

## parties, elections, voters

# cleavages, issues and parties: a critical overview of the literature

*Josep M. Colomer<sup>a</sup> and Riccardo Puglisi<sup>b</sup>*

<sup>a</sup>Higher Council of Scientific Research, Barcelona and Department of Economics, University Pompeu Fabra, Ramon Trias Fargas 25, Barcelona 08005, Spain

E-mail: Josep.colomer@upf.edu

<sup>b</sup>Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139-4307, USA

E-mail: r.puglisi@lse.ac.uk

doi:10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210054

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### Among the books reviewed in this article:

#### **Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives**

Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.) (London and New York, Collier-Macmillan-Free Press, 1967), xvi + 554pp., ISBN: 67 25332

#### **Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-six Countries**

Arend Lijphart (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999), xiv + 351pp., ISBN: 0 3000 7894 3

#### **Agenda Formation**

William H. Riker (ed.) (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1993), viii + 285pp., ISBN: 0 4721 0381 4

#### **Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments 1945–1998**

Ian Budge, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Andrea Volkens, Judith Bara and Eric Tanenbaum (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), 274pp., ISBN: 0 1992 4400 6

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The relation between social cleavages, policy issues and political parties has been one of the most extensively studied subjects in comparative political science, since at least the 1960s. The subject seems to target one of the core areas of politics, but different approaches and schools of thought have

not reached a single consistent, generally accepted and empirically successful analytical framework. We distinguish an overview between two groups of contributions. The first takes political parties as the dependent variable to be explained, by pre-existing social cleavages and issues, as in the classical works of

Lipset–Rokkan and Lijphart. The authors of the second group take political parties as an independent variable with strong explanatory power regarding policy issue choices, electoral campaigns and political party competition, and includes different approaches represented by Riker and by Budge *et al.* Our critical review of the existing literature concludes with a new analytical proposal integrating the variables mentioned, in which we emphasise the initiative of party leaders as the origin of the politicisation of issues through public policy design, as well as the indirect formation of social structures.

## FROM CLEAVAGES TO PARTIES

A generally recognised starting point for the study of the subject here consists of Stein Rokkan and Seymour Lipset's contributions in the late 1960s (especially Lipset and Rokkan; Rokkan *et al.*, 1970; see also the compilation by Flora, 1999). The usual way in which these seminal contributions were understood implied that deep social cleavages, produced by remote historical events and transformations, shaped the formation of political parties and, as a whole, the party system in each country. National revolutions in the French variant produced centre-periphery and state–church cleavages, while industrial revolutions in the English variant produced land–industry and owner–worker cleavages. Conservative and liberal political parties were prominent in these processes. But new parties were formed on the basis of the mentioned cleavages, especially ethnic–territorial, radical versus religious, agrarian, and socialist parties. In each country, the existence and relative strength of each party depended on the importance of the originating revolutions and the depth of corresponding cleavages.

Once cleavages were 'translated' (in a typical expression) into party systems during critical junctures, such as processes of democratisation involving the establishment of mass suffrage and stable electoral systems, they were 'frozen' (also a very typical word) for a very long term. As famously stated, 'The party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s' (Lipset and Rokkan, p. 50).

The Lipset–Rokkan approach implied a kind of sociological determinism. The authors did not even make a clear distinction between social cleavages and politicised issues sustaining the formation of political parties. Although they mentioned that strategic considerations regarding organisation, elections, and coalition formation should be taken into account, they did not elaborate or even consider political party leaders' motivations in such intermediate processes (as early noted, for instance, by Alford and Friedland, 1974; see also Flora, 1999: 46).

Even more so, the bulk of empirical literature produced by the followers of this approach did not take into account a number of interesting suggestions, alternative hypotheses and hints prudently introduced by the founding authors in their seminal works. Regarding, in particular, the number of cleavages, Lipset and Rokkan indeed expected voter alignments to be shaped 'by such obvious socio-cultural criteria as region, class, and religious denomination'. But they also noted that, in any society, there was a potential for politicisation arising from 'a great variety of relationships in the social structure', even if many of these social relationships had not yet been transformed into occasions of political polarisation. They even proposed to 'consider the possibility that the *parties themselves* might establish themselves as significant poles of attraction and produce their own

alignments independently of the geographical, the social, and the cultural underpinnings of the movements' (Lipset and Rokkan, p. 3, underlined in the original). This consideration would have been very consistent, in fact, with the alternative approach later developed in the literature here to be reviewed, in which political parties are taken as the origin of issue salience and even cleavage formation.

These caveats somehow eroded the authors' 'freeze' thesis. In fact, the very logic of the analysis suggested that new 'critical junctures' created by unpredicted social transformations, as well as institutional changes, especially of electoral systems, could foster significant innovations in party systems. When looking at cases of party systems which were shown to be 'more fragile and open to newcomers' than the 'freeze' thesis would have permitted to expect, Lipset and Rokkan included as exceptions France, Germany, Italy and Spain all outstanding cases in their initially small sample of countries. They even dared mocking some easy, rigid implications that could be derived from their own vision: 'In the fifties many observers feared the development of permanent majority parties.. . It is heartening to see how quickly these observers had to change their minds'. Regarding the future, they did not in fact predict stability of voter alignments to political parties, but rather that 'there will clearly be greater fluctuations than before', producing not only frequent alternations of previously existing parties in government but also 'new varieties of coalition-mongering' and party formation (Lipset and Rokkan, pp. 50–55).

