlying socio-demographic and ideological landscape. Their importance increases in times of crisis, but agents may also help to generate those crises for the opportunities they provide. The evidence of agency in shaping the structures of political competition may thus be found across a wide range of political subfields from party organization and coalition formation to persuasion and framing, from public policy to the study of critical junctures.

Agency in Political Institutions

The role of agency is most straightforward in shaping political institutions, the “supply side” of the political equation. While we can speak of party “families” and see regional similarities among party systems, individual countries’ systems display highly idiosyncratic differences in party system structure, party organization, campaign strategy, and coalition choices which can be traced more easily to elite decisions than to underlying ideological or socio-demographic conditions.

One of the most significant roles that elites play is in establishing the roster of party choices. Even in the Western European context (a stable region according to any international standards) there is far too much variation among the party systems of particular (otherwise similar)

countries⁴ to one could leave out from the calculus elite actions, leadership, and organizational strategies. Countries such as France, Italy and Austria vividly demonstrate the significant role of elites in shaping the menu of electoral choices by fissions, fusions, party creations, institutional reforms and skillful (or, sometimes, inept) organizational management and campaigning.⁵ The emergence, collapse or other radical change of a significant political party has cascade effects on the broader structure of political competition, as do promiscuous relations across party lines (including fragmentation and recombination of party parliamentary delegations) which undercut the possibility of cleavage-like oppositions by obscuring clear friend-foe distinctions and making habitual voting difficult or impossible. In the political equivalent of economists' "perfect competition," such intra-party questions might have little impact on the broader question of structure—new parties would emerge to fill the place of old ones, with the overall alignments remaining intact—but party competition is far from perfect and intra-party decisions and inter-party interactions tend to have an enduring effect on the roster of organizationally competitive parties.

Elite decisions also directly affect the ability of parties to work with one another and thereby shape the patterns of conflict and cooperation. The shifts of the Agrarians between left and right in Scandinavia and the similar moves of liberals in continental Europe during the 20th century offer instances of strategic calculations that created the basis for stable, long-term socio-political alliances.

When inherited ethnic or cultural differences divide the citizenry into distinct groups the choice of elites is more restricted but it is still not insignificant. Even in such situations the leaders of particular sub-groups will differ from each other in their definitions of the meaning and borders of the political divides. The ambiguity (and the room for maneuvers) follows partly from the fact that individual parties tend to have both partisan and bloc-identities, and the elites must balance between the two in a way that optimizes their own chances for power. In the case of "mosaic cleavage parties" (Enyedi 2005: 5), which coordinate organizationally and culturally isolated electorates, the maintenance of the coalition of groups is the primary task of the elite. This depends as much on personal relationships and organizational devices such as intra-bloc consociationalism as on bridging the differences in ideological terms.

Parties are also able to shape the balance of forces among various interest groups and constrain the articulation of social preferences through the manipulation of the structure of governance and of the rules of political competition. Parties can constrain even habitual political behavior by influencing institutional opportunities. In addition to the powerful but unpredictable tool of rewriting electoral laws, party finance rules, district boundaries, and executive-legislative relationships, elites may also seek to reshape relationships with voters by choosing electoral venues that cut across existing alignments and habits. If, for example, citizens are accustomed to side with party X at the national election, party Y may initiate referendums where the same citizen may align with party Y, breaking the habit of voting with X and making the citizen more available for competitive bids from Y in the coming parliamentary elections.

⁴ Even the EP elections, with their partly overlapping agenda and similar institutional environment, reveal robust cross-country differences. In terms of the group membership of country deputies there is less than 40% overlap between the Netherlands and Portugal; less than 30% for Poland and Denmark, the United Kingdom and Spain, and less than 20% for the United Kingdom and either Malta or Cyprus. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert/groupAndCountry/search.do?country=IE&language=EN>

⁵ Kitschelt (2010) also calls for more attention to how political institutions (supply of parties, their positions, number, competitiveness, policies, etc.) influence voting choice.

Agency in Positional Alignments

The manipulation of the institutional sphere discussed above has only an indirect (though often powerful) impact on the social constraints of party politics. Elite agents can have a more direct effect if they can alter the links between their parties (or their “sides”) and particular positional characteristics, whether based on socio-demographic characteristics, values or on group-consciousness. This is a harder task than simply changing the institutional menu because it requires change in relationships with voters themselves.

