

BAK10: Comparative Democratic Politics

Week 8 - Cleavages and Party Systems

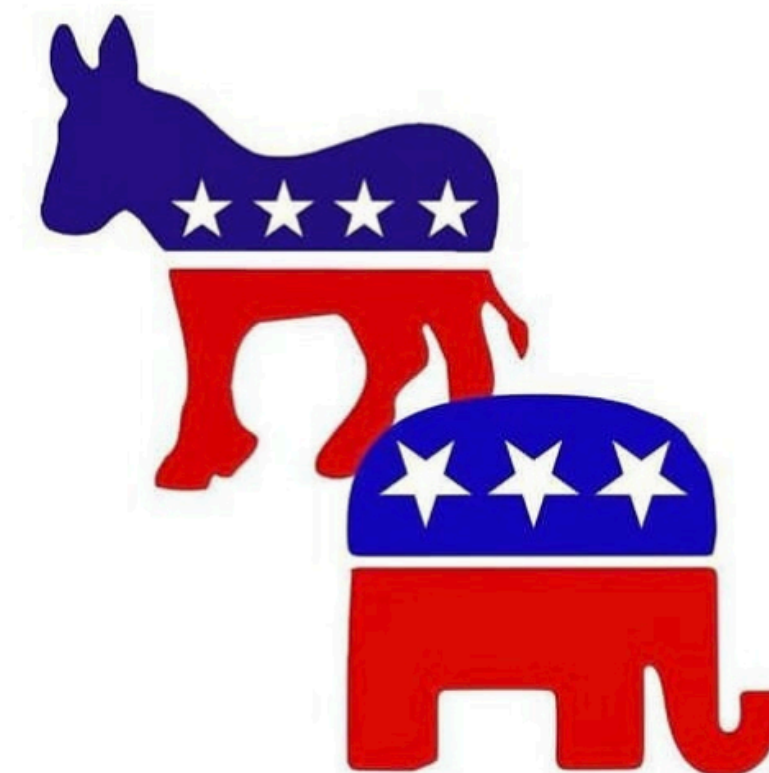
Leonardo Carella

The Plan for Today

- Classical **cleavage** theory: how we got the parties we have.
- **Party systems** as the product of cleavages *plus* strategy *plus* institutions.
- ‘New’ cleavages and **party system change** in the age of globalisation.



Nooo! America
splitting into two
political factions will
only further divide and
polarize America and
subvert the power of
the people and fuel
the most horrid
enormities of the
people!



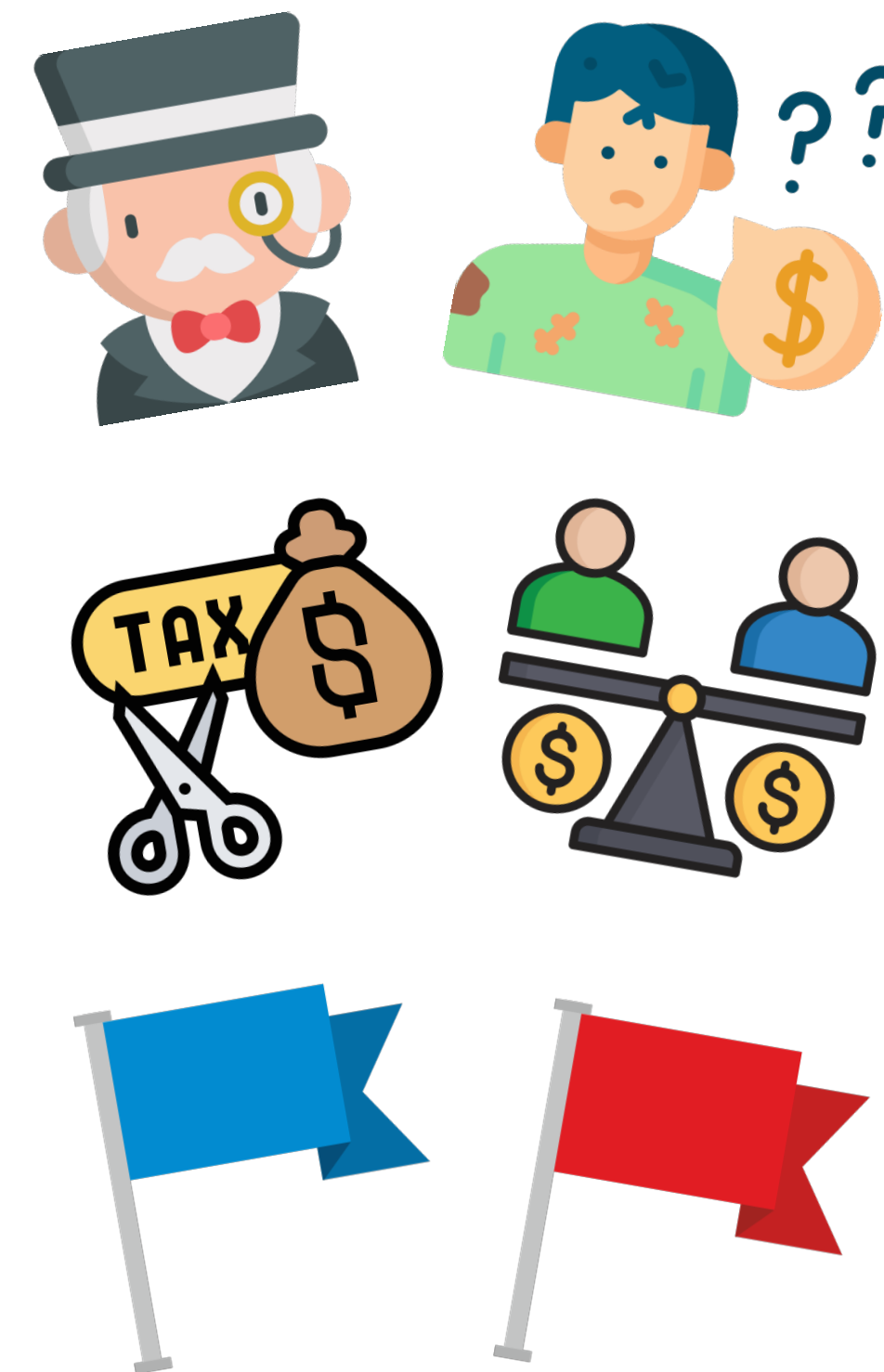
Hahaha funny colored
animals go brrrr

Where were we...?

- **Institutions** shape party systems (allowing for some endogeneity!).
 - Most notably: electoral systems → number of parties (week 7).
 - But also: executive forms → party organisation and cohesion (week 5).
- But this is primarily about the ‘shape’ and ‘size’ of parties and party systems. What about their ‘content’?

Cleavages

- For Bartolini and Mair (1990), a cleavage is a *durable division* among citizens that:
- Has a basis in differences between **social groups** (the ‘socio-structural’ element).
- Corresponds to differences in **beliefs** and **identities** (the ‘normative’ or ‘attitudinal’ element).
- Drives political conflict, through institutions like **parties** (the ‘organisational’ or ‘institutional’ element).



Cleavages and Party Systems

- Lipset and Rokkan (1967): political parties are “alliances in conflicts over policies and value commitments within the larger body politic”.
 - **Expressive function:** parties serve to **cristallise** conflicting interests by making them explicit.
 - **Instrumental function:** parties force citizens to ally across structural cleavage lines and to set up priorities for political action.
- stable competition between parties, whose electorates share a social identity and programmatic goals.

Cleavages and Party Systems

- Lipset and Rokkan's (1967): cleavages in Western democracies emerge out of the **historical conflicts** that preceded the 'first wave' of democracy.
- **Frozen cleavage thesis:** the parties that existed after mass (male or universal) suffrage — i.e. around the 1920s — remained stable for decades, so that party systems reflect the intensity of earlier conflicts:
 - Institutionalisation through strong organisation (churches, unions, parties).
 - Voter loyalties develop around these divisions.