Further work arising from this initial inspiration took two main directions: (1) social cleavages as a structural explanation of voters' behaviour; and (2) the relation between politicised policy issues and the number of political parties. The

first section of the present review deals with these two strands of the literature.

## **SOCIAL CLEAVAGES**

Consistent with Lipset and Rokkan's general suggestion for a 'comparative political sociology', the basic orientation of further empirical work gave priority to the discovery of social parameters and operationalised data. They sought to confirm and refine the 'social cleavage' model and develop predictions about the presence, strength, cohesion and fate of various parties. Two different lines of investigations were, however, developed. The first sought to prove a direct relationship between social cleavages and political party strength as measured by voter alignments and stability. The second actually tried to prove a close relationship between politicised issues (not necessarily related to social cleavages, although this was not always clear in the analysis) and political party formation and differences.

The huge amount of empirical and analytical work that developed from the purely 'social cleavage' assumption, especially through the sociological tradition of political behavioural research represented by the Columbia and Michigan schools cannot all be reviewed here. In comparison with the macro-structural relations between social cleavages and party systems previously sketched, the analysis was here transferred to micro-level relations between individual characteristics, such as race, language, religion, income or profession, and voter alignments with one or another political party. It was, thus, taken for granted that cleavages were given and fixed, according to the 'freeze' thesis. The hypothesised line of causality was from social cleavages to individual characteristics, which were produced by the former, to political parties, which were conceived as 'expression' and 'representation' of those

social and individual treats. Logically, the expected finding was stability of voting behaviour, although this was not necessarily the only inference possible from Lipset and Rokkan's approach.

We do not review this body of literature here, but only summarise some evaluations of the general results in electoral sociology after several generations of scholarly endeavours. Regarding the United States, Seymour Lipset himself very early on observed, 'the existing political parties have found it difficult to link positions on the new issues to their traditional socioeconomic bases of support... party loyalties have declined' (Lipset, 1981). Lipset, thus, somehow confirmed his and Rokkan's own prediction about a future of fluctuations. But much more recently, a general survey of the accumulated research still saw 'social cleavages as a necessary condition', although 'not a sufficient one for the emergence of political cleavages' (Manza and Brooks, 1999). (For the sake of clarity, in the present review we are calling political cleavages 'issues').

According to multi-country comparative studies, also very early on since the 1970s, 'change became the normal pattern in many countries'. After revising a series of contributions during the 1980s, prominent authors in the field summarised that 'social structure has long been irrelevant to party choice', while the decline of cleavage politics was presented as the removal of a straightjacket opening the gates to initiatives for politicising a variety of issues producing massive electoral change. 'Indeed, much recent scholarship has emphasised the apparently increasing independence of issue-based voting choice from conventional cleavage structures' (Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992: 55; after revising Nie *et al*, 1981; Franklin, 1985; Rose and McAllister, 1986; and Knutsen, 1988). More expeditiously, Mark Franklin concluded that 'social cleavages had (finally...) become

irrelevant to partisanship' (Franklin, 1992: 404).

### **POLITICISED ISSUES**

A second group of contributions focused on the relation not between social cleavages and political parties but between politicised issues and parties. The main reference in a comparative perspective is the work of Arend Lijphart (1984, 1999: Chapter 5). He still used some 'social cleavage' vocabulary, stating, for instance, 'a relatively large number of parties are needed to *express* all these dimensions' (p. 89). But in his empirical recollection of relevant issues in 21 or 36 countries (respectively, in the two editions mentioned), Lijphart grouped together the four basic social cleavages previously identified by Lipset and Rokkan (ethnic, religious, rural-urban, and socio-economic dimensions, roughly corresponding to the previously mentioned centre-periphery, state-church, land-industry, and owner-worker cleavages, respectively) plus another three dimensions not derived from social structures but more directly introduced and politicised by political entrepreneurs: regime support, foreign policy, and materialist versus post-materialist (also based on previous work by Taylor and Laver, 1973; Dodd, 1976; Sartori, 1976; and Inglehart, 1977). Lijphart found an average of more than two relevant issue dimensions per country, with values between 0.5 and 3.5.

The crucial point was the relation between these issue dimensions, whether derived or not from social cleavages, and the party system. Initially, Lijphart noted that 'some important issues in a country may not constitute issue dimensions of its party system, they may divide parties *internally* instead of *from each other*'. But when proceeding to the applied analysis, issue dimensions were 'defined in terms of differences *between* instead of *within*

parties' (Lijphart, pp. 78, 87, emphasis added). Logically, he found a very strong correlation between the number of issue dimensions in each country, as defined in terms of differences *between* parties, and the number of different political parties.

A more precise relation between the number of issues and the number of parties was established, on the basis of Lijphart's first collection of data, by Rein Taagepera and Bernard Grofman (1985). They apparently still confused social cleavages and politicised issues, as revealed in their interpretation that both 'Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Lijphart (1984) may be interpreted as standing for the proposition that 'the more axes of cleavage there are within a society, the greater will be the number of political parties''. But, by taking Lijphart's list of issue dimensions for what they were – politicised issues, derived or not from social cleavages – Taagepera and Grofman found a simple relation that made much sense: 'parties minus issues equals one', or  $I + 1 = P$  (where  $I$  stands for issues and  $P$  for parties). The basic logic behind this finding is that when there is a single politicised issue dimension two parties proposing alternative policies define the issue as a controversial one. Thus, the minimum values in democracy would be  $I = 1$ ,  $P = 2$ . A second issue can be politicised if a new, third, party takes the initiative of introducing a new policy proposal on that issue alternatively to the *status quo*. The politicisation of a third issue would imply that a fourth party enters the scene, and so on.

