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Lipset and Rokkan meet data: the electoral structuring of traditional cleavages, 1870–1967

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented, historically-grounded data availability that researchers enjoy today allows them to move beyond mere anecdotal evidence and properly test, through quantitative data, Lipset and Rokkan's conditions for cleavage electoral structuring and their 'freezing hypothesis'. In this article, Lipset and Rokkan's conditions are translated into empirically testable hypotheses related to the evolution and determinants of cleavage electoral structuring. The empirical analysis – applied to 17 Western European countries from the late nineteenth century to 1967 – shows that the freezing hypothesis shall be reconsidered, as inconclusive evidence is found about the stabilisation of the four cleavages between the 1920s and the 1960s. Moreover, only some of the expectations deriving from Lipset and Rokkan's original conditions are confirmed, while others are rejected. Finally, the analysis unveils the role played by some factors that have been previously overlooked, thus contributing to redefining the narrative of cleavages' electoral structuring.

KEYWORDS Traditional cleavages; cleavage electoral structuring; macro-comparative historical analysis; time-series-cross-section data; Lipset and Rokkan

In the seminal introduction to their edited book 'Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives', Lipset and Rokkan (1967) trace the cultural, socioeconomic, and political roots that brought to the emergence of Western European party systems. That essay is one of the most influential and cited scientific contributions of the social sciences (more than 7,800 citations according to Google Scholar). It lays the foundations of cleavage theory and, through a macro-comparative historical analysis, reconstructs the historical process that led four structural societal divides (centre vs. periphery; State vs. Church; urban vs. rural; owner vs. worker) to emerge as a consequence of certain key turning points of European history (the Reformation, the National Revolution, the Industrial

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Revolution). These *divides* became the four main *cleavages* that structured – in different ways, due to varying historical and institutional conditions – electoral alignments and party systems in Western European polities.

However, Lipset and Rokkan's study suffered from some limitations. The first was a certain vagueness concerning cleavages' definition (a problem later solved by Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]). Second – and more crucially for our work – the enumeration of a series of *conditions* regarding the explanatory factors behind the cleavage emergence in the different Western European contexts that, despite grounded on historical accounts, were supported only by scarce empirical evidence (mainly anecdotal accounts of individual historical events).

Despite such limitations, their work paved the way for cleavage theory and provided the intellectual basis for numerous studies testing the ability of this theory to resist the passage of time – that is, social structures' resilience or decline in influencing voting behaviour. For instance, many studies investigated the empirical strength of the 'freezing hypothesis' and the hold of cleavages over time using individual-level or aggregate data (Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]; Emanuele 2023; Franklin *et al.* 1992; Flanagan and Dalton 1984; Knutsen 2004, 2018; Rose and Urwin 1970; Shamir 1984). Conversely, another aspect received much less attention: the empirical translation of the factors deemed by Lipset and Rokkan as central in explaining the emergence and consolidation of the parties representing the four cleavages – more precisely, representing the losing side of each cleavage and opposing the status quo imposed by 'nation-builders'.

The unprecedented availability of historically-grounded data that researchers enjoy today allows us properly to test Lipset and Rokkan's hypotheses related to the four cleavages and also their 'freezing hypothesis'. This is the aim of this article which puts forward a two-faced innovation. Theoretically, it presents a novel conceptualisation of 'cleavage electoral structuring' – i.e. the hidden concept behind Lipset and Rokkan's theory, including their freezing hypothesis. Empirically, the article employs the most accurate proxies available to test the conditions considered by Lipset and Rokkan as central for cleavage emergence and consolidation.

Revisiting Lipset and Rokkan's theory with new quantitative data is not just important *per se* – namely, to reach a valid and generalisable understanding of the formation and consolidation of traditional cleavages – but also for contemporary research, as traditional cleavages are a benchmark for assessing the real 'cleavage nature' of new divides, which is one of the key puzzles of this special issue (Attewell and Zollinger 2025).

All in all, the article provides a macro-historical comparative analysis of the evolution of the four traditional cleavages and outlines the set of determinants explaining their electoral structuring (or lack of it). Results confirm some of the expectations deriving from Lipset and Rokkan's original conditions but reject some others.

In particular, the importance attributed to the freezing hypothesis shall be toned down. Indeed, we find inconclusive evidence about the stabilisation of the four cleavages between the 1920s and the 1960s.

Moreover, cleavage electoral structuring is associated with some key factors highlighted by Lipset and Rokkan, such as the cultural heterogeneity of society and its territorial concentration (for the centre-periphery cleavage), the diffusion of the Catholic faith (in the case of the State-Church cleavage), urbanisation (for the urban-rural cleavage), and the strength of the industrial working class (for the class cleavage). However, some other allegedly central predictors (e.g. the economic dependence on the capital, for the centre-periphery cleavage, or the concentration of resources in the countryside, for the urban-rural cleavage) are not associated to cleavages' electoral structuring.

The analysis also unveils the role played by some factors overlooked by Lipset and Rokkan and the subsequent cleavage studies, thus bringing new evidence to redefining the narrative of cleavages' emergence and strengthening. Specifically, societal factors, such as the strength of civil society or the level of education, and political-institutional factors, such as party system fragmentation and electoral systems' disproportionality, contribute to shaping the context in which cleavages consolidate or decline.

The article is structured as follows: the next section presents our theoretical framework, defines a model of cleavage electoral structuring, and puts forward the hypotheses derived from Lipset and Rokkan's conditions; then, the subsequent section details the operationalisation of the dependent, independent, and control variables, along with the research design and the method for the empirical analysis; subsequently, a further section presents the results of our analysis; a concluding section discusses the implications of the findings and further research paths.

Theoretical framework and expectations

Cleavage electoral structuring

According to Bornschier (2009: 3), 'one of the most central problems is how cleavages are to be analysed in a dynamic perspective'. Indeed, how to translate empirically the dynamic nature of cleavages, which originate from a societal conflict, get politicised, mobilise voters, and eventually become a structural element of party competition? Lipset and Rokkan (1967) never properly define cleavages in their work but implicitly assume a certain dynamicity of the cleavage model, as they talk about 'emergence and consolidation' with reference to cleavage bloc parties (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 42). Thus, they highlight two critical moments of the dynamic evolution of cleavages. The first, 'emergence', is when the

cleavage gets politicised, thus moving from a mere societal status to an organisational and electoral status. A new party emerges to organise the interests of a so far unrepresented social group and, in so doing, transforms a social conflict into a fully-fledged cleavage (on this point, see also the definition of cleavage provided by Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]: 199). The second moment, ‘consolidation’, occurs when the cleavage becomes a structural element of the party system, namely, when cleavage bloc parties – the party or group of parties that originally emerged to represent the interests of the conflicting social group – become electorally strong and stable.

The literature on class cleavage has focused either on one or the other of these two characteristics, strength and stability. In his pioneering study on class cleavage and left parties, Bartolini (2000: 26) defines ‘cleavage structuring’ as a multidimensional concept involving various social, ideological, and organisational elements but identifies the electoral strength of cleavage bloc parties as the crucial element for the structuring. Various later studies aligned with this perspective and conceived electoral strength of cleavage bloc parties as a proxy of cleavage structuring (Benedetto *et al.* 2020; Emanuele 2023).