A principal mechanism by which elites shift parties’ positional alignments is the effort to change the relative political salience of a particular characteristic. The salience theory of party competition emphasizes that parties typically win over voters not by changing their opinions on a particular question but by persuading them that the question is less important than another (Schattschneider 1958; Klingemann *et al.* 1994). The logic applies to sociological features as much as to issues. Przeworski, for example, argues that “.... the relative salience of class as a determinant of voting behaviour is cumulative consequence of strategies pursued by political parties of the left”(1986, 100-101). Early research offered evidence of elites’ power to persuade (Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1976). By promoting particular discursive structures, elites could alter the perceptual and interpretative frameworks, the understanding of self within the political system, and therefore the structure of political behavior. The notion of “framing” (Zaller 1992) has come to be associated with the cues that politicians and media use to shape the story-line of electoral contests. Although the scholarly literature sometimes contrasts framing against “deeper” questions of voter predispositions, elite framing may actually intervene directly into the predispositions themselves, reshaping the subjective salience of socio-demographic characteristics, value and identity variables. In fact it is often more plausible to derive the salience of these characteristics from elite actions than from impersonal historical forces: Deegan-Krause’s comparison of Slovakia and the Czech Republic shows the powerful role of elites in shifting the salience of national identity relative to economic values and in linking previously unrelated views on questions of national identity and political authority (2006); Carsey and Layman, using panel data, offer evidence of opinion-leaders influence in aligning partisan supporters’ views on previously unaligned issue dimensions, thus extending the conflict into additional ideological dimensions (Layman and Carsey 2002; Carsey and Layman 2006).

These shifts in salience affect not only values but also socio-demographic category and group membership. Elites may try to shift the social profile of their constituency by the relatively simple mechanism of recruiting candidates from the particular social groups to which they hope to appeal (Huddy 2003). The link may also be more complicated. Take the example of the women and the Democrats in the US. First some working class women moved to Democrats because they liked the party’s position on welfare. Others (later) were attracted as a result of their participation in the women’s movements (Manza and Brooks 1999). In one case specific *policies* led to the movement of *individuals* with similar background in the same direction, while in the other case the political entrepreneurial activity of *group leaders* had a major role in orienting the members into that same direction. Even the withdrawal and passivity of a group may have an impact on the social profile of the party (as some argue occurred with the United States’ Republican Party, which fell into the control of evangelicals after the departure of more liberal mainline protestants).

Where group consciousness prevails, elites can speed up the alignment-process by making direct overtures to groups or, in cases where a group is hierarchical, to those perceived as group leaders. Resource-poor but well-organized (or politically isolated) minorities can be often easily brought into coalitions through the incorporation of their elites into government. This

phenomenon is fairly uncommon today in Western Europe, but in the postcommunist world it goes a long way to explain why ethnic minorities are often staunch supporters of the “parties of power.”

More subtle and therefore potentially more effective are those elite-led shifts which maintain a party’s existing profile while also emphasizing an alternative demographic position or set of values. In this way parties may change their target-group without changing their official identity. Parties that were established as representatives of peasantry may become conservative parties, while socialist parties may turn into the representatives of the urban population. The transformation of the class cleavage into an ideological cleavage (Knutsen 1988) and more specifically into a social-justice cleavage (Kriesi *et al.* 2006) is a result of such changes in the party profiles.

Elites can also take steps to undermine *all* positional alignments with appeals that highlight the personal appeal of a particular candidate or candidate’s success in achieving broadly agreed-upon—valence—goals such as economic prosperity. The same is true also of certain clientelistic strategies, especially short-term vote buying.⁶ In line with the dealignment approach, such appeals remove existing alignments without creating new ones and undermine the very notion of habitual voting. While the goal may be to break alignments of the *other* side, it is difficult for a party to use them without risking its own established ties to voters. Evidence suggests, however, that the process is not one-directional. Even explicitly non-positional “populist” appeals to a diffuse, universal “whole people” (Mudde 2004) end up having particular appeal for certain subsets of the population with particular socio-demographic characteristics or value orientations. In some countries in Latin American and postcommunist Europe, these newly-relevant differentiating characteristics have become the hallmark of one of the main party blocs thereby restoring a degree of structure to the party system (Ostiguy 1998; Barr 2009; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009).