Of course, it may also happen that a new policy issue is raised by an already existing party. Conversely, there can be more than two policy proposals (and the corresponding parties) on an issue, or a new issue can give place to the creation of not one but two new parties with opposite stands. In fact, Taagepera and Grofman

found the best empirical fit for their relation as  $I + 1 = P \pm 1$ . But this somehow deviated from Lijphart's operative definition of issues as differences between, not within, parties. In further work, Taagepera (1999) himself clarified the question. First, he referred to issues as 'the number of social cleavages that are politicised', noting that 'social heterogeneity is not the same as political heterogeneity. The former deals with potential cleavages, the latter with the actually politicised ones'. Although he still mentioned that 'low heterogeneity puts a lid on the number of parties... because there will be no *demand* for many parties' (emphasis added), he also noted – from what could be rather called, in contrast, a 'supply-side' approach – that 'some political issues do not reflect pre-existing social heterogeneity'. The number of issues can, thus, be higher or lower than the number of social cleavages. But it will certainly be related to the number of parties. Taagepera concluded that if 'politicised issues mean issues on which some parties disagree... the connection (between the number of issues and the number of parties) may be tautological' (Taagepera, 1999: 545).

The substantive findings of the social cleavage literature can be summarised in the following way. First, causality from social cleavages to the creation and strength of political parties has not been proved, but rather dismissed and found irrelevant, probably because the structural-deterministic hypothesis did not seriously consider the intermediate strategic stage of politicising cleavages into issues and building the corresponding organisations or coalitions. Second, the correlation between the number of politicised issues and the number of political parties is strong (of the type  $I + 1 = P \pm 1$ ), but somewhat tautological since, in the empirical data used, issues had been defined precisely as differences between parties.

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Electoral sociology, even after a long-term sustained effort with sophisticated analytical techniques and abundant empirical data, seems to have abandoned the hypothesis that social cleavages can explain individual votes for political parties. In some of the other cases, the weakness of positive results can be due to the number of variables considered, the data available or the operationalising methods used. But none of the disparate scholarly contributions gathered and reviewed above, all of them trying to explain the formation, survival and strength of political parties as dependent on some social structural variables, has achieved conclusive results.

## **FROM PARTIES TO ISSUES**

A completely different approach has tried to explain the number and selection of politicised issues in elections, as well as its role in explaining electoral competition, post-electoral coalition formation and government performance, not as derived from social cleavages or any other similar structural variable, but from political parties' strategies. In the following, we will refer to 'political parties' in the limited sense of organisations driven by electorally oriented leaders. This implies, a vision of political parties as organisa-

tions developing an activity directly addressed to voters in search of their votes, but also having a crucial role in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policy. We do not consider here other important aspects of political parties, such as their different forms of mass or activist organisation or other institutional features.

Four different kinds of contributions are considered, coming from the rational choice school in political science, the institutionalist branch of political economy, electoral campaign and media studies, and the party manifestos project.

Initially, the 'agenda formation' model (Riker, 1983, 1986, 1993, 1996) emerged as an alternative to Downsian spatial models of electoral competition (Downs, 1957). Roughly speaking, in the Downsian models it is assumed that both voters' preferences and the issue policy space (whether one-dimensional or multi-dimensional) are exogenously given, while parties or candidates choose policy-ideological 'positions' in the available space. The Rikerian agenda model, in contrast, assumes that voters' preferences and party positions are basically given (as constrained by an ideological 'argument') and then party leaders choose issue dimensions to be given salience in order to shape the policy space.

Some elements in this approach had already been sketched out by Stokes (1963) in an early critique of Downs' theory. Based on his and other colleagues' empirical findings in the field of electoral sociology mentioned above (especially Campbell *et al*, 1960), Stokes remarked that the electoral policy space tends to be multi-dimensional and it does not have a stable structure. In order to understand electoral competition, he recommended that 'different weights should be given (to) different dimensions at different times'. Stokes even sketched the strategic argument: 'The skills of political

leaders who must maneuver for public support in a democracy consist partly in knowing what issue dimensions are salient to the electorate or can be made salient by suitable propaganda' (Stokes, 1963: 372).

More specifically, Stokes made an analytical distinction between position- and valence-issues, which would clarify some of the further discussion. For position-issues, there is a set of policy alternatives the parties can take and for which a distribution of voters' preferences can be defined – for instance, on trade or school issues. Stokes suggested that, on these issues, the Downsian analytical framework, in which parties choose policy positions, would be appropriate. For valence-issues, in contrast, there can only be a dichotomous positive–negative evaluation. An 'overwhelming consensus' is assumed to be the goal of government action on these issues: all parties and electorate want it – for instance, peace or prosperity. Party competition on those issues consists in claiming credit or getting blamed for it (based on the party's previous government record and the likelihood of its performing well in the future). Interestingly, Stokes acknowledged that a position-issue can become a valence-issue (for instance, a consensus for less taxes can be created) and *vice versa* (peace at any cost, for instance, can suddenly become a divisive issue). Also, voters can change their minds regarding which parties can be positively or negatively associated with each issue.

To summarise according to the Downsian model of two-party competition, we should expect that parties will converge in their positions on position-issues. But, according to Stokes' contribution, parties will coincide on wanting more of consensual valence-issues. So, in general, no confrontation between highly different policy positions could be expected in electoral competition in the long term.