On the other side, Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990] focused on the element of stability, by conveying the idea that electoral structuring means progressive electoral stabilisation, namely, the reduction in voters’ electoral mobility across the cleavage line. When electoral mobility is high and a substantive portion of voters regularly shift from, say, parties representing rural interests to parties representing urban interests, this means that voters do not perceive the urban-rural cleavage as a relevant dimension of identification. In other words, in that situation, the cleavage is unstructured (there is a low ‘cleavage closure’ in their own words). Conversely, electoral structuring (high ‘closure’) occurs when electoral mobility across the cleavage line becomes lower and lower over time, as this means that voters perceive the cleavage as highly relevant and consistently place themselves on one or the other side.

The two aspects of electoral strength and mobility have been combined in the dynamic model of cleavage electoral structuring recently proposed by Emanuele (2024).¹ The model defines ‘Maturity’ as the stage of full electoral structuring, with the presence of electorally strong cleavage bloc parties and low electoral mobility across the cleavage line. Then, the model also identifies three other situations when the cleavage has emerged but is not yet structured: ‘Marginality’, when cleavage bloc parties are stable but electorally weak, and they only represent a niche in the party system; ‘Mobilisation’ and ‘Crisis’ when electoral mobility across the cleavage line is high and electoral strength is, respectively, increasing or decreasing across subsequent elections. All these stages of development,

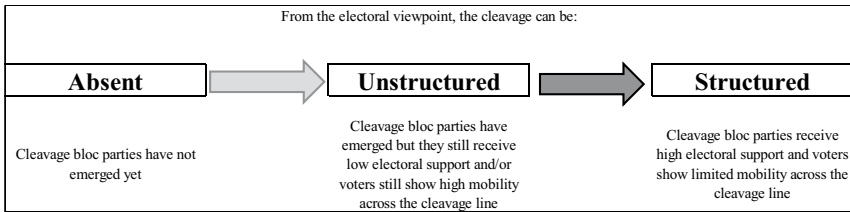


Figure 1. A simplified, dynamic model of cleavage electoral structuring.

for different reasons, depict situations of electorally unstructured cleavages. For the purpose of conceptualising cleavage electoral structuring, therefore, they can be considered together as instances where the two necessary conditions (strength and stability) are not fully met. Moreover, unlike in the case of the class cleavage analysed by Emanuele (2024), which emerged throughout Europe, the analysis of the other three Lipset and Rokkan (1967) cleavages also requires consideration of the instances of ‘Absence’, namely, all situations where the cleavage has not yet emerged. In other words, as shown in Figure 1, cleavage electoral structuring can be conceived as a continuum going from cleavage absence (cleavage bloc parties have not emerged) to an electorally unstructured cleavage (cleavage bloc parties have emerged but they still receive low electoral support and/or voters still show high mobility across the cleavage line), and, eventually, to full electoral structuring (cleavage bloc parties receive high electoral support and voters show limited mobility across the cleavage line).

Translating Lipset and Rokkan’s conditions into hypotheses

Once defined what we mean by cleavage electoral structuring, the first and most important hypothesis to test is Lipset and Rokkan’s *freezing hypothesis*. The authors claim that social cleavages and their resulting party alternatives consolidated in the wake of the extension of suffrage and the process of development of mass politics and eventually froze by the 1920s, so much so that ‘the party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s’ (1967, 50).

Based on Lipset and Rokkan’s own words, what allegedly froze for almost half a century were cleavage structures, as evidenced by the consolidation of party alternatives shaping stable party systems. Rather than testing the freezing hypothesis by looking at general trends of electoral volatility, as usually done in previous literature (Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]; Rose and Urwin 1970; Shamir 1984) – a choice already criticised by Lybeck (1985) – we aim to test what we believe was the core of that hypothesis, namely, that cleavages were structured around the 1920s

and remained constant in the following decades, up to the 1960s. Therefore, our H1 is the following:

H1: *Cleavage electoral structuring remained stable between the 1920s and the 1960s*

We now turn to the explanatory conditions of cleavage electoral structuring. Starting from the centre-periphery cleavage, Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 42) outline three conditions favouring the 'emerge and consolidation of territorial counter-cultures'. The first one is the 'heavy concentration of the counter-culture into one clear-cut territory'. For counter-culture, they mean 'resistance of the ethnically, linguistically, or religiously distinct subject populations in the provinces and the peripheries' (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 14). Therefore, H2 can be empirically translated by looking not only at the extent to which cultural minorities are numerically relevant but also at the extent to which they are concentrated within a specific territory of a country.

H2: *The stronger the territorial concentration of a cultural minority, the higher the electoral structuring of the centre-periphery cleavage*

The second condition is the presence of strong 'ties towards external centres of cultural or economic influence' (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 42). Indeed, the chances of politicising the peripheral opposition are strongly connected with the presence of cultural and economic bonds with an external power, so much so that the cultural minority feels closer to these foreign centres rather than their own national centres. For instance, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Italian-speaking minority in the Trento and Trieste regions likely recognised Rome as its cultural centre of reference instead of Vienna. Conversely, after 1918, the German-speaking minority in the *Alto Adige* (South Tyrol) region was likely to feel closer to Vienna than to Rome. As a result, our H3 follows:

H3: *The electoral structuring of the centre-periphery cleavage is higher if there are external centres of cultural or economic influence*

The final condition for the structuring of the centre-periphery cleavage is the 'minimal economic dependence on the political metropolis' (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 42). The argument is straightforward: the periphery has higher chances of mobilising if its opposition is fuelled by a strong economic arsenal that is independent of the economically backward centre. For instance, the authors mention the case of the Catalan and Basque regions against Madrid. Therefore, for H4, we argue:

H4: *The stronger the economic dependence on the capital, the lower the electoral structuring of the centre-periphery cleavage*

Moving to the State-Church cleavage, Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 34) do not mention specific conditions for the emergence of parties for religious defense, except for one fundamental difference revolving around the critical juncture of the Reformation: in Protestant countries, religious and secular elites were allied in the nation-building process and the only religious opposition came from small groups of 'dissidents' (orthodox Calvinists and Protestants); conversely, the most relevant opposition to the secularising effort brought about by nation-builders inspired by the French Revolution occurred in Catholic or religiously mixed countries, where the Roman Church enjoyed central relevance in mass education and retained important economic privileges.