Cleavages and Party Systems

- ‘Traditional’ parties originate from **four** conflicts brought about by two ‘revolutions’:
- **The National Revolution:** formation of **nation states** and liberal democracy in the 19th century.
 - Centre-Periphery cleavage
 - Religious (or State-Church) Cleavage
- **The Industrial Revolution:** industrialisation and urbanisation in the late 19th and early 20th century.
 - Urban-Rural Cleavage
 - Class Cleavage (common to all European countries)



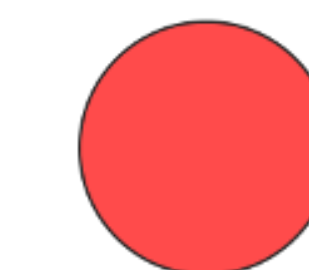
Owner



Church



Urban



Centre



Worker



State



Rural



Periphery

Centre-Periphery

- Nation-building — through cultural assimilation, ‘direct rule’, administrative standardisation — creates a conflict between the central nation-building culture and ‘subject’ populations.
- Sometimes gives rise to **minority/regionalist parties**:
 - Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ireland.
 - Today: SNP, Plaid Cymru, Catalan parties in Spain, Parti Québécois in Canada, Swedish People's Party of Finland, Sami parties in Norway.
- Sometimes subsumed into broader divides:
 - British Liberals as the party of the ‘Celtic fringe’.



Religious Cleavage

- Nation-state claim to a “national culture” clashes with the prerogatives of churches on education and social organisation.
- **Christian Democratic** parties in Western Europe and Latin America.
- Explicitly secular parties: Radicals in France, Kemalist Republicans in Turkey.
- Denominational cleavage between Protestants and Catholic parties: e.g. Netherlands KVP and ARP).





Urban-Rural Cleavage

- (Early) industrialisation and urbanisation created a new, urban economic sector, centred on capital, manufacturing and trade, against the old economic order, based on land and agricultural production.
- Conflict over free trade vs tariffs, taxation, privileges of traditional vs new elites.
- **Liberal parties** emerge in the 19th century to represent the interests of the urban bourgeoisie against **conservatives** landed aristocracy.
- **Agrarian parties** emerge in the early 20th century to represent small-holding farmers.



Class Cleavage

- (Later) industrialisation produced a 'new' group: the industrial working-class, in conflict with the bourgeoisie over wages, labour laws, unionisation, suffrage expansion.
- Main consequence: rise of **social-democratic parties**.
- The class cleavage is the most common and long-lasting in Europe: often either substituted or displaced pre-existing cleavages.



Other Cleavages

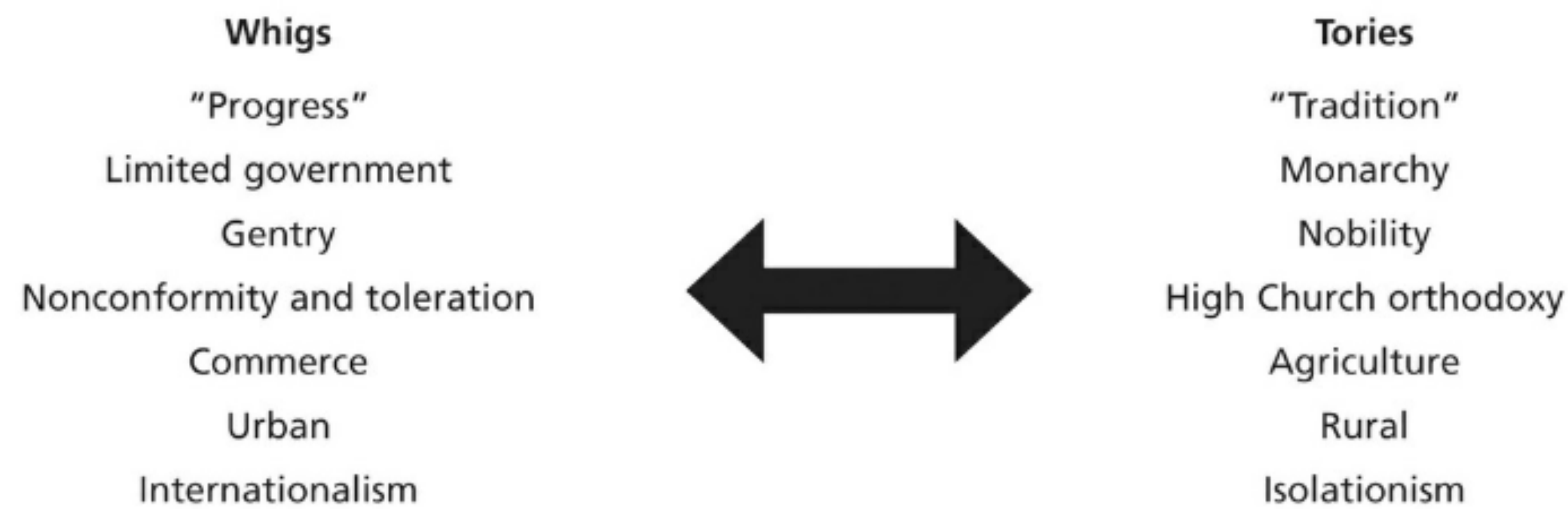
- Main claim in Lipset and Rokkan (1967): suffrage expansion (often, accompanied by PR) saturates the electoral market — no more groups to mobilise.
- But some other dimensions of political competition may qualify as cleavages:
 - Ethno-linguistic cleavages: ethnic parties.
 - ‘Cold War’/Third International cleavage: Communist Parties.
 - Eastern Europe: ‘post-communist’ or transition cleavage: economically liberal, pro-EU parties vs the parties of the ‘losers of transition’.

Cleavages and Party Systems

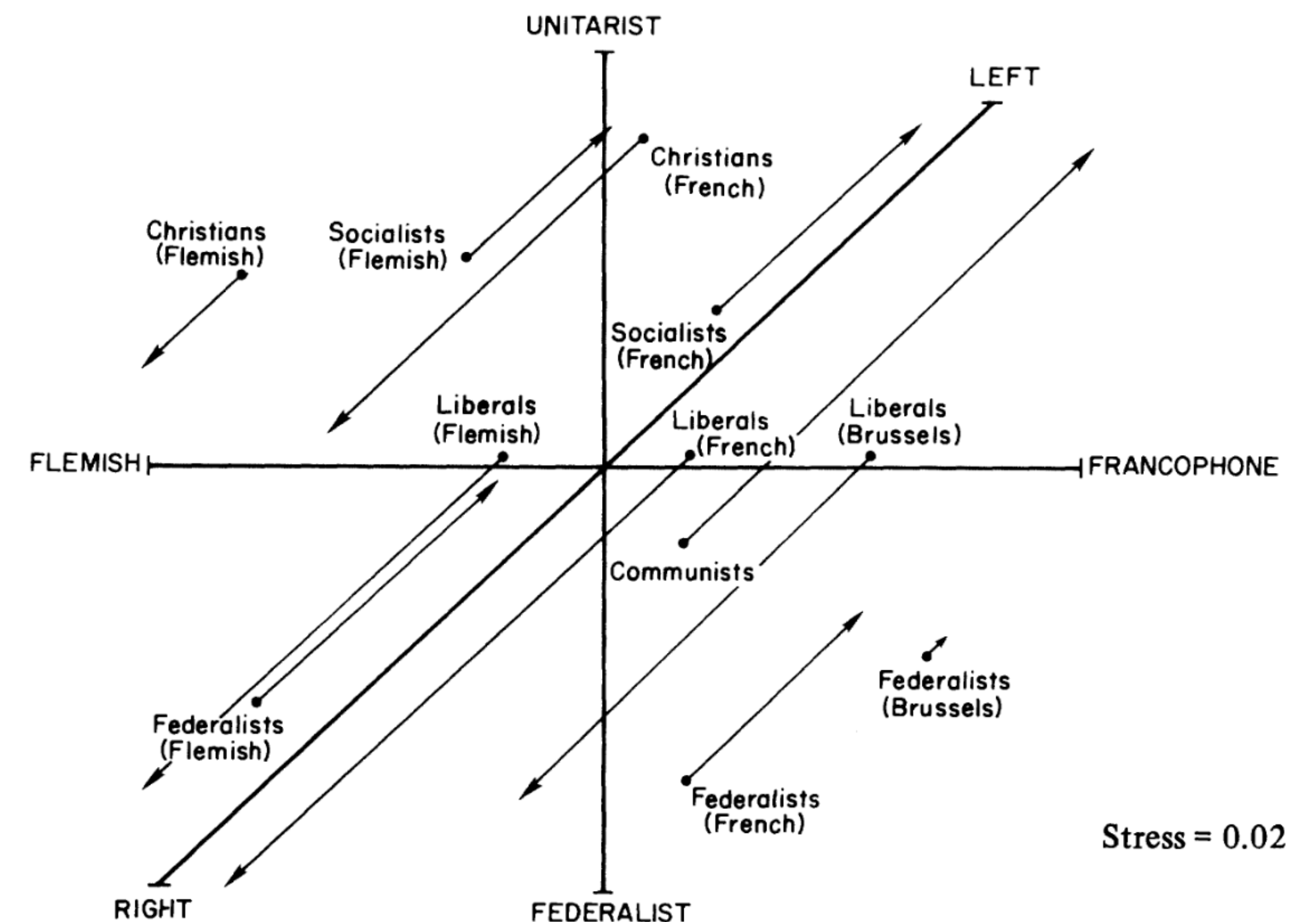
- Party systems are the result of:
 - **Social structure:** which divisions exist in a country.
 - **Elite agency:** which of these divisions get mobilised.
 - **Electoral Institutions:** how many of these divisions can electoral competition accommodate.
- Implication: some divides may be organised “out” of party politics. Some divides may be organised “into” party politics, but have lost roots in social divides.