A number of crucial points in this approach which have been further developed are discussed in the following pages: (1) the origins of policy issue proposals and preference formation; (2) the role of parties and ideologies in policy design; (3) the implications for electoral campaigns; and (4) the evaluation of policy performance and the subsequent attachment of certain issues to specific parties.

### **THE ORIGINS OF POLICY PROPOSALS**

An issue may become salient in voters' perception if it is known that problems related to it have occurred which deserve some policy action (note that 'agenda', which literally means 'things to be done', has the same Latin root of 'action' and 'agent'). The *status quo* policy might have become unsatisfactory, even if it has been stable for a long period. Durable dissatisfaction can be the result of the fact that a single vote on multiple policy issues may impede the implementation – on less salient issues – of policy positions that are preferred by a majority of voters (a Downsian insight noted, for instance, by Besley and Coate, 2000, 2003). Dissatisfaction may also derive from changing circumstances, such as technology or migration, causing a traditional policy to produce new unintended, undesirable effects. But all of this also implies that voters' preferences may not be exogenously given but formed in the process of challenging the *status quo* and giving new salience to an issue.

For a political party or entrepreneurial politician, giving salience to an issue (which essentially means talking about it and making it news) implies taking a new 'position' on the issue itself in contrast to the presumably unsatisfactory *status quo* policy, as well as framing the new position or policy proposal with some value or argument. Only the presentation of alternative

policy proposals induces the 'activation' of relevant voters' preferences. Voters can then form their preferences over different policy alternatives on an issue by comparing the *status quo* policy on the issue and some new policy proposal. Thus, voters' clearly defined preferences cannot exist in the absence of alternative policy proposals and the corresponding issue salience. If no new policy proposal is presented, the issue will not be salient, but then voters will not have preferences on the issue either. This line of reasoning is consistent with the idea that voters as decision makers have a limited amount of attention to devote to the formation of preferences regarding policy issues. Once an issue becomes salient thanks to a new policy proposal, voters will dedicate some time and attention to defining their preference.

William H. Riker once made a distinction between 'heresthetics' as the art of selecting issues and 'rhetoric' as the art of arguing about the issue by means of persuasive values. Regarding the latter, it has been frequently remarked that two types of arguments exist: 'negative' arguments oriented to rejecting the *status quo* and which, according to standard psychology, are likely to be given relatively high weight by voters; and 'positive' arguments for choosing new proposals, which may be accepted by default. (cf. in Bailey, 1969; Davis and Ferrantino, 1996; Riker, 1996; Sartori, 1998).

It should be possible to develop similar spatial models for each of the two manipulative strategies just mentioned. In a multi-dimensional issue space, for each issue-dimension there can be a multi-dimensional value space. For instance, governmental social spending and abortion can be two salient issues in an election forming a two-dimensional issue space. But for the issue of social spending one party may want to emphasise its characteristic of social investment in

favour of the poor while the other party may give salience to the implication that it requires new taxes, thus creating a two-value dimension for the issue. On the abortion issue, one party will give salience to the value of 'freedom' of choice, while another party will try to make the value of 'life' more salient. Giving a new issue salience may make the space one-issue dimensional, but this might be only the first step in a process in which the party disadvantaged on that issue will react by giving salience to an alternative value on the issue, by this way creating new multi-dimensionality in the space. In such a framework, rhetoric can be considered as a further development of heresthetics, within a single issue that can be framed in different ways.

In this approach, the formation of the public agenda is explained as the result of endogenous salience structures based on information and messages, without having to include previously formed voters' preferences or exogenous preference changes. The selection of salient issues is not determined by pre-existing social cleavages, but the result of political party's or entrepreneurial politician's initiative to provide information, news and values on some potentially politicised issues.

## **PARTY AND IDEOLOGY**

It is mainly the parties that choose new issues in their platforms and public debate. Each party, apart from deciding which position to hold on each issue, has a fixed endowment of 'effort' (measurable in terms of time, money, personnel, organisation) that can be distributed across issues. The share of effort devoted to an issue can determine the weight given by voters in evaluating the party's position on that issue (Cantillon, 2001). In addition, parties may also want to select candidates who are more competent on the issue they want to highlight.

This could be a way to commit credibly to devote effort to a given issue.

As remarked above, voters' preferences and choices are also determined by the limits of their resources, in this case involving memory and capacity of attention span. They are likely to give more weight to repetitive, intense messages, as is often remarked by cognitive psychology (see comments by Riker, 1983). For many voters, a reasonable hypothesis is that salience suggests the pre-commitment of the party, if it arrives in government, to dedicate the corresponding fraction of time and resources to the issue. An alternative hypothesis more in accord with traditional Downsian assumptions, would be that a voter can choose a party on the basis of the voter's concern for an issue and the party's position on the issue even if it is not raised or giving salience by the party. However, it would be highly risky for a voter to vote for a party on the basis of non-salient issues because it is obviously likely that the party, once in government, will not pay much attention to them and will spend more effort on issues in which it has committed itself during the electoral campaign.

Parties' innovative proposals are, thus, limited, especially by the party system itself and the communication role of political ideologies. First of all, policy innovation is limited because a party sells packages on several issues at the same time. This implies that a system of policy choice based on political parties' initiative may be unsatisfactory for many citizens on many policy issues. New issues can be developed inside old parties or create the occasion and motive for the formation of new parties – as already suggested by Lijphart's comments. Which of the two alternatives will occur strongly depends on the electoral and institutional system.