As a result, the key factor allegedly driving the electoral structuring of the religious cleavage is the diffusion of the Catholic faith against other denominations. Therefore, our *H5* reads:

H5: *The higher the diffusion of Catholicism, the higher the electoral structuring of the State-Church cleavage*

Unlike the religious cleavage, the conditions for the emergence and consolidation of parties for agrarian defense are presented in great detail by Lipset and Rokkan. Five main conditions emerge from their discussion. The first posits that agrarian interests are more likely to be politicised when the nation-builders are allied with the urban economic elites (therefore, the 'N-U' cases in their eight-fold typology of party systems). Therefore, in countries like the Scandinavian ones, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, or Italy, the chances of having an electorally structured urban-rural cleavage are higher compared to countries like Britain or Germany, where nation builders aligned with landowners (see e.g. Berman 1997 on the German case). Our *H6* is:

H6: *The electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage is higher if nation-builders are allied with urban economic elites*

The second condition (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 45) is the relative weakness of the urban environment vis-à-vis the countryside. Indeed, after the Industrial Revolution and the development of major industrial factories around or within newly-created urban centres, there was a gradual shift in the balance of power from landowners to industrial entrepreneurial elites. Thus, it is imaginable that agrarian mobilisation was more likely to occur in contexts where this shift had not entirely occurred, and agrarian claims were not yet defeated. All in all, *H7* posits:

H7: *The stronger the urbanisation, the lower the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage*

Then, the third condition is arguably the most important one in Lipset and Rokkan's discussion (1967, 44–45): it deals with the concentration of resources in the countryside and the size of the units of production. Here,

a fundamental distinction is drawn between family farms and large estates. In the latter, the relevant concentration of resources in the hands of a few powerful landowners reduced the pressures for the mobilisation of an organised opposition protecting agrarian interests. Conversely, the fragmentation of rural power into a multitude of small farmers made it more urgent for them to politically organise. So, *H8* is:

H8: *The larger the proportion of family farms, the higher the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage*

As for the fourth condition, the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage was more likely 'where there were important cultural barriers between the countryside and the cities' (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 45). It is imaginable that, in contexts where the countryside perceives the urban environment as distant and diverse, the need for mobilisation to protect rural interests is more urgent than in contexts where frequent exchanges and connections between cities and the countryside exist. The former scenario is more likely to occur in monocentric countries, where the capital city is the only relevant urban centre, and the rest of the population living in small rural villages inevitably perceive it as distant and disconnected. On the contrary, the latter scenario is more likely to occur in multicentric countries, where a vast array of cities and towns are scattered across the country, and the surrounding countryside feels more connected to them. Consequently, *H9* argues:

H9: *The more monocentric the country, the higher the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage*

The fifth and final condition relates to the influence of the Catholic Church. In countries where it retained significant powers, the Church played an important role in the defense of farmers' interests, thus making the development of agrarian parties less necessary. Therefore, *H10* points out that:

H10: *The stronger the Catholic Church power, the lower the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage*

As in the case of the State-Church cleavage, Lipset and Rokkan do not specify the conditions favouring the electoral structuring of the class cleavage. Not by chance, the class cleavage is the only one to appear everywhere in Europe and to become the 'homogenizing factor' in the development of national party systems (Caramani 2004: 181). As the critical juncture triggering the formation of parties for class defense is the Industrial Revolution, a decisive factor is the development of a strong industrial working class, which constitutes the social constituency that

organised into class bloc parties to claim its interests against industrial entrepreneurs (e.g. Bartolini 2000). Our final *H11* states:

H11: *The stronger the industrial working class, the higher the electoral structuring of the urban-rural cleavage*

Research design, data, and method

The dependent variable(s): cleavage(s) electoral structuring

The expectations discussed above will empirically test the effect of Lipset and Rokkan's conditions on the electoral structuring of the four cleavages. This structuring can be defined as a situation where the cleavage is electorally strong – namely, the bloc of parties politicising its 'losing' side is voted on by a substantive portion of the electorate – and electorally stable – i.e. only a narrow portion of the electorate crosses the cleavage line between consecutive elections.² Therefore, two variables must be considered when operationalising the concept of electoral structuring: the electoral support received by cleavage bloc parties and the electoral volatility of that bloc.³ We weigh cleavage bloc volatility by the electoral support of the bloc in each election, to accurately interpret instances of identical figures of bloc volatility emerging from very different levels of electoral support.⁴ The two variables of electoral support and weighted bloc volatility are then combined into a single standardised index of *Cleavage electoral structuring*. To ease its interpretability, the index has been transformed into a 0–100 range, with 0 indicating situations where the cleavage has not emerged (yet), low values indicating low electoral structuring and high values indicating high electoral structuring.⁵ This operationalisation diverges from Emanuele's (2024) in two respects: first, it provides a more nuanced measurement of the concept of electoral structuring with a continuous measure replacing the dichotomous distinction between immaturity and maturity of the cleavage; second, it also allows consideration of instances of cleavage absence, which become particularly relevant when moving from the analysis of the class cleavage – emerging substantially everywhere in Europe before World War I – to the analysis of the other three cleavages, whose emergence has been more scattered and more temporally differentiated.

Independent variables

The operationalisation of the independent variables starts from the centre-periphery cleavage. *H2* concerns the territorial concentration of culturally distinct minorities (see also De Miguel 2017). We have weighted

the fractionalisation index (Alesina *et al.* 2003) – measuring the ethnic, linguistic, and religious distinctiveness of the society – by the level of ‘segregation’, namely, the territorial concentration of the different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups (Alesina and Zhuravskaya 2011).⁶ The resulting variable *Cultural segmentation* ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 means a perfectly culturally homogeneous society and 100 a perfectly heterogeneous society, with a perfect territorial distinction of the various groups. *H3* is concerned with the presence of a linkage between the periphery and another country from which the former is influenced by a cultural or economic viewpoint. We have built the dichotomous variable *External ties* (1 for those countries where the periphery can be clearly connected to an external centre and 0 otherwise). Finally, *H4* relates to the economic dependence of the periphery on the capital, which we have operationalised in terms of the Gross Domestic Product share of the capital region over the national GDP (*GDP share capital*).⁷

Moving to the religious cleavage, for our *H5*, we have measured the *Share of Catholic population* in a society. Data come from Ribberink *et al.* (2018).

For the urban-rural cleavage, as *H6* is concerned with the alliance between nation-builders and the urban economic elite, we have built the dichotomous variable *Urban nation-builders* that, following Lipset and Rokkan (1967), identifies those countries where the nation-builders allied with urban merchants and entrepreneurs. Then, *H7* is related to the weakness of the cities as a precondition for the agrarian mobilisation: we have measured the percentage of population living in urban areas (*Urban population*). Data come from Vanhanen (2003). The same data source is used to retrieve the share of *Family farms* as a ‘percentage of total cultivated area’ (Vanhanen 2003), which allows us to operationalise *H8*. Subsequently, *H9*, concerning cultural barriers between the countryside and the cities, has been operationalised as an indicator of the level of Multicentrism vs *Monocentrism* in the country. The index ranges from 0 to 100, where lower values indicate a stronger diffusion of urban centres and higher values a stronger concentration in a few or only one big urban centre. Data have been calculated from Buringh (2021), which provides information about the population of European cities from the Middle Ages to date. Then, *H10*, related to the influence of the Catholic Church, will be tested with an ordinal variable, *Catholic power*, where 0 has been attributed to Protestant countries, 1 to religiously mixed countries, and 2 to Roman Catholic countries.

Finally, concerning the class cleavage, *H11* is connected to the Industrial Revolution and the development of the industrial working class. Here,

similarly to Bartolini (2000), we consider two indicators. The first is the size of the industrial working class, namely, the ratio between the number of industrial workers⁸ and the total active population in a country, while the second is working-class homogeneity, i.e. the ratio between the number of industrial workers and workers of other sectors (agriculture and services). Following Emanuele (2023) and given the correlation between the two indicators (0.92), we have combined them into a standardised index of *Working class strength*, ranging from 0 to 100.⁹ The first section of the [Online Appendix](#) provides more detailed information on the construction of the independent variables and their data sources.