Agency in Society

In some circumstances, party leaders may change not only their parties and their relationships with voters but even the voters themselves by intervening directly into the composition of society. Value shifts, socio-demographic changes, and group formation are each typically explained by some underlying macro phenomenon: changes in technology, in the means of production or other exogenous shocks. Even here, however, there exist some accounts which identify political agents as the source, either direct or indirect, for changes in fundamental and (seemingly) deeply-embedded societal characteristics.

The most obvious route for politicians to change society is to try and change values and (re)define group consciousness. Though political intellectuals and comprehensive ideological “-isms” may play a smaller role than in the past, nearly all parties commit themselves to particular values and try to some extent to propagate those values. More complicated are the strategies involving the intentional deepening of social identities and the establishment of group-specific organizations. Examples of such efforts range from clichés about “making Italians” to the work of Sartori about “class persuaded” societies (1969: 85) and Przeworski and Sprague’s emphasis on ability of parties to “forge collective identities,” “instill commitments,” and “define ... interests”(1986: 101) Such efforts face especially significant obstacles in postindustrial,

⁶ Clientelism employing traditional patron-client relationships falls into the category of “group-consciousness” positional alignments, even if it is rarely studied as such.

individualized societies, but strategies devoted to creating “groupness” still constitute an important alternative strategy for ambitious elites. Elites may appeal to dissatisfied individuals, particularly those from groups that may perceive themselves as ethnically or culturally marginalized, by encouraging the creation of an autonomous sphere with its own internal rules. This cultural “exit” (Hirschman 1970) need not even diminish the group’s political “voice” as long as those committing to group can be persuaded to come to the polls and have a party to vote for. Efforts of religious conservatives in the United States to create a “Moral Majority”—both an exit group of those with similar values and an electoral coalition—offer a case in point.

In addition to bringing together individuals with similar socio-demographic characteristics, party leaders can sometimes extend their reach further to change the sociodemographic characteristics. In the past several decades research has demonstrated the degree to which categories such as ethnicity, class or even age are subject to a significant degree of construction and re-interpretation over time (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Brubaker *et al.* 2004). To regard socio-demographic characteristics as exogenous from politics is sometimes a useful simplification but which is particularly unhelpful for studying the *origins* of structural relationships. The relevance of elite actions does not mean, however, that political developments necessarily follow elite plans. Kalyvas demonstrated that the development of the clerical cleavage and the participation of this cleavage was a result of a number of unintended elite actions (Kalyvas 1994).

Research on religiosity offers insights into persuasion mechanisms by which party efforts shape *non*-political practices. Several studies of the United States (Hout and Fischer 2002; Patrikios 2008) suggest that both declining levels of religiosity of liberal Protestants and the increasing religiosity of conservative Evangelicals depend in part on the increasingly religious social imagery of the Republican Party. Patrikios in particular uses panel data to question the conventional wisdom of an increase in churchgoers’ tendency to vote Republican with evidence for a rival hypothesis: an increase in churchgoing by Republicans, for whom attendance constitutes a line of demarcation from out groups (“liberals” and Democrats). The reverse holds for Democrats, who increasingly avoid attending conservative Protestant churches. The shift did not occur wholly without socio-demographic constraints—panel analyses show that the value clusters of “conservatism” and “liberalism” had developed the power to motivate church attendance by the 1970s due to a number of value conflicts. But when partisan elites noted this development and reacted with an ideological sorting, partisan cues also became instrumental in shaping the level of church attendance. In this sense the *political* shaped the *social*. Of course the unusual free “religious market” in the United States and the dominance of voluntary association over passive socialization raises questions about the generalizability of these findings, but similar shifts in other parts of the world—particularly Eastern Europe, where millions moved into the “religious camp” for largely political reasons (Enyedi 2000)—suggests a broader applicability.

Elites also certainly shape the socio-demographic environment through the application of certain *policy* choices, though the process may take years or decades (Berelson *et al.* 1954; Campbell *et al.* 1960; Lazarsfeld, *et al.* 1968; Manza and Brooks 1999; Elff 2005). Of course policy itself is subject to social constraints, but even minor nuances in policy—those that are probably not socially conditioned—can have large effects in the long run. The United States’ New Deal offers one of the most cited instances of government policy that has shaped individual preferences and group politics, but socio-demographic contours created by different types of welfare states may affect the ability of political leaders in various countries to employ particular socio-demographic appeals (Henjak 2010), and privatization policies in Central and Eastern Europe allowed parties to reward entire social groups, economic sectors and occupational categories. Immigration choices throughout Europe and North America also shape, albeit slowly,

the demographic landscape and thereby affect the availability of certain kinds of voters (both immigrants and “anti-immigrants”).