Also, simple institutional frameworks – such as a single-chamber parliamentary regime with single-member districts – in

which a single-seat election is decisive for the composition of both the parliament and the cabinet, as well as for all the set of corresponding policies, is likely to be potentially highly multi-dimensional and open to issue innovation. In contrast, within institutional frameworks involving division of powers and decentralisation, each election for a separate institution (say, the presidency, each of the chambers of parliament, regional and local governments) is likely to deal with relatively low numbers of potential issues and make innovation more difficult. Ultimately, if there were a single issue for each election because the division of powers among different institutions made policy decisions highly fragmented, no choice of issues would be possible. The standard Downsian model of a single-issue space with only a position-taking strategy would apply very well.

The second limitation on policy innovation derives from the role of ideology. The relation between policy issues and political ideology has been systematically explored in extensive empirical analyses by the Manifesto Research Group led by Ian Budge (Robertson, 1976; Budge *et al*, 1987, 2001; Laver and Budge, 1992). Even in an internally highly flexible party or in a multi-party system with low entry costs, policy-issue innovation is limited by the encompassing, rigid role of political ideologies. Although ideologies may not give detailed guidance of which position to take on the issue in policy space, they do indicate the general policy 'area' (in a spatial sense) that a party should occupy. On the basis of general ideologies, parties recognise each other's spatial boundaries and, then, 'parties cannot move much beyond the centre, nor change their relative positions to left or to right, because of the confusing effects this would have on electors and the lack of credibility of a party which repudiated its past commitments, not to mention the

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policy beliefs of leaders themselves' (Budge, 1994: 451).

In fact, this is a very Downsian argument. According to Downs, the relevance of the left-right (or a similar) dimension for a high number of economic, social, moral and cultural issues is largely due to communicative restrictions imposed by the existence of mass electorates and media. It would not be rational for a voter with very small influence on the electoral result to pay high costs for obtaining detailed information about each party's stands on each issue. General ideological and symbolic messages may provide sufficiently good hints and cues to make a voter's choice probably correct.

But a party's ideological consistency can produce cognitive dissonance among voters. Certain voters can find it hard to manage instances in which their agreement with a party is partial, in the sense that they agree on some issues and they definitely disagree on some other issues. Instead of weighting pros and cons on different issues when making their choice, some voters may prefer to embrace a given political party, which may entail dissonance on some issues.

At the same time, communicational requirements prevent parties from adopting disparate or apparently contradictory positions on different issues and force them to take rather predictable positions when a new issue emerges in order to be understood by the electors as being consistent with the party's previous posi-

tions on other issues. The need to maintain 'ideological consistency' in order to keep their members together and communicate in simple ways with voters limits parties' capabilities to innovate or fight successfully on certain issues because they cannot take the most popular position on them.

Ideological consistency, thus, condemns some parties to appearing as disadvantaged on certain issues and therefore not interested in emphasising or giving them salience. However, as some authors remark, the specific policy position contents of 'left' and 'right' or of 'progressive', 'liberal' and 'conservative' global ideological positions are accidental: 'There is after all no logical or inherent reason why support for peace (for instance) should be associated with government interventionism (also for instance)' (Budge *et al*). What is less accidental is the convenience to maintain predictable and relatively stable positions on each issue and on the encompassing ideological dimension, in order to be able to offer understandable 'packages' to the voters over time.

The analysis of party electoral manifestos in twenty-five countries during the period 1945–1998, which relies heavily on 'intensive reading of the texts themselves', distinguishes fifty-seven policy issues and a limited number of ideological dimensions. These are the politicised issues that take salience in electoral campaigns, in a similar vein to Lijphart's previously mentioned issue dimensions, which claimed to capture all relevant or 'salient' issues in elections. Budge and the members of the Manifesto Research Group distinguished seven groups of issues (close to but not exactly corresponding to Lijphart's seven dimensions), roughly characterised as: minority groups, morals, the economy (including agrarian protectionism), social issues (including environment), political regime, foreign policy, and government effectiveness

(the latter not included in Lijphart's) (see, for instance, Budge *et al*, Table 3.2). As can be seen, these distinctions between groups of politicised issues were not necessarily related to pre-existing social cleavages, since several of them were strictly related to government performance.

By using factor analysis, the Manifesto Research Group tried to identify how many issue dimensions, that is, groups of issues on which parties could be distinguished, were relevant in each country. Budge and his co-authors have repeatedly emphasised that the left-right ideological dimension is the most common one across countries and they have provided the corresponding relative party positions over time. On all issues parties tend to locate themselves on the same relative part of the spectrum with respect to other parties (no 'leap-frogging'), although they do not follow any pattern of convergence or divergence in the long term (Budge *et al*; see also Laver and Hunt, 1992; Laver, Benoit and Garry, 2003). 'In most countries, there is no steady movement to convergence or divergence; parties come together and move apart presumably in response to imperatives of party competition, not to secular trends towards deideologisation' (Budge, 1993).

In the short term, during election campaigns, parties can fight on several dimensions at once by choosing different issues to emphasise. No single number of issue dimensions has been found appropriate to make generalisations across countries. Initially, a major finding was that 'the optimal spaces for each country were never less than three-dimensional, and sometimes four- or five-dimensional' (Budge *et al*, 1987; Chapter 18; Budge, 1993: p. 58). Further research has presented results in two (Robertson, 1976; Schofield and Laver, 1985; Miller and Schofield, 2003), three (Warwick, 2000), or five issue dimensions (Budge *et al*,

1987; see survey by Budge *et al*, 2001). According to these analyses, the independence of the number of issues politicised by political parties in electoral campaigns from social cleavages or other pre-existing structural variables seems to be complete.