Cleavages and Institutions

- Reinforcing, cumulative cleavage structure (18-19th century Britain).

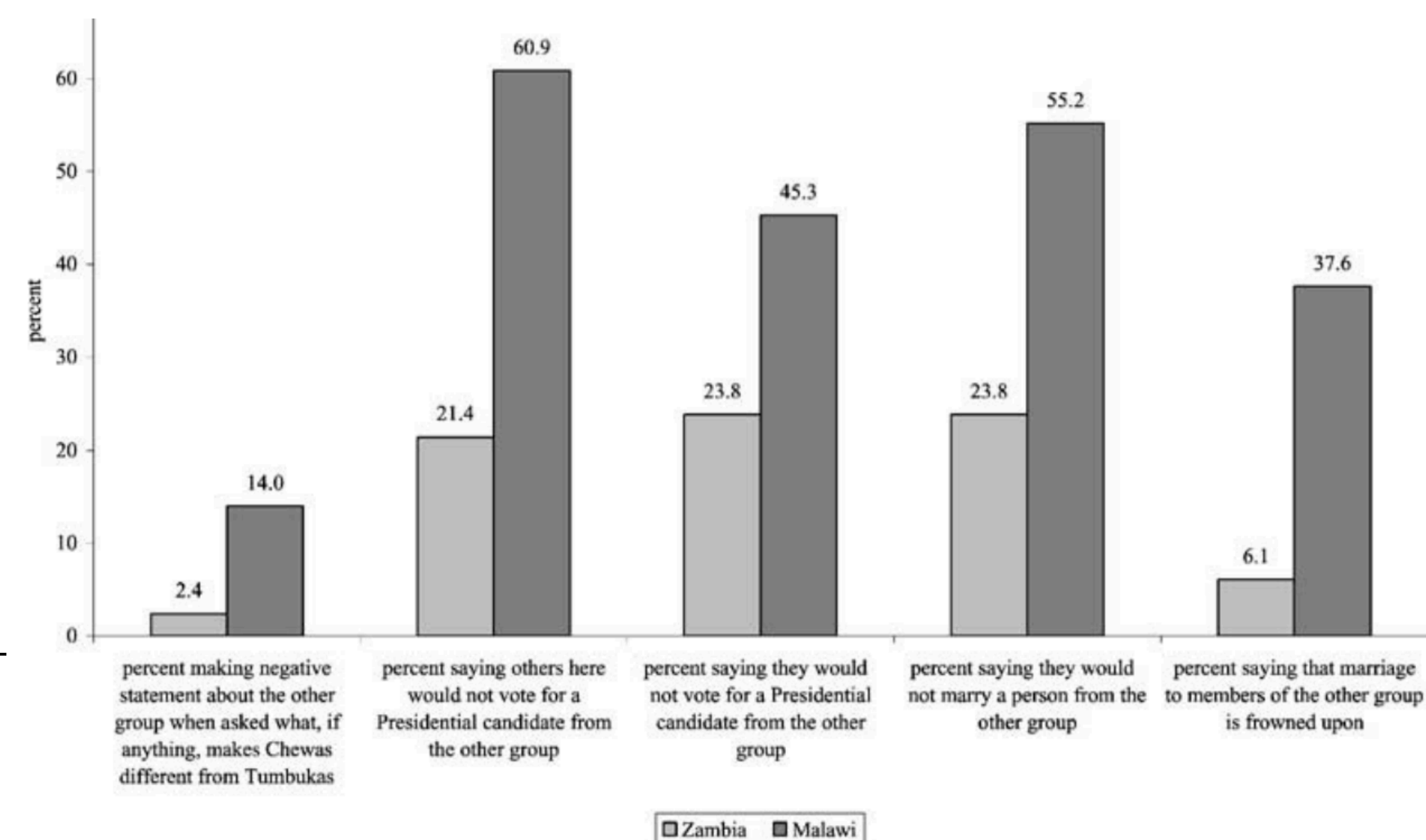
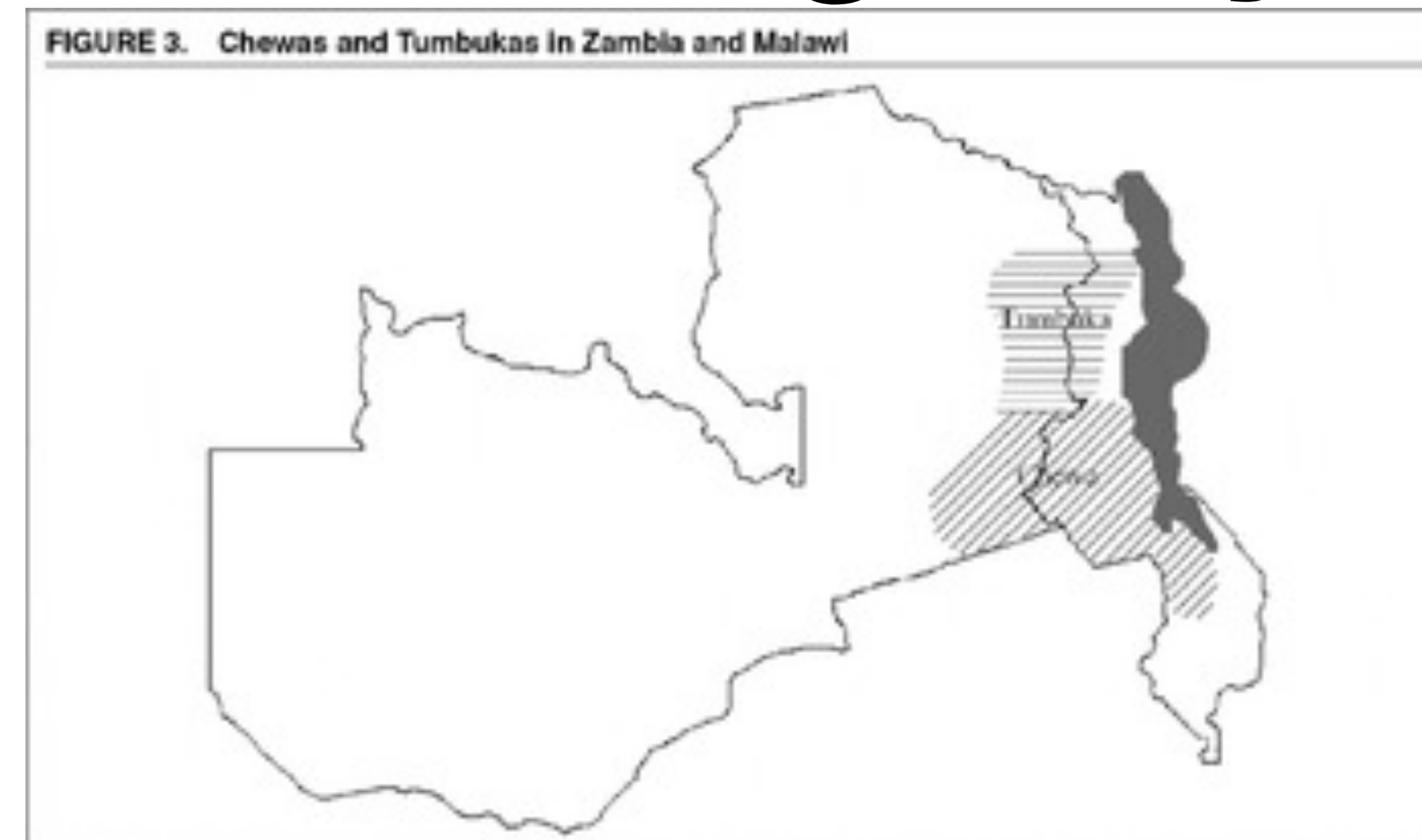