Agency over Time

The concept of inertia in the physical sciences allows for change only by the application of force. In political science the matter is rather more complicated because of the human mind’s creative approach to time and memory. Political elites may exert control over time both by reaching back into voters’ understanding of the past and by taking advantage of critical junctures that cause voters to rethink their understanding of future alternatives.

Far from exotic, the act of going back in time to change the present is actually a rather mundane tool of political leaders. Since the past is not a fixed commodity, leaders can to intervene to some degree in voter inertia in much the same way they intervene in voter alignments. Voters can be encouraged to misremember their past votes to bring them in line with present feelings. Politicians can present themselves as the true heirs of values, interests and statesmen normally associated with the other side of the aisle, implying that *genuine* continuity of values or interests requires voters to shift their *nominal* allegiance. Such battles over interpretation of the past are particularly obvious in case of party splits, when the new formations compete for the equivalence with the old one.

More important are the elite actions which define the options of the future. The existence of such actions imply the division of history into two types of periods: critical junctures and enduring patterns. Already early work in the field—LaPalombara and Weiner (1966) and Lipset and Rokkan (1967) followed this logic. According to this perspective, political actors first define fundamental alternatives and mobilize society in the support of one or the other alternative, and then they maintain those patterns against growing popular disenchantment.

Scholars disagree, however, over what constitutes a critical event, how much additional leeway they provide political actors, and whether the critical events can themselves be the result of political agency. If one situates critical junctures in a universalist framework of political development, agency inevitably seems less relevant. Although Rokkan was sensitive to the variance across the European nation-states, he also tried to fit the emergence and establishment of party systems to the general process of modernization (Rokkan 1970). Bartolini and Mair identify the extension of suffrage as the critical period in European history that shaped the subsequent frozen period (1990). Inglehart’s work on postmaterialism (1984) and Kriesi’s emphasis on globalization (1998, 2006) emphasize later developments but are similar in their emphasis on macro trends.

Stubager (2010) begins from a similar historical perspective, deriving critical periods from large-scale social change, but his study shows that such processes do not automatically provide the mechanism or dictate the timing of the juncture. The education-based libertarian-authoritarian cleavage crystallized in Denmark in a period when the impact of education or the level of libertarianism was not increasing. The political articulation of Denmark’s conflict in a period when there was little immediate change in the technological, socio-demographic or attitudinal raw material points to the importance of political leaders in forging alignments between parties and social groups defined by characteristics that until then had only secondary relevance in politics. The particular context-dependent triggers thus overshadow the universal causes.

The limits of the universalist perspectives are further underlined by evidence from individual Western European party systems which indicates that the “critical periods” are often nation-specific. Developments in Italian party politics, for example, have been primarily shaped by the

1948-1953 period, when a tri-polar system developed through the fragmentation of the left and the stabilization of the small radical right and again by the 1992-1994 period, when a bipolar pattern developed through the collapse of Christian Democracy, the consolidation of the right and the moderation of the left. In the Netherlands, by contrast, a tri-polar competition between the social-democrats, Christian-democrats and liberals, the centrist position of the Christian Democrats, the coexistence of two (economic and cultural) ideological dimensions and the cooperative, moderate style of competition all emerged directly from the events surrounding the “historical compromise” of 1917 and changed little for the subsequent eight decades. General process of political economy and democratization appear to allow for such wide variation in the nature or the timing of critical junctures, that local context becomes essential for understanding their origins.⁷

Local context is also essential to understanding the severity of the juncture and the stability of subsequent patterns. Following the logic of path dependency, historical institutionalists argue that periods of agency and choice differs from the locked-in situations that follow largely because actors adjust their strategies to accommodate the prevailing pattern, producing self-reinforcing positive feedback mechanisms and incentives to behave in a pattern-confirming way (Krasner 1988; Thelen 1999). They disagree, however, about the magnitude of the break necessary to create these patterns: whereas some focus on the role of major crises such as war and civil disturbance, others take their lead from David’s (1985) work on QWERTY style path dependencies and argue that minor initial differences can also result in distinct paths.