Control variables

Moving to control variables, we need to account for the presence of a lively and organised civil society, as it is a precondition for any political mobilisation of opposition against the status quo. Moreover, the development of the organisational element of cleavages – i.e. political parties – is often preceded by the building of societal organisations, such as trade unions for the class cleavage. The V-DEM (Varieties of democracy) dataset includes the ‘core civil society index’ that addresses the question of how robust civil society is and looks at the presence of interest groups, labour unions, spiritual organisations, and other social movements and non-governmental organisations (Coppedge *et al.* 2023). The variable *Civil society* ranges from 0 to 1, where 1 means a strong civil society.

Then, another precondition for the development of mass politics is the level of education in a society, a fundamental indicator of cultural integration allowing ordinary citizens to better understand politics and get more and more involved in it. Similarly to Bartolini (2000), who employs indicators of cognitive stratification as drivers of left political mobilisation, we control for the average years of education among citizens older than 15 (Coppedge *et al.* 2023) with the variable *Education*.

Moreover, the political translation of social cleavages is favoured by the progressive societal enfranchisement (Caramani 2004). As our analysis encompasses the period 1870–1967, it is important to account for the fact that, at least in the first decades under consideration, suffrage was limited (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Aidt and Jensen 2009). As the number of people allowed to vote increases, the potential for political mobilisation becomes stronger. Therefore, we control for ‘the ratio between people that voted and people that would have been allowed to vote if universal suffrage had been the rule’ (Emanuele 2024: 564). The resulting variable *Turnout (enfranchisement)* reports the share of adult citizens who actually voted in a given election.

Table 1. Hypotheses, factors, measures, and expected effects.

Cleavage		Hypothesis	Measure	Expected effect on cleavage electoral structuring
All	H1	<i>Cleavage electoral structuring remained stable between the 1920s and the 1960s</i>	Decade (1920s vs. 1960s)	<i>Null</i>
Centre-Periphery	H2	<i>Territorial concentration of a cultural minority</i>	Cultural segmentation (Fractionalisation*Segregation)	+
	H3	<i>External centres of cultural or economic influence</i>	Presence/absence of external ties	+
	H4	<i>Economic dependence on the capital</i>	GDP share of the capital region	-
State-Church	H5	<i>Spread of Catholic faith</i>	Share of Catholics in the population	+
Urban-Rural	H6	<i>Nation-builders allied with urban economic elites</i>	Presence/absence of N-U alliance	+
	H7	<i>Urbanisation</i>	Share of urban population	-
	H8	<i>Family farms-based agricultural production</i>	Share of family farms as a % of total cultivated area	+
	H9	<i>Barriers between countryside and cities</i>	Index of monocentrism	+
	H10	<i>Power of Catholic Church</i>	Protestant countries/Religiously mixed countries/Roman Catholic countries	-
Class	H11	<i>Industrial working class</i>	Industrial working class strength (Size + Homogeneity)	+
	Control		Core civil society index	
	Control		Average years of education among citizens older than 15	
	Control		Share of adult citizens who actually voted in a given election	
	Control		Effective number of electoral parties	
	Control		Index of disproportionality	
	Control		Nation-builders' parties vote share	
			Decade/Year	

We also control for two other political-institutional variables, namely, the level of party system fragmentation – the Effective Number of Electoral Parties, *ENEP* (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) – and the *Disproportionality* of the electoral system (Gallagher 1991). Indeed, a higher number of competitive parties should increase the options for voters, thus putting the stability of the dividing cleavage lines under increasing threat, while higher barriers for party entry may discourage the politicisation of social cleavages, especially in the early phases of their development (see e.g. Boix 1999; Kreuzer and Neely 2025). Data come from Gallagher (2023) and own calculations for earlier elections.

As social cleavages are primarily politicised as oppositions to social blocs and parties that represent the ‘nation-builders’ of the respective political systems (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), it is also key to control for the electoral strength of the parties representing them. We have constructed the variable *Nation-builders support* by looking at the parties representing the nation-builders in Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 37) and collecting their aggregate vote share.¹⁰

As a final control for possible problems of spurious correlations in time-series analyses (Roberts and Wibbels, 1999; Tavits, 2005), we have included a linear trend variable (*Year*) or, alternatively, a categorical variable for decades (*Decade*). Table 1 summarises the hypotheses, their empirical translation, and their expected effect on cleavage electoral structuring.

Data and method

The research design to test our hypotheses has an extended temporal scope. Indeed, the article adopts a macro-historical comparative perspective, consistent with the tradition of previous studies dealing with aggregate-level data (Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]; Bartolini 2000; Benedetto *et al.* 2020; Delwit, 2021; Emanuele 2024). It examines 17 Western European countries from the earliest election contested by a party politicising one of Lipset and Rokkan’s original cleavages or from the first available electoral data in the country. Specifically, the article focuses on Lower House elections across a total of 353 electoral periods, starting with Belgium in 1870 up to 1967, the year in which Lipset and Rokkan published their edited book on cleavage structures. Elections held under non-democratic rule have not been considered (e.g. Italy in 1924 or Germany in November 1933).

The number of elections, reported in Table 2, ranges from four in the case of Spain¹¹ to 38 for Belgium, with an average of 20.8 elections per country. In each country, we have considered all parties that historically emerged to represent the interests of the ‘losing’ side of each cleavage, namely, ethno-regionalist parties for the centre-periphery cleavage, Christian-democratic and religious parties for the State-Church cleavage, agrarian parties for the urban-rural cleavage, and socialist, social-democratic, communist, and labour parties for the class cleavage.¹² Overall, a total of 198 parties have been considered for the four cleavage blocs, with class being the only cleavage to be represented in each of the 17 countries under study, consistent with the idea that the class cleavage spread throughout Europe and became a homogenising factor of Western European party systems (Caramani 2004; Rokkan 1970). Conversely, the other three cleavages have been politicised only in a subset of countries (respectively, nine for the periphery cleavage, 14 for the Church one, and

Table 2. Spatial and temporal framework of the analysis.

Country	Period	N elections	N periphery parties	N church parties	N rural parties	N class parties
Austria	1891–1966	17	26	7	9	2
Belgium	1870–1965	38	4	5		3
Denmark	1884–1966	32	1	1	1	3
Finland	1907–1966	24	1	1	3	2
France	1893–1967	19		3		5
Germany	1871–1965	27	8	5	5	3
Greece	1926–1964	15	3	1	5	1
Iceland	1916–1967	18			3	3
Ireland	1922–1965	16			2	4
Italy	1895–1963	13	5	3		5
Luxembourg	1915–1964	15		1	1	2
Netherlands	1888–1967	21		10	2	5
Norway	1891–1965	22		1	1	4
Spain	1923–1936	4	8	2	1	2
Sweden	1893–1964	24		1	2	5
Switzerland	1890–1967	24		3	2	3
United Kingdom	1874–1966	24	8			1
Total	1870–1967	353	64	44	37	53

13 for the rural one), and only in six of them is there at least one party politicising each of the four cleavages (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece and Spain).