- Cross-cutting cleavages (20th century Belgium).



Cleavages and Elite Agency

- In Malawi, Chewas and Tumbukas are large enough to form separate vote blocs, so elites mobilise them against each other → Ethnic cleavage becomes politically salient under “winner takes all” rules.
- In Zambia, the same groups are small minorities within a larger multiethnic region → To gain influence, elites ally across ethnic lines, making ethnic divides less salient.
- In sum: cleavages are not fixed—they are activated by political incentives, especially those created by electoral systems and group size.
- Posner, D. N. (2004). The political salience of cultural difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas are allies in Zambia and adversaries in Malawi. APSR, 98(4), 529-545.



Cleavage Dealignment?

- Widely acknowledged that the traditional cleavages like class and religion are losing relevance for voters' choices. **Why?**

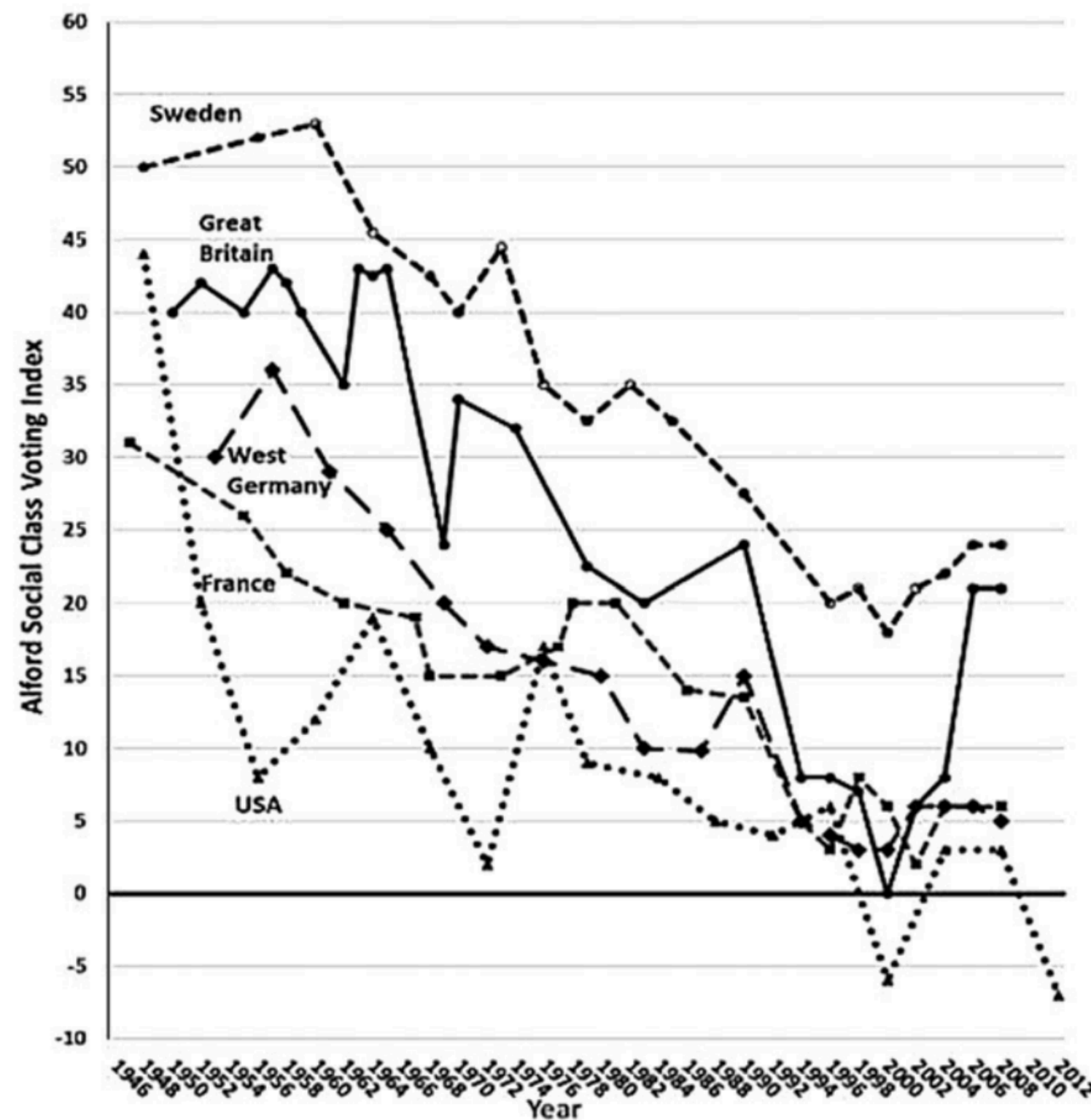
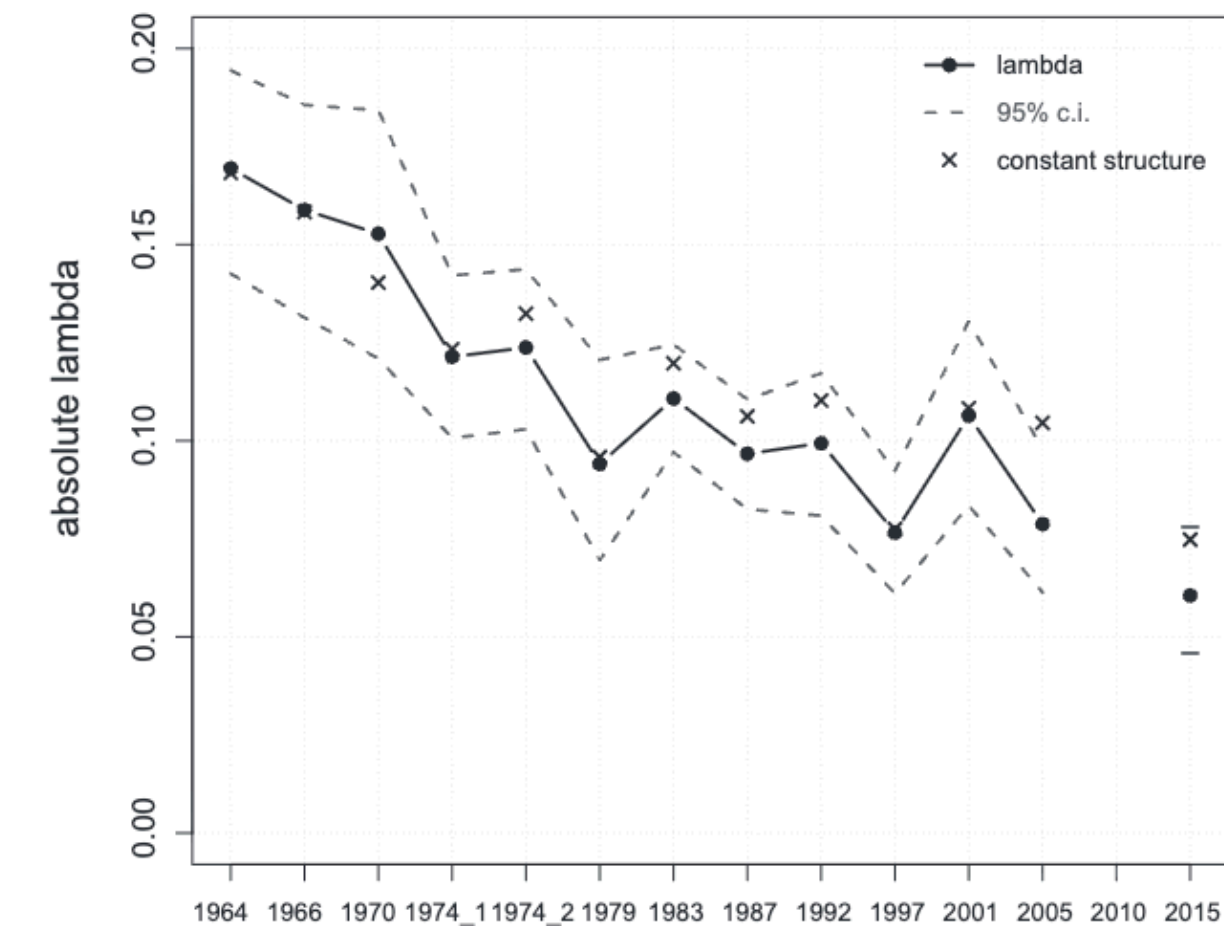
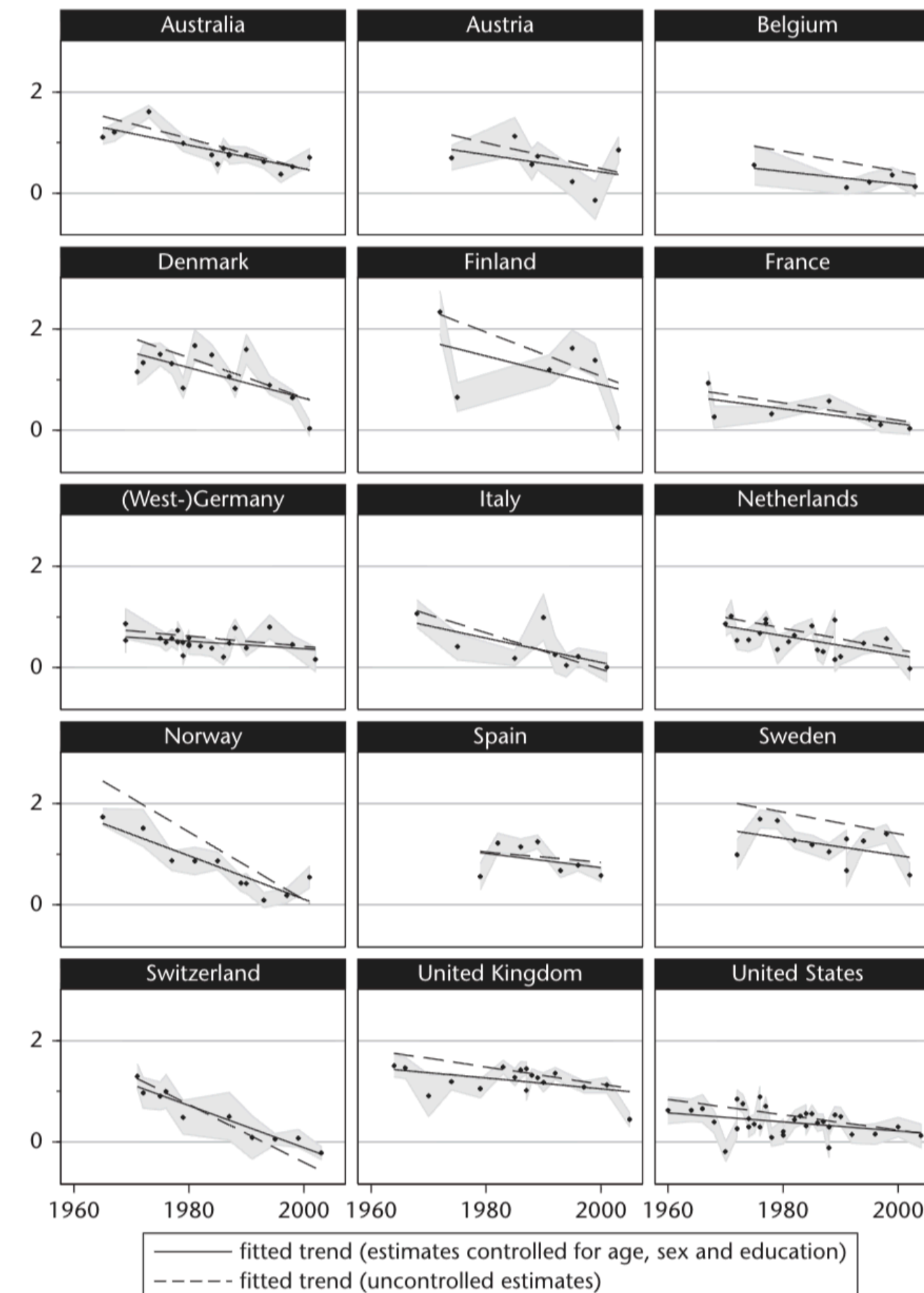