Scholars also disagree about the cost of finding alternative paths. According to Pierson (2000) the cost of switching paths is higher in politics than in the economy because of the high start-up costs of collective action, the high density of institutions, the ability of political authority to enhance original and minor asymmetries of power, and the intrinsically complex and opaque character of politics: “Once established, basic outlooks on politics, ranging from ideologies to understandings of particular aspects of governments or orientations toward political groups or parties, are generally tenacious”(Pierson 2000, 260). Other historical institutionalists express greater skepticism toward this strong version of path dependency. Thelen (1999) criticizes the QWERTY model, because it allows for too much agency at the critical juncture, and becomes too deterministic afterwards. She draws attention to the fact that as unlike most losers in economic and technological competitions, losers in political struggles often survive long enough to make comeback.

Whether the path dependency applies to political competition seems to depend on location, era and other circumstances. Germany’s post-war critical juncture, for example, appears to have provided strong advantages to the Christian Democrats and Socialists that allowed them until relatively recently to fend off new competitors. Post-authoritarian and post-communist critical junctures by contrast, produced relatively few long-term electoral contenders—Suarez’s Union of the Democratic Center in Spain failed despite being “present at the creation,” and a large number of successful initial challengers in post-communist Europe later collapsed despite (or indeed because of) their initial strength. Even the basic contours of political blocs have changed significantly in many of these countries.

This variation in the timing, frequency and breadth of critical junctures, calls attention to the context-dependent nature of the ‘reinforcing mechanisms’, ‘feedback loops’ or ‘mechanisms of

⁷ The inertia implied by Pierson is rather at odds with the rapidly changing political space of many modern countries. Thelen emphasizes that we should not take the survival of political patterns for granted but focus on feedback loops or “mechanisms of reproduction”(Collier 1991) that sustain the particular patterns, and be ready for their erosion.

reproduction' (Collier 1991; Thelen 1999). Each of these mechanisms, whether cultural-ideological commitments, material-ideological group interests, institutional barriers to newcomers, patronage or governmental structure, is vulnerable to a different kind of challenge. If party competition divides the educated and the non-educated, for example, then educational reforms that equalize citizens may challenge the underlying dynamic of the party system. Where party support depends on pillarized institutions such as sport clubs and charities then even seemingly non-political shifts such as the professionalization of the recreational sector may disrupt the feedback loop.

To the extent that systems do remain stable until disrupted, the question for those interested in agency is to what role elite agents play in causing—or preventing—the disruption (Colomer and Puglisi 2005). It is not difficult to find historical examples ranging from the depression of the 1930's to the terrorist attacks of the 2000's to find elites who have taken advantage of crises to rewrite the list of alternatives. There is a smaller, but not insignificant number of cases in which elites have provoked crises, sometimes playing with dangerous social forces and political mechanisms to break open a political system whose existing institutions and alignments do not admit major change. We must not forget, however, that the maintenance of reinforcing mechanisms and prevention of critical junctures is a less spectacular, though not less important, aspect of elite actions.

Conclusions

It is useful truism in studies of agency that small groups of individuals matter most in the realms that, for overall society, matter least, and visa versa: at one extreme party leaders may be almost solely responsible for creating or destroying parties, but since other parties often shift to compensate, that may not shape the broader structural constraints (Mair 2006). At the other extreme, leaders might exert enormous control by intervening directly in underlying societal factors, but this is difficult to do. There is thus a rough continuum between easy-but-inconsequential and consequential-but-hard that puts limits on the overall effect of agency in shaping the structure of political competition. But the continuum is not perfectly smooth and there are some types of interactions and some periods in which elites can make their mark on structures of competition. Table 2 presents a summary of the full range of opportunities for agents discussed here. Within this broad list are certain specific areas in which the independent role of agency is most important, or at least easiest to identify:

- Instances in which manipulation of institutional rules or party building and bloc building (or destroying) reshapes the overall field of political competition by fundamentally changing the options (or the meaning of the options).
- Instances in which political leaders shift the salience of particular social characteristics within society so as to attract new supporters or to deny the opportunity to their opponents.
- Instances in which leaders change the value and interest structure of the underlying society, not only through the (often overrated) “bully pulpit” but also by helping people to form common group identities and, in the longer run (sometimes quicker than might be expected), by using policy to reshape the composition of society itself.
- Instances in which leaders foment crises intended to undercut existing structures and strengthen their own positions in the achievement of the above efforts

Table 2. Integrated typology of elite actions with impacts on structures of party competition