The empirical analysis is based on a continuous dependent variable and a time-series cross-section structure. The unit of analysis is the election in a country, with elections representing the temporal units and countries the spatial units. With such a data structure, issues of panel heteroskedasticity and serial correlation within panels may arise (Beck and Katz 1995; Stimson 1985).¹³ As a result, we opted for a Prais-Winsten regression, namely, a panel-corrected standard errors regression with a correction for serial correlation (AR-1).

Results

The freezing hypothesis reconsidered: not-so-frozen cleavage structures

The empirical analysis starts from the testing of H1, positing that, consistent with the *freezing hypothesis*, cleavage electoral structuring remained stable between the 1920s and the 1960s. Table 3 reports the regression of cleavage electoral structuring on a simple model with decades and country fixed effects. By taking the 1920s as a reference point, the table shows, for each cleavage, the change in cleavage electoral structuring across time. Looking at the 1960s, there are no significant differences from the 1920s except for the class cleavage model. Here, electoral structuring increases by almost 13 points ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Evolution of cleavage electoral structuring across decades in the four cleavages.

	Model 1 Periphery		Model 2 Church		Model 3 Rural		Model 4 Class	
	b	pcse	b	pcse	b	pcse	b	pcse
Decade (Ref. cat. 1920s)								
1870s	-4.889	7.651	-9.580+	5.514	-17.611**	5.569	-60.537***	5.588
1880s	-1.622	5.345	-11.687**	4.291	-19.224***	4.429	-58.633***	4.185
1890s	-0.238	3.533	-12.731***	3.854	-22.664***	3.601	-42.080***	3.198
1900s	-0.044	3.012	-10.145**	3.437	-19.185***	3.223	-22.305***	3.008
1910s	2.127	2.145	-5.603+	2.915	-15.401***	2.753	-9.226**	2.918
1930s	0.506	2.135	-0.159	2.202	2.707	2.603	3.285	2.725
1940s	-4.636+	2.677	7.541*	3.124	-6.429+	3.829	12.503***	3.221
1950s	-2.29	2.852	5.151+	3.057	-7.951*	3.686	12.775***	2.834
1960s	-2.627	3.066	4.163	3.279	-6.053	3.869	12.797***	3.091
Country fixed effects	P		P		P		P	
Constant	28.148*	11.143	73.490***	8.896	25.296*	9.943	77.467***	2.831
Wald χ^2	834.6***		1217.4***		784.5***		832.5***	
N of elections	323		323		323		323	
N of countries	17		17		17		17	

Note. Prais-Winsten regression with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions; panel-corrected standard errors are reported. + $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Therefore, a first tentative conclusion can be that the freezing hypothesis is confirmed except for the class cleavage. However, this would be an insufficient and inaccurate conclusion for three reasons.

First, the direct comparison between the 1920s and the 1960s overlooks changes that occurred in the intervening period. Indeed, two other cleavages show relevant changes in the level of electoral structuring between the 1940s and 1950s that were eventually reabsorbed in the 1960s, so much that the last decade appears more similar to the 1920s, but this does not mean that the period 1920–1960s remained frozen. Conversely, a clear positive trend emerges for the State-Church cleavage, while the urban-rural cleavage experienced an opposite, negative trend (see [Figure 2](#)).

Second, it is important to consider not just the trend but the absolute level of cleavage electoral structuring. As shown in [Figure 2](#), since the 1920s, only the class cleavage reached high absolute levels of structuring (an average of 73 in the period 1920–1967), while the other three cleavages always remained on low absolute levels, with an average structuring of, respectively, 12 (periphery), 28.2 (rural), and 31.5 (Church) in the period 1920–1967.

Third, those reported in [Table 3](#) are general Western European patterns that may hide important cross-national differences. This is why [Table 4](#) presents the specific comparison between the 1920s and the 1960s obtained from the above regression analysis run in individual countries. The

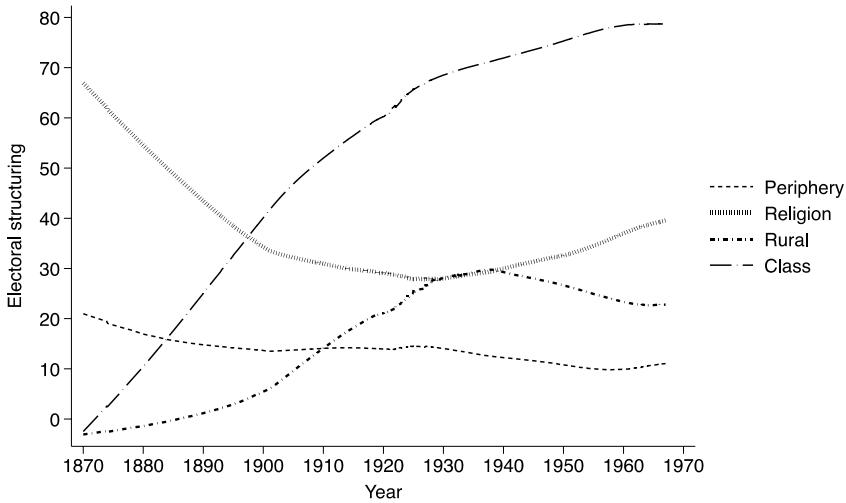


Figure 2. Evolution over time of electoral structuring for the four cleavages.

Table 4. Cleavage electoral structuring in the 1960s in comparison with the 1920s in the four cleavages. Cross-national variations.

Country	Periphery	Church	Rural	Class
Austria	-13.601+	2.765	-13.956**	7.754***
Belgium	-0.652	-6.621		-0.954
Denmark	6.242		-0.156	13.543***
Finland	-22.110***	0.181***	0.438	-0.433
France		45.168***		13.044**
Germany	-25.303***	29.329***	-32.851***	1.713
Greece	1.344		-21.212	51.832***
Iceland			3.234	27.481***
Ireland			-32.223***	10.970
Italy	25.877***	13.778***		17.309
Luxembourg		-11.655*	-0.615	40.698***
Netherlands		-5.104***	-10.530***	8.816
Norway		48.232***	-0.919	19.322*
Spain				
Sweden		0.696***	5.714*	11.951*
Switzerland		1.169	-7.664	0.490
United Kingdom	19.498***			15.850***

Note: the reported coefficients represent the 1960s in comparison to the 1920s in the regression model of cleavage electoral structuring in the country of interest. Spain has no reported coefficients as the period considered (1923–1936) does not include the 1960s. In the other countries, empty cells mean that the cleavage was absent in the 1960s.

existence of specific country trends not necessarily consistent with the general Western European trend is clearly visible, for instance, in the case of the centre-periphery cleavage. The latter was the only one to show a rather steady trend between the 1920s and the 1960s, thus apparently confirming the freezing hypothesis (albeit on low overall levels of cleavage structuring). However, this aggregate stability is the result of contrasting national trends, with, on the one side, Italy and the United Kingdom showing marked

increases in the level of electoral structuring between the 1920s and the 1960s and, on the other side, Finland and Germany (and, to a lesser extent, Austria) showing an opposite trend of cleavage electoral de-structuring.