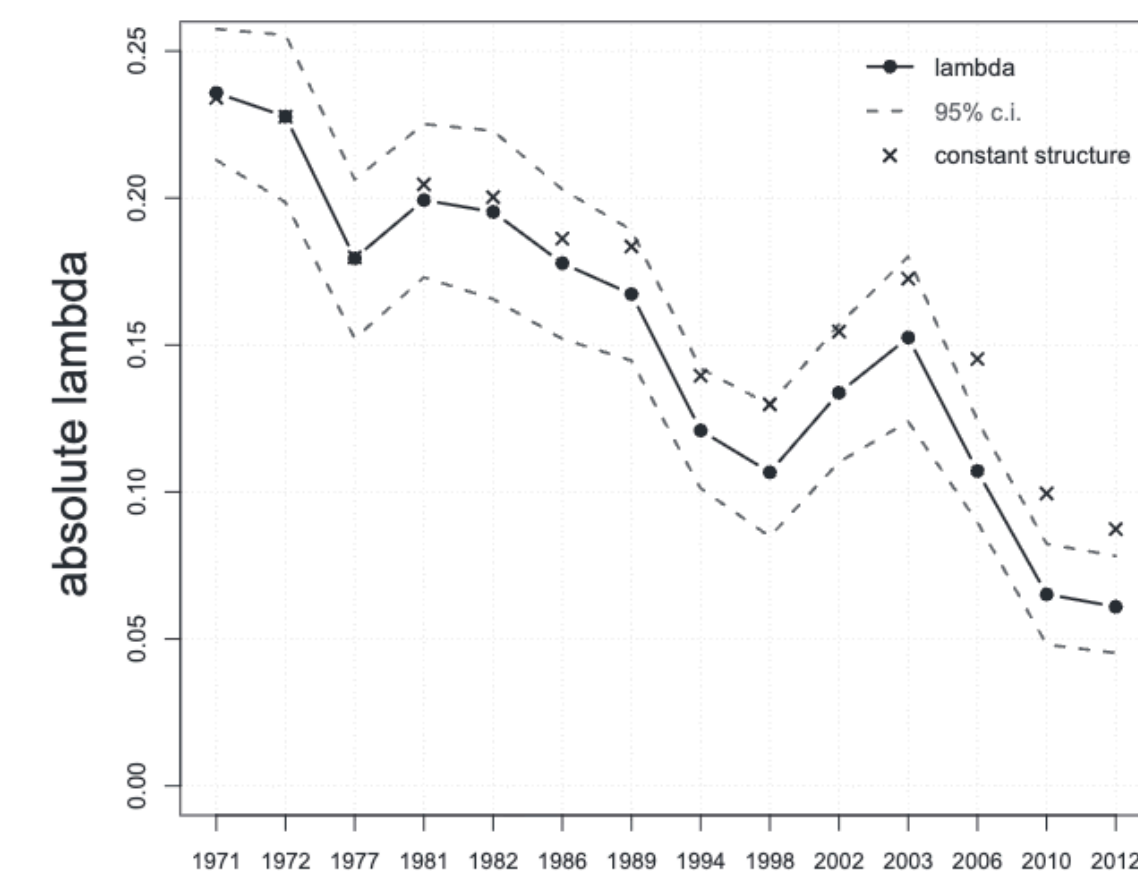
Figure 4. Alford Index Indicating the Level of Class-Based Voting, 1945–2012

Source: Inglehart 2018.

Note: The Alford index reports the proportion of manual workers voting left minus the proportion of non-manual workers voting left.



(a) Great Britain



(b) Netherlands

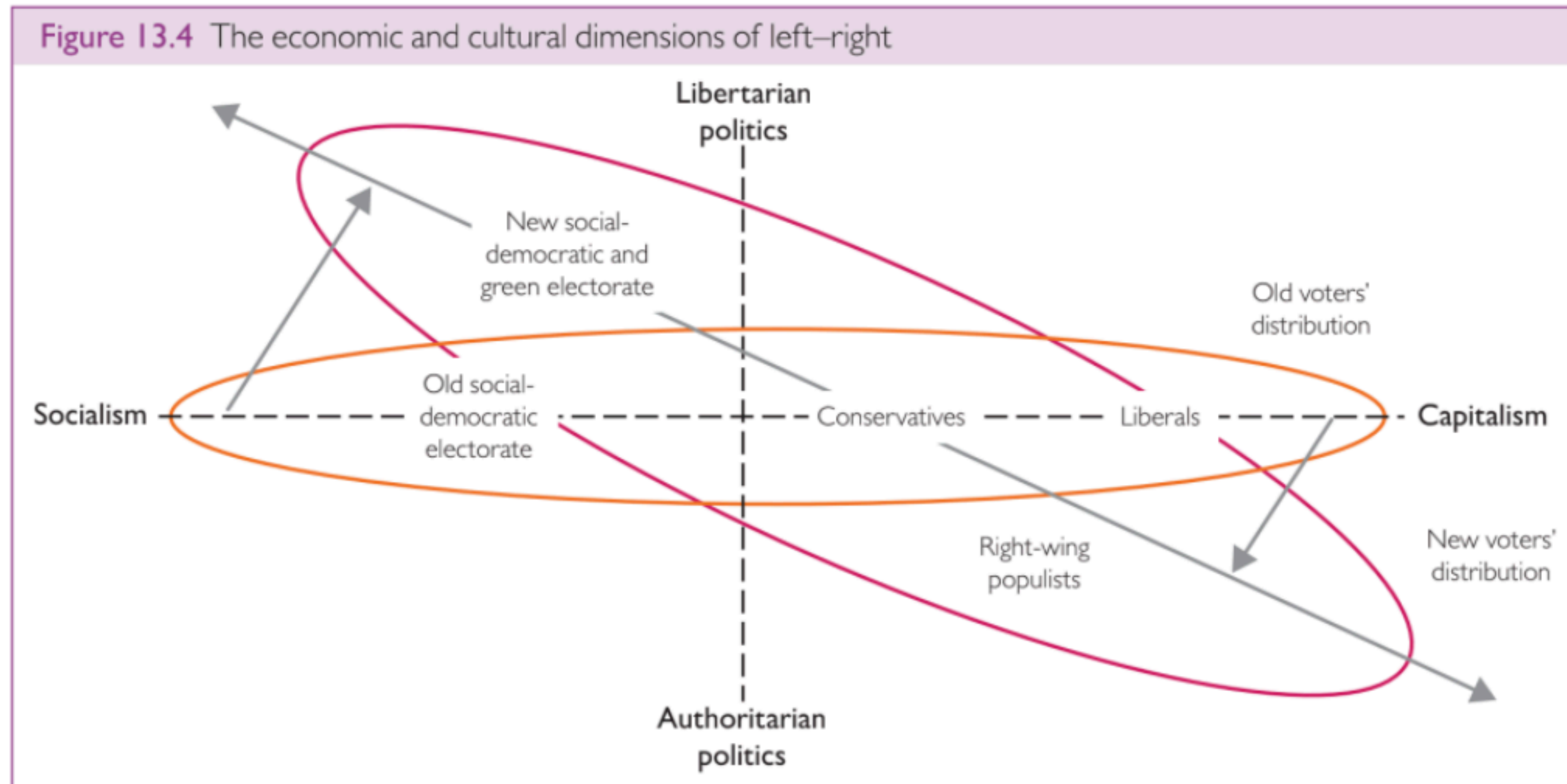
Cleavage Realignment?

- **Dealignment theory** (more in the next week): declining influence of collective identities, increased education, mobility → “voters begin to choose”.
- **Realignment theory:** new cleavage(s) replacing, or at least displacing, old ones. Many names for what is (roughly speaking) a similar phenomenon:
 - “Transnational Cleavage” (Marks and Hooghe, 2018)
 - “Universalist-Particularist Cleavage” (Bornschieer et al, 2024)
 - “Educational Cleavage” (Hooghe and Marks, 2025)
 - “Post-Material divide” (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), “GAL-TAN” etc. (Kitschelt, 1988)

Cleavage Realignment?