Category	Locus of action	Impact	How agents achieve impact
Political Institutions	Party	Availability of party alternatives	Establish new party or splinter party; merge parties; undermine party viability (intentionally or unintentionally)
	Bloc	Bloc-logic of party competition	Increase bloc logic with ideological choice of government coalition partner; decrease bloc logic with pragmatic partner-selection
	Institutional Framework	Formal expression of popular preferences	Change constitutional structures, electoral rules, and other interest-mediation institutions; use referenda and other alternatives for political participation
Alignment (Socio-political, Positional)	Socio-demographics	Salience of socio-demographic characteristics for political choice	Target appeals and policies to specific socio-demographic categories, choose candidates with particular socio-demographic characteristics
	Values	Salience of values for political choice	Present political struggles in value terms; emphasize importance of values related to party-owned issues; de-emphasize others; introduce of new "wedge" issues
	Group-consciousness	Salience of group for political choice	Appeal to individual voters as actual/potential group members
Connecting groups to parties		Maintain civic organizations and pillarized institutions linked to parties; incorporate prominent group leaders as party candidates	
Society	Socio-demographics	Socio-demographic structure of society	Use public policy to reshape distribution of wealth and income, limit or expand citizenship
	Values	Value configuration of society	Educate voters; socialize new generations into specific orientations; create connections between previously unconnected values (conflict extension)
	Group-consciousness	Processes of group formation	Propagate non-political practices that cement group identity including religious, social and economic patterns of behavior
		Boundaries between groups	Raise or lower sympathy among distinct groups by provoking antipathy or by mediating relations between distinct (but similar) groups; develop consociational or clientelistic practices <i>across</i> groups
Stability (Socio-Political, Temporal)	Past	Memory or interpretation of past political behavior	Establish symbolic continuity between actors of the past and present; project contemporary interests back into the past
	Future	Potential for critical junctures	implement major reform, exacerbate political crises, promote major compromises and constitutional settlements that reshape relations among social groups.

There are considerable bodies of academic work available on these specific questions and many more underway, but unlike scholarship which begins “from below” and shares a common vocabulary and framework, scholarship on agency is separated by differences in vocabulary and by the difficulty of comparing the specific contexts in which agency is most easily identified. One part of the challenge therefore lies in persuading scholars in areas ranging from party organization to policy implementation that their work may be connected by the thread of agency. To the extent that challenge can be overcome, a second part of the challenge lies in developing research methods that bridge the gap. Characteristic such as intra-party decision-making, group boundaries, and critical junctures depend heavily on local specifics and are not easily comparable across regions. These circumstances recommend a focus on smaller-scale comparisons within countries or among small groups of comparable countries. Careful choice of comparisons may also allow researchers to control for the broader range of variables and supplement multivariate large-N approaches that build in more controls but that cannot operationalize key measures across borders. New sources of data including focus groups and network analysis may also offer useful additions to mass-level survey data as can contextual analysis (Bornschiefer’s 2010). In the process of gathering new data, researchers may also devote more attention to time-based approaches, building on traditional narratives with process tracing and time series (including panel surveys where possible) that match the actions of elites with developments in the mass population.

Researchers may also double (at least) the extent of potential agency-related research by looking at the negative space, at the ways in which political agents *prevent* otherwise likely shifts in alignment or stability as the result of social, economic or technological change, a phenomenon noted in Lipset and Rokkan’s discussion of elite efforts to keep systems frozen but rarely studied in a systematic way. They should also look in the other negative spaces left by the melting of the mid-century alignments. Processes of dealignment may hide within themselves the seeds of other alignments that are not often considered in the current structural research. New groups may form not around factories and neighborhoods and churches but around blogs and niche media markets, or around certain kinds of clientelistic networks. New value alignments may form around causes such as corruption that look like valence issues but that actually involve differences in values (toleration for corruption) or identity (depending on the group that benefits). Increasingly rapid cycles of party birth, corruption and death may cause some voters to voting for “clean” newcomers in each successive election, establishing changing preference as a habit in its own right. New forms of alignments may also begin to emerge when parties reach out to voters in new ways, combining the reach of electronic mass-media with the personal connection of social networks.

Regardless of their specific forms, social forces will remain essential to understanding political outcomes, but that understanding will be even better if the relatively mature and comprehensive frameworks for looking at bottom-up process are accompanied by a an integrated and well-articulated framework for understanding how elites, particularly political parties, impose their will from the top down. In this pursuit, there are many opportunities for research and the field remains young

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