We have also replicated the analyses in [Table 3](#) only in the sample of countries explicitly discussed in Lipset and Rokkan's work (1967), namely, all but Greece, Iceland, and Luxembourg (see [Table A6 in the Online Appendix](#)). The results are confirmed, with an even stronger and more significant increase in the electoral structuring of the State-Church cleavage in the 1940s and 1950s compared to the 1920s and an opposite trend in the case of the urban-rural cleavage between the 1940s and 1960s.¹⁴

The analysis, therefore, reveals that it is rather hard to claim that Western European cleavage politics was frozen during the period under analysis from an electoral viewpoint.

Revisiting Lipset and Rokkan's conditions

Moving to the explanatory factors of the four cleavages (H2–H11), [Table A8 in the Online Appendix](#) reports the descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables. The analysis, whose results are displayed in [Figure 3](#), includes four models, one for each cleavage, all estimated with a Prais-Winsten (AR1) regression with fixed effects by decade (full results in [Table A9 in the Online Appendix](#)).¹⁵ The results are mixed, as they only partially confirm our hypotheses deriving from Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) conditions.

To begin with, Model 1 shows that, out of the three hypotheses raised above, two (H2 and H3) are confirmed, while H4 is rejected. Indeed, the electoral structuring of the periphery cleavage increases in contexts of high cultural segmentation and when the cultural minority is tied to an external country. In particular, the impact of *Cultural segmentation* is incredibly powerful: a 10-point increase in the level of strength and territorial distinctiveness of cultural minorities translates into a 19-point increase in the electoral structuring of the centre-periphery cleavage. Not by chance, the observations with the highest electoral structuring of this cleavage can be found in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which also presents the highest levels of segmentation of its 12 main ethno-linguistic groups and five religious groups¹⁶ (e.g. see Szöcsik *et al.* 2024). Conversely, the hypothesis concerning the economic dependence of the country on the political metropolis is not confirmed. While the sign of the coefficient is negative, as expected, the GDP share of the capital region does not play a decisive role in the mobilisation and consolidation of periphery bloc parties. The latter may occur even in contexts of strong economic dependence on the political metropolis (e.g. Austria, Belgium) or may not occur even in contexts of minimal economic dependence (e.g. Italy, Sweden).

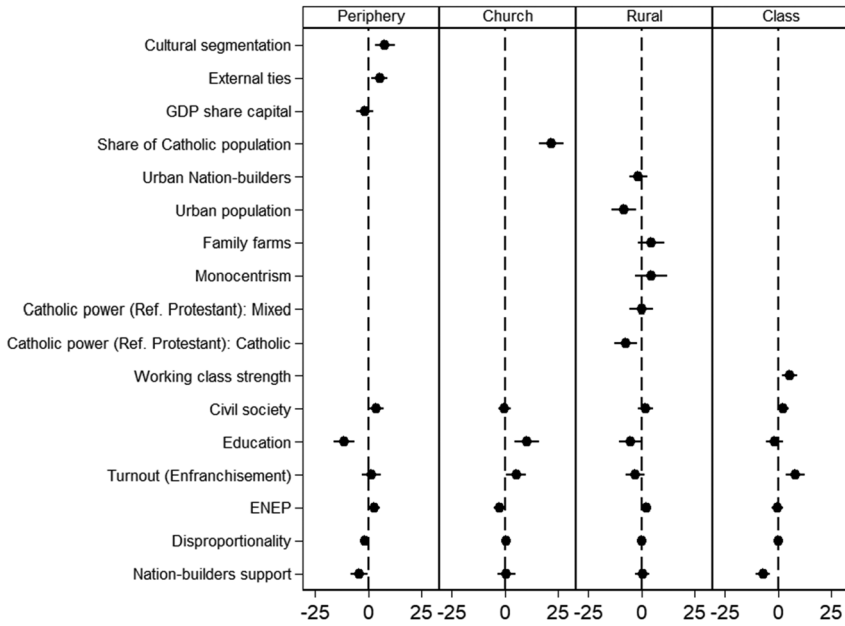


Figure 3. Determinants of cleavage electoral structuring.

Note: Prais-Winsten regression with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) regressions. All variables displayed in the figure have been standardised. Confidence intervals set at $p < 0.05$.

This result suggests a need to downplay the emphasis on the role of economic factors in the emergence and consolidation of ethno-regionalist parties (e.g. Rokkan and Urwin 1982; Strijbis 2023). Instead, the mobilisation of the periphery is primarily triggered by cultural factors.

Model 2 confirms H5, related to the State-Church cleavage. As expected, the *Share of Catholic population* in the country triggers the mobilisation and consolidation of parties for religious defense. Similar to *Cultural segmentation* in the centre-periphery cleavage, here, the effect is rather remarkable. More specifically, if one moves from Protestant to religiously mixed countries, the *Share of Catholic population* increases from 1.5 to 38.5%, and the electoral structuring of the religious cleavage increases by 19.6 points (the mean of the variable is 32.8). In other words, the analysis confirms Lipset and Rokkan's intuition that the State-Church cleavage involved specifically the Roman Church and the Catholic population rather than Christianity and religious people in general, as Protestant countries did not experience the emergence of strong Christian-democratic parties.

Model 3 investigates the five hypotheses raised on the urban-rural cleavage. Here, only two hypotheses (H7 and H10) find empirical confirmation, while H6, H8, and H9 are rejected. The electoral structuring of the rural cleavage is mainly a function of the share of *Urban population*

and *Catholic power*. Both negatively affect rural parties' emergence and consolidation, which tend to occur in contexts of weak urban centres and Catholic Church influence.¹⁷ Conversely, the electoral structuring of the cleavage is not significantly affected by the alignment of the nation-builders with the urban or rural elite (H6): in countries like Austria, Germany, and Ireland, the fact that nation-builders allied with landowners did not prevent rural interests from organising, especially in the interwar period. More important, given the emphasis Lipset and Rokkan put on the size of the units of production and the hierarchies established in the tenure system of the countryside, is the rejection of H8: a family farms-based rural system is not automatically conducive to a strong urban-rural cleavage (e.g. Norway before World-War I; Belgium, Germany, and Netherlands after World War II), whereas a countryside dominated by large estates can, in some cases, be associated with an electorally structured rural cleavage (e.g. Finland before and immediately after World War I). Furthermore, while the weakness of the urbanisation process matters (H7), the specific type of development of the urban environment (mono-centric vs. multicentric) does not: H9 is rejected, as rural parties' emergence and consolidation occurs even in multicentric contexts where the barriers between the cities and the countryside are allegedly lower (e.g. Switzerland) or does not occur in monocentric countries despite the presence of important cultural barriers between the capital and the countryside (e.g. Norway and Sweden before World War I). These findings challenge the traditional view that concentrated landownership hindered agrarian party development. Our results indicate that farm size is not a determining factor; instead, the Catholic Church acted as a surrogate for agrarian parties, safeguarding rural interests. Such an outcome is evident in Southern Europe and particularly in the Italian case (see Ignazi & Wellhofer 2013).