## **ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS**

The literature reviewed here supports the hypothesis that, in electoral campaigns, parties devote more effort to persuading voters that some issue should be 'salient' in their decision rather than to confront different policy proposals on any issue, that is, party 'positions' in the typical spatial approach. In the public debate, using campaign advertisements and media messages, each party seeks to give salience to those issues on which it is more credible and expects to obtain voters' attention and votes. It follows that parties do not debate policies but simply try to give salience to different issues, even using ambiguous statements regarding their policy proposals.

No party is, of course, in full control of the environment, in which other parties, pressure groups, unexpected events and the media contribute to shaping the public agenda. From this point of view, two types of campaign agendas could be distinguished, depending on whether they are endogenous to party competition or exogenous if imposed by external events, pressure groups or independent media.

For endogenous formation of campaign agendas, Riker distinguished two strategic principles. By the 'dominance principle', the party insists on an issue where the party proposal proves to be successful; by the 'dispersion principle', the party abandons an issue where the party proposal fails in attracting voters' attention or support. These party strategies produce electoral campaigns in which fail to

discuss with one other – so they talk about different issues and change the subject when are explicitly challenged (Riker).

Several electoral tactics can be identified in the continuing effort to attract attention to some preferred issue. One may include personal attacks of provocation on the rival party or candidate in order to divert their attention or put them on the defensive and then fill the corresponding vacuum with the preferred message. Also, a party can create opportune events, which may go from the usual town visits and press conferences to book presentations and artfully provoked international conflicts.

Similarly, Budge underlined that electoral campaigns are mostly about salience, not confrontation, therefore leading to no real debates (see also Simon, 2002 for empirical support). Somewhat more strongly, Budge even held that parties 'rarely take specific policy stands at all', but, at the same time, emphasise some policy areas because 'their credibility on that position is strong enough to pick up votes' or the party is 'committed and hence most trusted by electors' (see Budge *et al*, 1987, 2001).

In 'exogenous' campaign agendas, however, a party may face itself forced to deal with an issue on which it has a disadvantaged position – say, for instance, after a big scandal, massive popular protests, a terrorist attack or an external war. Then, given that the topic may have received overwhelming weight in news and voters' perception, the best response for the disadvantaged party is to give salience to the least unfavourable value attributes within the topic itself. As already mentioned, the corresponding discussion on different values for the same issue will create a new multi-dimensional value space within the one-dimensional issue space. Parties will talk now on the same issue, but still without discussing it with one another.

Electoral campaigns are also characterised by a prominent role of mass media in forming the agenda. As was already remarked by Cohen (1963), the media 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it's stunningly successful in telling its people what to think about'. McCombs and Shaw (1972) is the seminal empirical contribution in which such concept of agenda-setting effects of news coverage has been put to test. Further empirical studies have adopted a wide range of research designs, from cross-sectional surveys to aggregate time series analysis, from repeated cross-sections to controlled experiments. The broad message stemming from this literature, even if with some internal variation, is that agenda-setting effects on public opinion are indeed sizeable. However, there are several causal links connecting voters' real-world experience, the media agenda, and the voters' concerns. Real-world cues and experience influence both the media and the voters' concerns, while the media, if the theory of agenda-setting is correct, has a strong and separate influence on the salience structure of the voters. Additionally, political parties can have clear incentives to alter the set of news that voters receive. Political leaders may try and manipulate media outlets by buying their silence on the bad news; a more subtle way of obtaining the same result is to make the story on the preferred issue more palatable to the taste of media editors or journalists (Besley and Prat, 2004; Puglisi 2004a). From an empirical point of view, Puglisi (2004b) in fact shows that the *New York Times*, over the time period spanning from 1946 to 1994, systematically gives more coverage during presidential campaigns to the Democratic topics of health care, civil rights, labour and social welfare, but only when the incumbent president is a Republican.

*'Political leaders may try and manipulate media outlets by buying their silence on the bad news; a more subtle way of obtaining the same result is to make the story on the preferred issue more palatable to the taste of media editors or journalists'*

#### **POLICY PERFORMANCE AND PARTY ADVANTAGE**

When a new policy issue is given salience in order to attract voters' attention and votes, three alternative outcomes may happen. First, the party may fail in its endeavour, never arrive in government and not be able to implement the policy. Second, the party may win sufficient support to enter government and implement the policy, but this may produce unexpected or undesirable effects, causing voters to prefer again the previous *status quo* or a similar position. Finally, the new policy may be successful in the sense of being satisfactory for the citizens and this may reinforce the party's electoral support. In the first and the second occurrences, which both imply a policy failure, it is likely that the party, having promoted salience for the new issue, will be either electorally weakened in future elections or withdraw its policy proposal. The previous *status quo* policy will prevail. In the third occurrence, as the new policy will be implemented with wide popular acceptance, it is likely that the other party or parties will lower the salience of the issue or even adapt their positions on the issue to the new *status quo*. A new policy consensus may be created and as a consequence, the issue

will also lose salience in future contests. In the long term, thus, whether new policy proposals fail or succeed, we should expect increasing policy consensus among political parties. The number of issues potentially to be politicised and given salience by offering new policy proposals will always be very large, but an increasing number of them will be successively discarded from the electoral contest.