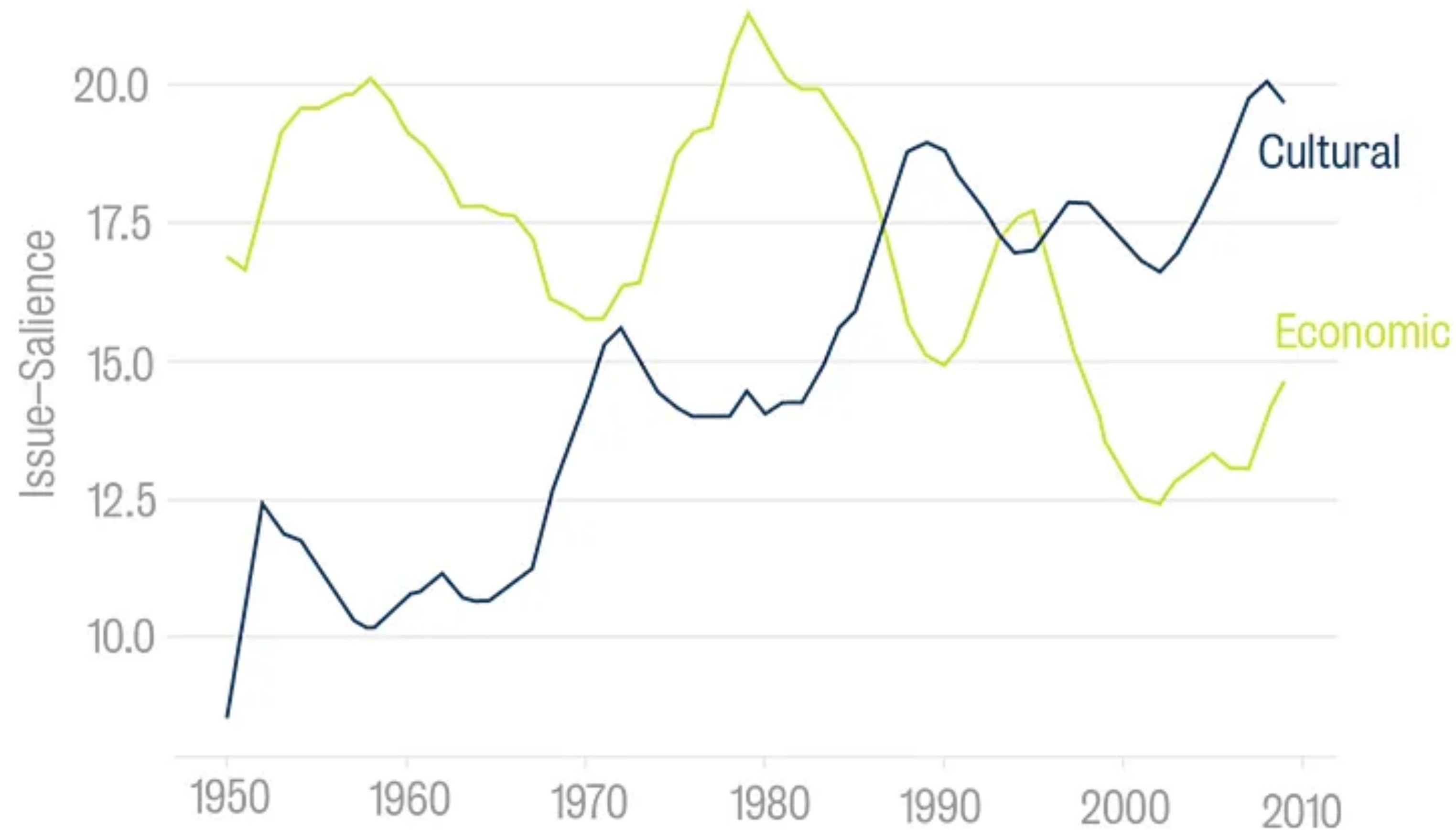
- Marks and Hooghe (2018, 2025 and elsewhere): global changes in the late 20th and early 21st century are a new historical rupture, on par with the revolutions of the 19th century.
- Perforation of national states by immigration, integration and trade + the ‘knowledge economy’ of the information technology revolution created a social divide between ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, with competing claims over:
 - Sovereignty, national culture vs supranational integration, multiculturalism.
 - Traditional vs alternative ‘ways of life’, security vs self-expression.
- Socially rooted, most notably, in educational differences (but also metropole vs province).
- Political expression in ‘GAL’ (Green, Alternative, Libertarian) vs ‘TAN’ (Traditional, Authoritarian, Nationalist) parties — a.k.a. ‘New Left’ and Radical Right.

Cleavage Realignment?



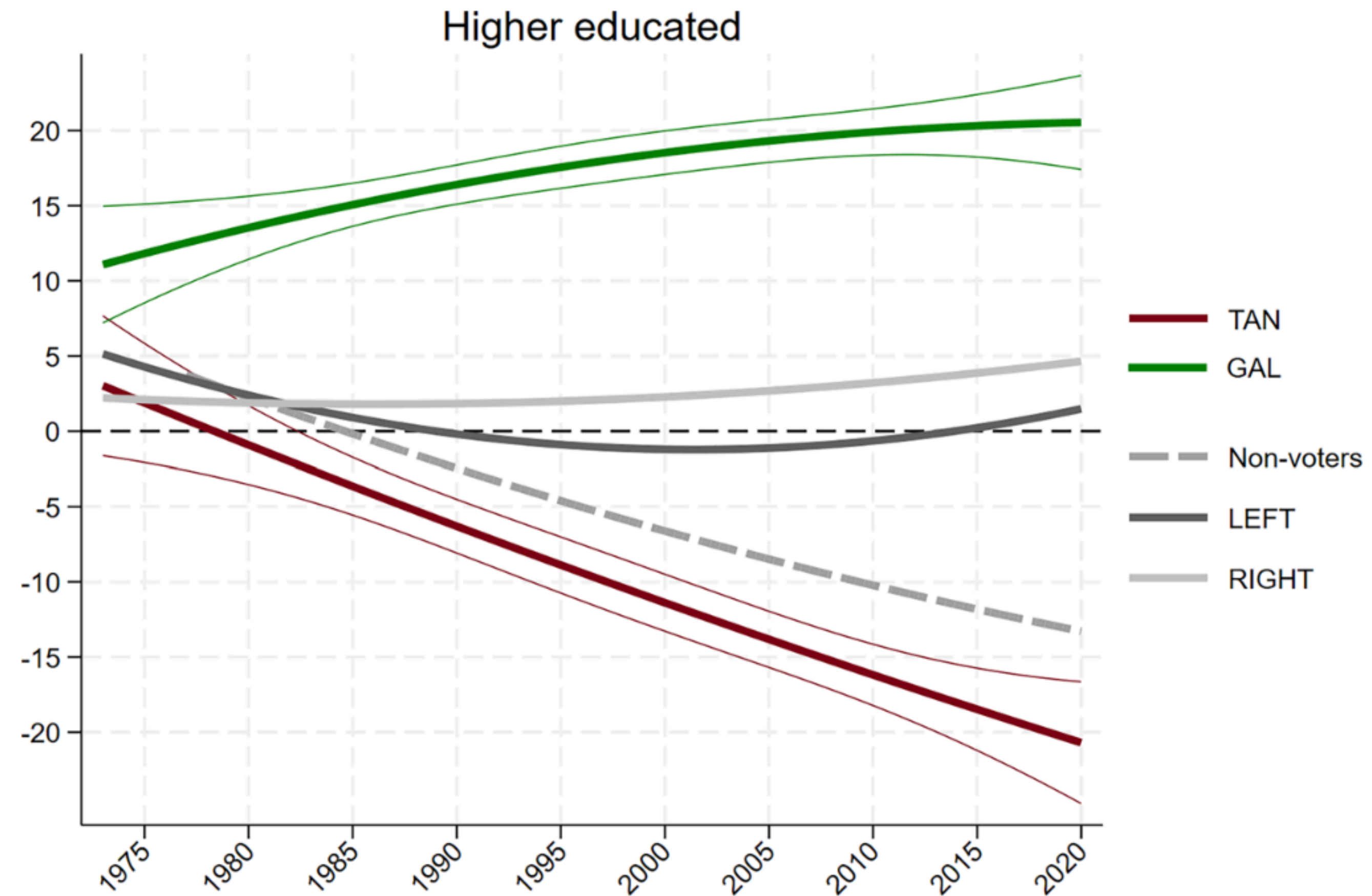
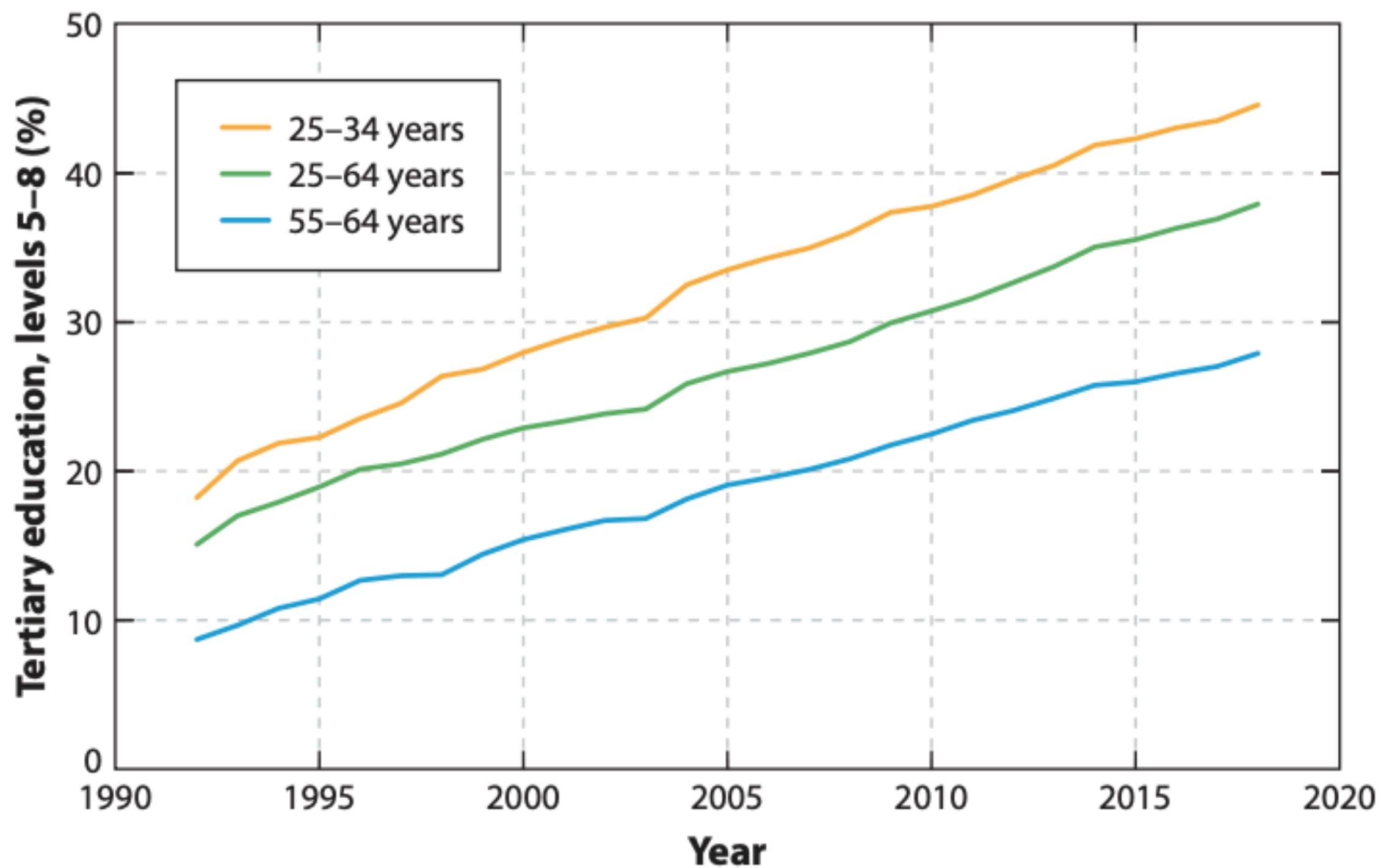
Cleavage Realignment?