Model 4 confirms H11, the only hypothesis raised on the class cleavage. Indeed, the stronger and more industrially-based the working class, the higher the electoral structuring of the class cleavage. This finding is consistent with previous literature (Bartolini 2000; Benedetto *et al.* 2020) and confirms the key role played by the critical juncture of the Industrial Revolution in the emergence and consolidation of left parties. However, in Emanuele (2024), the size of the industrial working class was not a significant predictor of class cleavage electoral structuring in the 1871–2020 period. This apparent inconsistency is compatible with the 'structural dealignment' thesis (see, for instance, Best 2011) as that analysis includes the post-1970 period, characterised by a massive deindustrialisation process and a consequent decline in the size of the industrial working class.¹⁸

Table 5. Hypotheses, factors, measures, expected effects, and findings.

Cleavage	Hypothesis		Measure	Expected effect on cleavage electoral structuring	Finding
All	H1	<i>Cleavage electoral structuring remained stable between the 1920s and the 1960s</i>	Decade (1920s vs. 1960s)	Null	Mixed
Centre-Periphery	H2	<i>Territorial concentration of a cultural minority</i>	Cultural segmentation (Fractionalisation*Segregation)	+	✓
	H3	<i>External centres of cultural or economic influence</i>	Presence/absence of external ties	+	✓
	H4	<i>Economic dependence on the capital</i>	GDP share of the capital region	-	✗
State-Church	H5	<i>Spread of Catholic faith</i>	Share of Catholics in the population	+	✓
	H6	<i>Nation-builders allied with urban economic elites</i>	Presence/absence of N-U alliance	+	✗
Urban-Rural	H7	<i>Urbanisation</i>	Share of urban population	-	✓
	H8	<i>Family farms-based agricultural production</i>	Share of family farms as a % of total cultivated area	+	✗
Class	H9	<i>Barriers between countryside and cities</i>	Index of monocentrism	+	✗
	H10	<i>Power of Catholic Church</i>	Protestant countries/Religiously mixed countries/Roman Catholic countries	-	✓
Class	H11	<i>Industrial working class</i>	Industrial working class strength (Size+Homogeneity)	+	✓
	Control		Core civil society index		
	Control		Average years of education among citizens older than 15		
	Control		Share of adult citizens who actually voted in a given election		
	Control		Effective number of electoral parties		
	Control		Index of disproportionality		
	Control		Nation-builders' parties vote share		
	Control		Decade/Year		

Besides the empirical testing of the hypothesised factors that either confirms or rejects Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) conditions for the emergence and consolidation of the four cleavages, [Figure 3](#) also highlights the role played by alternative explanations. All six control variables included in the models exert a significant impact on at least one cleavage, thus contributing to better framing the overall story of each cleavage's electoral structuring. A dedicated section in the [Online Appendix](#) discusses the contribution of such variables – particularly social factors such as *Civil Society* and *Education*, and political-institutional factors such as *ENEP* and *Disproportionality* – in shaping each cleavage's context.

[Table 5](#) summarises the results by replicating [Table 1](#) with the addition, for each hypothesis, of the actual findings.

Conclusion

Through a comparative historical analysis and a time-series cross-section dataset, this article has analysed – using a novel conceptualisation and operationalisation – the evolution of cleavage electoral structuring and its determinants in 17 Western European countries from 1870 (or from the first election where a party politicising one of Lipset and Rokkan's traditional cleavages appears) to 1967 (the year of publication of Lipset and Rokkan's edited book). The results should lead us to reconsider some foundational assumptions regarding the theory of cleavage formation and evolution.

First and foremost, the famous 'freezing hypothesis' was analysed by many scholars only with reference to the decades following the 1960s, while its validity in the years considered by Lipset and Rokkan (1920s–1960s) was taken for granted. Yet, our study reveals that the finding emerging from the freezing hypothesis, namely, the stability of cleavage electoral structuring between the 1920s and the 1960s, should be reconsidered and the related emphasis toned down, to say the least. Indeed, the electoral structuring of the class cleavage has experienced a continuous and consistent upward trend between the 1920s and the 1960s. In the cases of State-Church and urban-rural cleavages, the electoral structuring of the 1960s is similar to that of the 1920s, but our analysis shows that there were notable shifts in the in-between decades. Only the centre-periphery cleavage shows stability throughout the 1920–1967 period. However, further investigation reveals that its overall level of structuring is rather low and, most importantly, that this apparent stability hides contrasting national patterns that cancel each other out. Overall, it is rather hard to claim that Western European cleavage politics was electorally frozen during the period under consideration.

Second, the explanatory analysis shows that the role of some predictors is confirmed – e.g. societal cultural heterogeneity and its territorial concentration for the centre-periphery cleavage, the diffusion of the Catholic faith in the case of the State-Church cleavage, urbanisation for the urban-rural cleavage, and the strength of the industrial working class for the class cleavage. However, some other allegedly key predictors are not shown to have influenced cleavages' electoral structuring – e.g. the economic dependence on the capital in the case of the centre-periphery cleavage or the concentration of resources in the countryside in the case of the urban-rural cleavage.

Third, our empirical analysis also unveils the role played by some factors overlooked by Lipset and Rokkan and the subsequent cleavage studies, thus bringing new pieces of evidence contributing to redefining the narrative of cleavages' emergence and strengthening. More specifically, societal factors, such as the strength of civil society or the level of education, and political-institutional factors, such as party system fragmentation and electoral systems' disproportionality, contribute to shaping the context in which cleavages consolidate or decline.

The findings of this work have important implications not only for our understanding of Lipset and Rokkan's cleavage model but for comparative politics more generally. In particular, three findings are potentially harbingers of further reflections and research avenues in the discipline.

First and foremost, the partial rejection of the freezing hypothesis should lead comparative politics scholars to rethink the so-called 'Golden Age' of cleavage structures, political parties, and party system stability in Western Europe (Emanuele 2024; Janda and Colman 1998). That period is usually set as a benchmark to measure 'change' in various respects: the decline of traditional cleavages and the development of new ones, the increase in electoral volatility and the rise of new parties, the crisis of party membership, and the growing relevance of short-term factors in voting behaviour (see e.g. Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017; Franklin *et al.* 1992; Hooghe and Marks 2025; Van Haute *et al.* 2018). All these lines of research typically compare their post-1970 findings with the previous period, with the underlying assumption that the latter was an era of structured cleavages, strong party organisations, and stable patterns of voting behaviour. This study suggests taking care in this regard and, more generally, showing caution in taking for granted assumptions deriving from classical studies that had not been achieved through proper empirical testing.

Second, the fact that economic dependence on the capital does not significantly affect the chances of mobilisation of the periphery should lead to downgrading the role of the economy in the emergence and consolidation of ethno-regionalist parties (e.g., Rokkan and Urwin 1982;

Strijbis 2023), which are, instead, first and foremost, a product of cultural factors. This finding is of great interest to contemporary politics, as it better frames the motives behind the recently resurged nationalist claims and the quest for independence of ethno-regionalist parties in historical peripheries like Catalonia and Scotland (Barrio and Field 2018; Bennie 2016).