At this stage, we can compare again the implications of this model of agenda formation with some basic elements in classical Downsian spatial models of electoral competition. In the latter, in which the basic strategy is the party's choice of policy positions, the main results are either policy convergence on a single issue-dimension or chaotic trajectories or unpredictably changing policies in a multi-dimensional issue space (see Grofman, 2004 for a revision). In the model of agenda formation, in contrast, a multi-dimensional issue space does not necessarily produce policy instability. It is expected that parties will select some issues to be given salience, while voters will vote on the basis of the vector of weights they attach to the different issues. In spatial terms, the sequence implicitly assumed in the agenda model can be presented with the following steps:

- (1) There is a *status quo* policy on an issue which is non-salient, on which voters have no real preferences (because they have no alternatives to compare), and on which there is no party competition.
- (2) An innovative party chooses a new issue 'position', that is, a new policy proposal in contrast to the *status quo* and give it salience and value.
- (3) Voters form their preferences by comparing the *status quo* with the new policy proposal. It is in the subsequent distribution of voters'

preferences that a 'median voter' emerges. All the previous stages are not contemplated by the classical spatial models, which assume that the issue space and the voters' preferences are given.

- (4) It is only at this stage that basic assumptions of Downsian models begins to apply. On a new salient single issue there is party distance and perhaps polarisation. One party – typically the closest one to the median voter – has electoral advantage and wins.
- (5) The other party, whether a defeated previous incumbent or a failed challenger, may unilaterally converge to the new winning position. A new consensus can be formed, as also postulated by Downs. But note that in this approach convergence and consensus may be formed around a vague political 'centre' defined by a previously given median voter's position. If the challenge of the innovative policy proposal turns out to be successful, the new consensus will be formed around the new winning position which will have proven to be able to attract popular support and define a new median voter.
- (6) The issue in question will loss salience. A new issue space is likely to be shaped for the next election.

This dynamic sequence suggests that, in a static analysis, different policy issues may be 'owned' or 'leased' by some parties (as in the classical classification by Petrocik, 1996). But – as we will discuss below – they may also be either controversial or consensual.

In most of the literature reviewed here, it is implicitly assumed that the party policy stand is sufficiently well known by the voters to give the party 'credibility' and 'trust' for its enforcement. In other words, it is usually taken for granted that a policy proposal already exists, that it

has proven successful or has gained a value-argumentative effort of persuasion, and, as a consequence, has the support of all or at least a majority of voters. It is also assumed that the successful policy proposal is attached in the eyes of the public to one of the parties, presumably the one having originally introduced the proposal and/or having transformed it into successful government policy.

Hence, leftist parties like the socialists (but also the Christian Democrats) tend to favour social welfare policy issues, while the liberals emphasise free-market economic efficiency, and the conservatives prefer to give salience to defence, foreign and interior policy issues (see Budge and Keman, 1990). In the United States, 'Democrats have an electoral advantage when problems and issues associated with social welfare and inter-group relationships are salient. Republicans have an advantage when issues related to taxes, spending, and the size of government are high on the public agenda,' (Petrocik *et al*, 2002). Other empirical analyses have also postulated that different issues are 'owned' by different parties, as developed, for instance, by Carmines and Stimson (1989) regarding the issue of race in the United States. In a very long term perspective, the absence of direct rivalry between parties on each issue (although nothing that parties can change their emphasis on different issues over time) has also been assumed by Miller and Schofield (2003); see also Schofield *et al*, 2003).

By analysing news content, answers to open-ended questions about issue salience, and the vote itself for US presidential elections in a long-term period, Petrocik shows that candidates indeed tend to emphasise 'owned' issues in their political speeches. If issues owned, for instance, by the Democratic party are salient, Republican voters are less willing to go to the polls and vote for their candidate, independents are more willing

to vote for the Democratic candidate, and finally democratic turnout increases, together with their vote for their partisan candidate. Of course, the opposite party advantage also applies.

While 'owned' issues are those in which a party is reckoned as more capable on a long-term basis, 'leasing' may exist on issues in which, for instance, the incumbent has performed acceptably well on a short-term basis. Performance issues, such as the conduct of government officials, the state of the economy, or the country's status and security among other nations, are not automatically owned by a single party, but can provide an advantage to a candidate when events, official behaviour, and policy failures allow the candidate to claim credit for good times or blame the opposition for bad times (Petrocik *et al*, 2002).

In this approach, 'party ownership' of issues results from the accumulation of positive policy performances over time. This analytical framework may evoke some rationalist revision of the old theory of 'party identification' by voters, in which it is conceived as deriving from the accumulation of positive retrospective voting (see Fiorina, 1977). This approach may explain that certain issues may appear as temporarily 'owned' by a party, but, after a perhaps unexpected big failure – which could be produced by technological or population changes or other factors – issue ownership can also change. As already noted in Stokes' seminal contribution mentioned above, even 'valence-issues' enjoying broad consensus may become controversial position-issues. Also, new governmental performances may modify a party's traditional advantage on an issue.

Just as happened with 'party identification' in the above-mentioned interpretation, so 'party ownership' can come to imply an incumbent's advantage. The incumbent party or candidate may obtain advantage in electoral competition from a

higher capability for providing favourable information and good news on the preferred issues, as well as the possibility of having performed temporarily well on some unowned issues. However, the incumbent may also have some disadvantages. For certain issues, values implying criticism of governmental interventionism or of rising taxes can backfire against the incumbent (Jacoby, 2000). In general – as also noted in cognitive psychology – a party in government can be rewarded much less for good performance than it is punished for bad performance (Ansola-behere and Iyengar, 1994).