Changes over time in the relative prominence of economic and cultural issues in the party manifestos of Western democracies



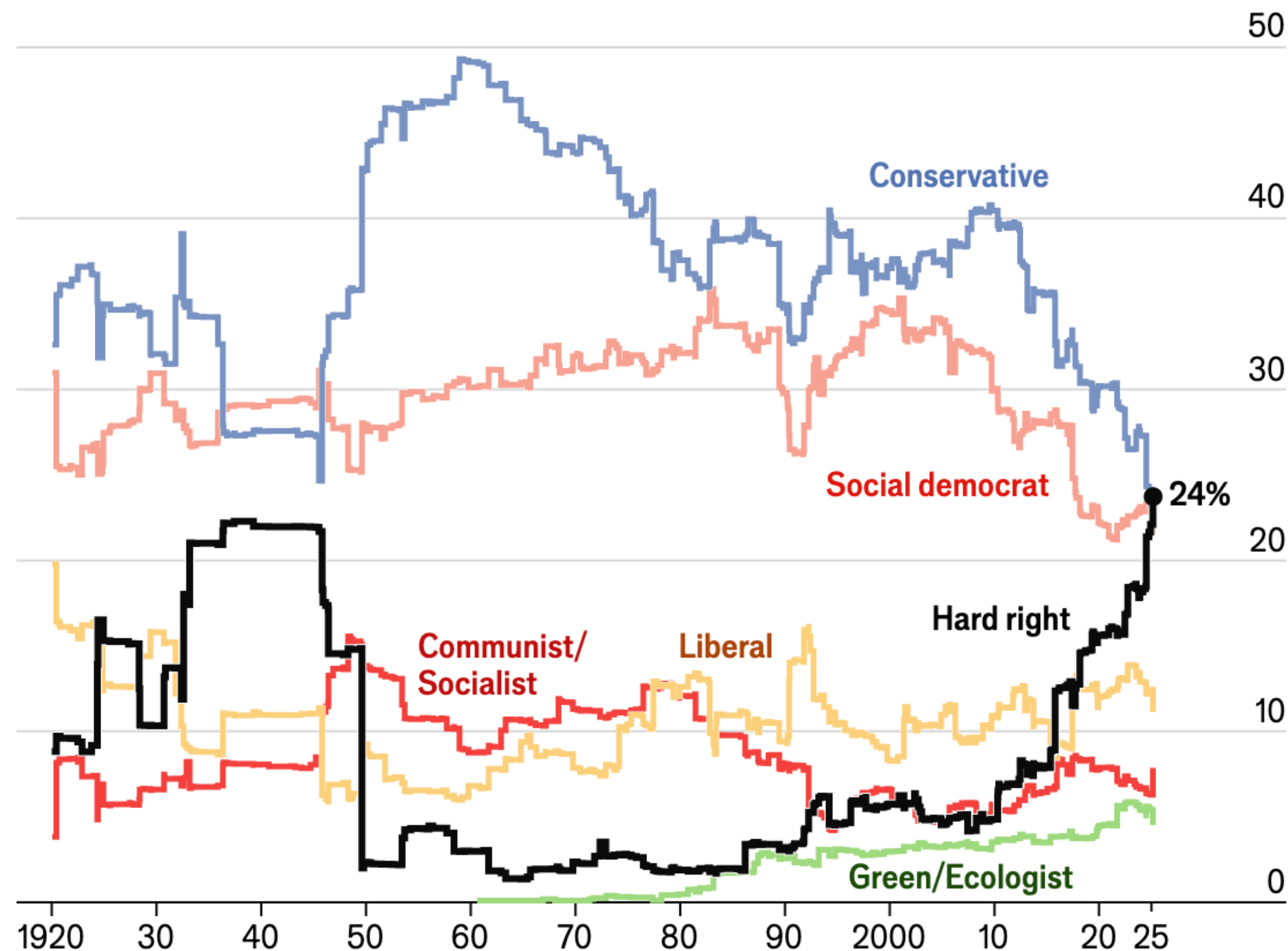
Source: Comparative Party Manifesto Dataset, in *The Electoral Politics of Growth Regimes*, Cambridge University Press, 18 June 2019, Peter A. Hall. Note: proportion of references to each type of issue in party manifestos weighted by party vote share in the most recent election for each country

Cleavage Realignment?



Cleavage Realignment?

European democracies*, average vote share[†] by party type, %



Summing Up...

- Cleavages create identities, engender voter loyalty, stabilise party competition.
- Party systems have traditionally reflected **‘frozen’ historical conflicts**.
- Variation in party system due to institutions, agency, intensity of conflict.
- **New conflicts** and **party system change** brought about by globalisation: does it qualify as a cleavage? How does it interact with pre-existing divides?

**Thank you very much for
your kind attention!**