Third, the new findings related to the contextual factors hindering agrarian mobilisation are especially relevant to explaining why, for instance, Southern Europe did not experience the development of strong agrarian parties. Traditionally, a key role was attributed to the structure of landownership, with the relevant concentration of resources in a few hands of powerful landowners making the mobilisation through party channels unnecessary to protect the agrarian interests. Rather, the fact that farm size does not matter should be read in conjunction with the finding related to the influence of the Catholic Church which, in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy, acted as a surrogate for agrarian parties in the protection of the countryside (Ignazi & Wellhofer 2013). This finding should lead us to reconsider the role of land power in the historical processes of modernisation, mass political integration, and democratisation (see the classical work by Barrington Moore (1966) and the recent accounts by Albertus (2017) and Samuels and Thomson (2021)).

The work by Lipset and Rokkan has influenced generations of scholars and, still today, represents an essential reference point for researchers on cleavages, party systems, and voting behaviour. These results are not intended to diminish the importance of Lipset and Rokkan's analysis, but rather to stimulate comparative historical research on cleavages and to reassess, in light of the new availability of data, findings that were once considered established and taken for granted. Indeed, the wide amount of available comparative historical data has allowed us to empirically test hypotheses derived from their original expectations using a temporal and spatial framework that is most closely aligned with their original analysis. Looking at our findings from this perspective, the fact that a substantial number of their expectations regarding the emergence and consolidation of the four traditional cleavages have been confirmed by our empirical testing is certainly further evidence of the validity and soundness of their comparative historical analysis. At the same time, our article has revealed that, on the one hand, some of their expectations are not confirmed, and, on the other hand, some factors not included in their explanation play a significant role in explaining cleavage electoral structuring.

This article aims to represent an initial attempt to revisit a theory that is not only relevant to the past but that, especially today, represents a solid foundation for the understanding of cleavages in contemporary society.

Notes

1. Moreover, see also Deegan-Krause and Enyedi (2010, pp. 688–689) on the dual nature of ‘structure’ (i.e., position and stability).
2. Drawing from the literature (Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]; Bartolini, 2000; Federer-Shtayer and Meffert, 2014; Tavits 2005; Emanuele *et al.*, 2020; Emanuele 2023; 2024), we specifically examine parties aligning with each cleavage’s ‘losing’ side, such as working-class parties in the context of the class cleavage or ethno-regionalist parties for the center-periphery cleavage. These parties activate the cleavage by advocating for the interests of their respective social groups. Prior to their involvement, the cleavage remains dormant, as the interests of the ‘winning’ side dominate the party system uncontested. Henceforth, when mentioning parties politicizing the cleavage, it pertains to those representing its ‘losing’ side. [Tables A1-A4 in the Online Appendix](#) report the full list of parties considered for each cleavage bloc.
3. Bloc volatility quantifies the overall aggregate vote shifts between the opposing sides of a cleavage. Its scale ranges from 0, indicating no net aggregate shifts between the two cleavage sides, to the level of total volatility, where all net aggregate shifts between elections occur between the cleavage’s sides (for an extended discussion, see Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]).
4. For instance, a bloc volatility of 4 would indicate significant mobility across the cleavage line if the bloc is supported by 8% of the voters but would be considered negligible if the same bloc is supported by 40% of the voters. In the former case, vote shift involves 50% of the bloc voters, in the latter only 10%. On the importance of weighting bloc volatility by the electoral support of cleavage bloc parties, see Federer-Shtayer and Meffert (2014).
5. For a more detailed discussion on the index along with empirical examples, see the first section of the [Online Appendix](#).
6. For a similar measure, see Selway (2011).
7. The main data source is Rosés and Wolf (2018).
8. Industrial workers are ‘those dependent laborers employed in mining, manufacturing, construction, and transport’ (Emanuele 2023, 919; see also Mainwaring and Zoco 2007).
9. Data come from Emanuele (2023; 2024) and other country-related sources.
10. See the [Table A5 in the Online Appendix](#) for the full list of parties included in the nation-builders’ bloc.
11. Spanish electoral data are not available before 1923, while, after 1936, Spain experiences the civil war and the following Francos’ dictatorship. On Spanish cleavage structures during the analyzed period, see Llamazares (2024).
12. We have tracked these parties from their first electoral contestation onwards by following a principle of organizational continuity (Bartolini and Mair 2007[1990]; Emanuele and Chiamonte 2018) and carefully assessing the inclusion of all direct successors of these parties.
13. The dataset is rather balanced between spatial and temporal units, with a slight prevalence of the latter (17 countries and an average of 20.8 elections per country). We performed an L-R test of panel-level heteroskedasticity and a Wooldridge test of serial correlation (Drukker 2003). Both tests confirmed the presence of these issues in the dataset.

14. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue that the extension of suffrage was pivotal to the freezing hypothesis, as cleavage structures and party systems crystallized after full male suffrage was introduced. In this regard, a more generous test of the freezing hypothesis should require comparing pre- and post-suffrage extension periods rather than specific decades. To explore this, we have replicated Table 3 with decades replaced by a categorical suffrage variable (limited, full male, and universal suffrage). According to the theory, no significant changes in cleavage structuring should occur after full male suffrage is adopted. The analysis, reported in Table A7 in the Online Appendix, offers mixed results, as the expected stability pattern is clearly rejected in the case of State-Church and class cleavages, both showing positive and significant coefficients. Therefore, consistent with Table 3, this analysis challenges the claim that cleavage structures remained frozen during the 1920s-1960s and suggest the need for a re-evaluation of the freezing hypothesis.
15. Due to missing data in some independent variables, the models are estimated in, respectively, 15 countries (center-periphery and urban-rural; all minus Iceland and Luxembourg) and 16 countries (State-Church and class; all minus Luxembourg). As a robustness check, Table A10 in the Online Appendix replicates the results by replacing decade fixed effects with the continuous time variable (Year). We have not opted for a fixed-effects specification by country, given that some variables in the models (e.g., *External ties*, *Urban nation-builders*, or *Catholic power*) are completely time-invariant. In such situations, Plümper *et al.* (2005, 331) show that ‘unit dummies completely absorb differences in the level of independent variables across units’. Furthermore, a Hausman test confirmed that random effects can be used (Treiman 2009, 371).
16. According to the 1910 census, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire hosted 12 different ethno-linguistic groups (Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Ruthenians, Romanians, Croats, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Italians, and Bosnians) and five main religious groups (Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Jews, and Muslims), each including at least 1 percent of the population.
17. For the sake of parsimony, in the variable Catholic power, Greece has been considered as belonging to the Catholic country group (against the Protestant and the religiously mixed countries). We acknowledge this is a highly debatable choice, as Greece has a predominantly Orthodox population. As a robustness check, we have replicated the results of this model by creating an additional ‘Orthodox’ category for the Catholic power variable (see Table A11 in the Online Appendix). All the results are confirmed (in particular, the negative and significant effects of *Urban population* and *Catholic power*), and we also notice that *Family farms* become significant at $p < 0.10$.
18. Moreover, as already done in the case of H1 (see Table A6), Table A12 in the Online Appendix replicates the analyses in Figure 3 only in the sample of countries explicitly discussed in Lipset and Rokkan’s work (1967). The results confirm all our main findings, with the exception of *Family farms* that becomes significant at $p < 0.05$.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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