In contrast to issue 'ownership' and 'leasing', no comparable attention has been devoted to the permanence of controversial policy proposals that can still split the electorate after their initial emergence from an inconclusive governmental performances. This, however, could explain party polarisation and the corresponding alternation of winning parties and policies on a single issue, which is certainly a rather common occurrence. On some issues not yet settled, ambiguity regarding policy effects, controversy in public debate, uncertainty about voters' support, and party alternation in government to implement alternative policies may subsist. Political competition may inflame conflicts and generate polarisation on those issues. Precisely because many differences between party platforms tend to disappear, a few potentially controversial differences are exaggerated. Although it could be assumed that these features would correspond to 'primitive' stages in the formulation of innovative policies, they also seem to exist in reality even for very 'old' issues such as family values and sex issues, for instance (Fiorina *et al*, 2004).

## SUMMARY

In the second group of contributions here reviewed, politicisation of issues appears

as the work of entrepreneurial politicians in their task of launching policy proposals, building parties or candidacies, persuading voters and receiving their votes. The potential for such activity seems to be immense, since it does not depend on prominent structural characteristics of the society. It can encompass literally any topic, subject or aspect of human life able to be regulated by public enforceable decisions, on which some alternative to the *status quo* can be proposed. This may include both issues that have not been in the public sector before and 'privatisation' of issues traditionally submitted to public regulation. As Ian Budge and Judith Bara remark: 'Most investigators in this area would probably agree that the 'true' policy space is composed of as many dimensions as there are political actors and public preferences held by them – forming an underlying space of almost infinite dimensions therefore (especially if we take private preferences into account, whose translation into public ones is difficult and chancy)' (Budge *et al*, p.59).

## CONCLUSION

A number of contributions to the conceptualisation and analysis of the relations between social cleavages, policy issues and political parties have been reviewed. Two bodies of literature have been distinguished, according to whether they take political parties as dependent or independent variable in their analyses. From both schools, we can clarify the conceptual difference between social cleavages and policy ('politicised') issues, as well as the connection between the latter and political parties.

The first group emphasised a line of causality from social cleavages to political parties. By contrast, the findings of the literature reviewed in the second part can be summarised the following way:

- (1) Social cleavages do not appear in the analytical framework. It could be inferred from the analysis that they are a product rather than the origins of public policy decisions and enforcement.
- (2) The potential of issues to be politicised in a complex society with a working government is immense, not restricted to a handful of controversies nor determined by deep cleavages associated to long-term social structures.
- (3) Policy innovation and the corresponding party advantage are limited by the role of political parties in providing 'packages' of policies and the requirement of developing not very costly communication with voters through ideological consistency. Parties place themselves on a policy area along an ideological dimension encompassing multiple issues, such as the left-right axis, and have to stay within.
- (4) In electoral campaigns and, more generally, in shaping the public agenda, parties choose to give salience to those issues on which they have an advantage before the electorate. Such advantage is typically based on the trust and credibility their previous performance has gained them. In an unstable multi-dimensional policy space parties can give salience to different issues. A single-issue discussion is also likely to become a multi-dimensional value space.
- (5) On the basis of some previous process and experience, different policy proposals are submitted to the proof of public evaluation. If successful, they are associated with specific political parties, augmenting their trust and credibility.

This approach might enlighten the successes, failures and general evolution of public policies and related political parties

and ideologies over time. While policy consensus may emerge on a number of issues, there will be polarisation on other issues. In any case, there will always remain a number of non-salient but latent issues, potentially to be politicised, and thus open to further policy innovation and change.

In this perspective, the general relation between cleavages, issues and parties can be re-stated the following way. It is policy issue design and implementation that can explain the formation of social cleavages and structures, rather than the other way round. In contrast to the traditional sociological approach, the hypothetical line of causality can be reversed, since it can be expected that politicised issues in the form of policy proposals, if they become effective public policy, will create incentives for citizens, groups and companies to react that will eventually transform some social structures. Or, to paraphrase some statements in the 'social cleavage' approach, new 'critical junctures' can be created by parties unpredicted policy issue proposals and salience.

*'The number of politicised issues cannot directly explain the number of political parties, since policy innovation may develop either within or between parties.'*

The number of politicised issues cannot directly explain the number of political parties, since policy innovation may develop either within or between parties. Which of these alternative developments will be chosen highly depends on the electoral system – a topic that has not been reviewed here – but it is likely that electoral systems will also be chosen by political parties in order to permit or prevent the creation of new parties. The role of party leaders' initiative in both politicising issues and creating parties has been emphasised in what could be labelled a 'supply-side' approach to political process.

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## About the Authors

**Josep M. Colomer** is Research Professor in Political Science and the author of more than 120 academic articles and book chapters, as well as author or editor of 28 books in six languages, including *Handbook of Electoral System Choice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), winner of the Leon Weaver Award of the American Political Science Association; *Political Institutions in Europe* (Routledge, 2002); *Political Institutions* (Oxford University Press, 2001); *Strategic Transitions* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and *Game Theory and the Transition to Democracy: The Spanish Model* (Edward Elgar, 1995). Josep M. Colomer acknowledges partial support of grant HPSE-CT-2002-00146 from the European Commission.

**Riccardo Puglisi** holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science and is Assistant Professor at the department of Political Science of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.