

VOLATILITY AND WESTERN EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEMS: TWO NEW APPROACHES¹

Jan-Erik Lane

ABSTRACT

The sharp rise in electoral volatility in the last two decades calls for a new explanation of Western European party systems. The established party system theory—Lipset and Rokkan’s “freezing hypothesis”—is not confirmed by today’s data. But what framework should replace Lipset and Rokkan’s? One option is to focus on values in postmodern society, as French sociologist Alain Touraine does, by emphasizing how individualism trumps social cohesion formed by social cleavages. The rational-choice approach, combined with a principal-agent model perspective, offers another lens for exploring electoral volatility in Western Europe. In this paper, gross and net volatility are analysed with both Touraine’s sociological approach and with a new principal-agent model of political election, underlying dynamics.

Key words: *Lipset, Rokkan, Touraine, Welzel, volatility, postmodern society, values, trust, individualism, principal-agent model, asymmetric information, opportunism.*

INTRODUCTION

In his 1970 book *Sociologists, Economists, and Democracy*, the late Brian Barry contrasted two alternative models of mass behaviour in democratic elections in Western Europe. The first model focused on values in citizen’s attitudes to account for mass behaviour—like the vote. The second model highlighted strategic deliberations that are subsequently manifested in electoral behaviour. Barry concluded that he preferred economic modelling to sociological theorizing, but his conclusion is still debatable.

I will contrast two sociological theories of volatility with a rational choice framework. The first sociological theory, Lipset and Rokkan’s, can be rejected given recent data. Whereas the second theory, that of French sociologist Alain Touraine, also focuses on values but does so in an entirely different way. Let me first briefly analyse the major developments in volatility since 1970.

1. RELEVANT POLITICAL CHANGES FROM 1970 TO 2010

In their model of Western European politics, Lipset and Rokkan identified certain salient features in the relationships between an electorate and their party system. They also offered an explanation of how political parties manoeuvre to form a representative government on

JAN-ERIK LANE, fellow at the Public Policy Institute in Belgrade, janeklane@gmail.com.

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the basis of the principles of parliamentarism. Today, one would speak of the principal-agent relationships in a democratic polity.

According to Lipset and Rokkan's model, interactions between voters, parties, and governments are characterized by:

1. a stable structure of cleavages in the electorate;
2. loyal voting behaviour from one election to another; and
3. a stable pattern of government formation based on coalitions in Parliament.

In order to test these hypotheses, one needs to develop a set of indicators to map the political realities of the 1960s and 1970s. Data pertinent to these three features of Lipset and Rokkan's model can be reanalysed with explicitly constructed indices. These indices can also reveal whether the model's conjectures held true in Western European politics from 2000 to 2010.

The Lipset-Rokkan model amounts to a middle-range theory because it focuses on the outcomes of elections, the parties making up a party system, and how these parties create viable governments. Their emphasis is definitely on stability. So, let us focus first on electoral volatility.

2. NET AND GROSS VOLATILITY

The distinction between net and gross voter volatility significantly enhanced enquiries regarding the links between voters and political parties (Pedersen, 1979) as it allowed for

TABLE 1: Net and gross volatility by country from 1970 to 2010

Country	Net 1970	Net 2000	Gross 1970	Gross 2000
Austria	2.6	16.6		
Belgium	6.9	15.5		27.0
Denmark	15.6	10.8	23.0	29.3
Finland	7.7	9.9	22.0	24.0
France	17.7	20.6	28.0	42.0
Germany	5.0	9.9	12.0	25.5
Greece	23.1	13.6		17.0
Iceland	12.6	12.9		30.9
Ireland	8.5	21.2		24.0
Italy	6.1	13.4		32.0
Luxembourg	12.3	7.2		
Netherlands	13.2	22.7	20.0	39.8
Norway	15.2	14.2	22.8	33.3
Portugal	11.7	11.4		16.5
Spain	12.1	11.2		10.0
Sweden	6.3	13.5	17.3	33.5
Switzerland	7.7	8.9		27.7
United Kingdom	8.3	7.0	18.3	17.8

Note: Net volatility was measured as the gains and losses of political parties participating in two elections as measured by the Pedersen index. Gross volatility was measured as party switching by voters.

in-depth examinations of whether electoral behaviour can be described as frozen—meaning that it is hardly changing. Table 1 reveals that between 1970 and 2000 volatility has risen from five to ten per cent to fifteen to twenty-five per cent. Net volatility results from gross volatility, or party switching among voters, being usually twice or three times as strong as net volatility.

Volatility rose dramatically in some countries that used to be well known for electoral stability, such as Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway.

One may say that in 1970 net and gross volatility fluctuated together but the pattern of gross and net volatility deviates considerably from net and gross volatility around 2000. The pattern of voter-party relations from one election to another in post-industrial models of the early twenty-first century has changed from the pattern seen in the industrial societies that Lipset and Rokkan based their model on.

Diagram 1 and Diagram 2 provide ample evidence of changes in voter volatility. How far the empirical cases fall outside of the 45-degree line—to the right or to the left—reveals just how much volatility has changed, as indicated by the data.

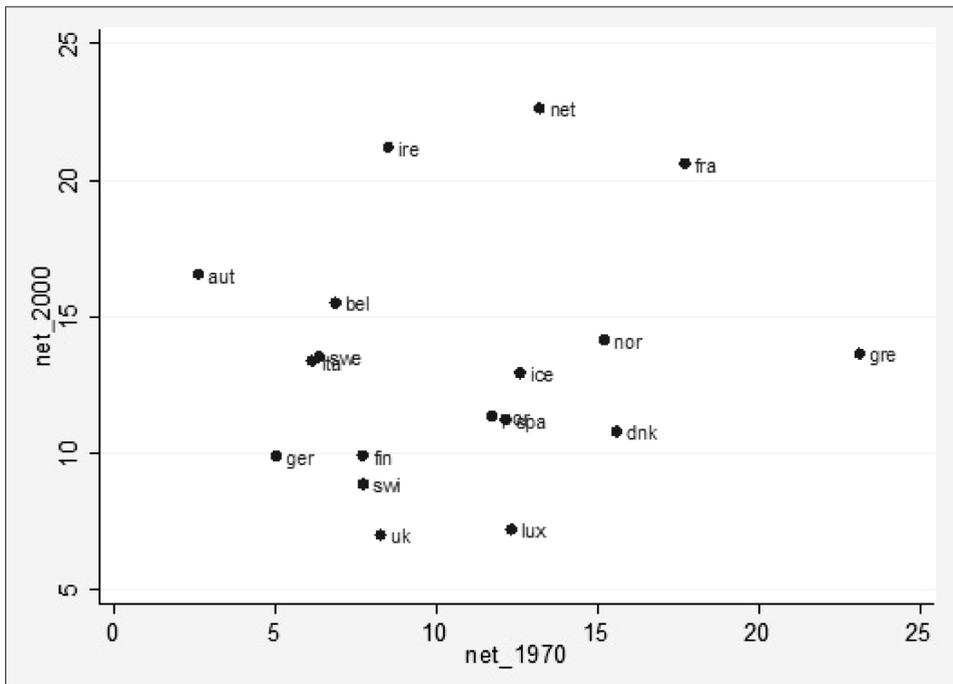


DIAGRAM 1: Net volatility, 1970 and 2000

Source: See Table 1

For most countries, with a few notable exceptions, net volatility was much higher around 2000 than it was in 1970. The 2000 pattern is entirely different from the 1970 pattern. Comparisons of gross volatility sharply clarify this difference (Diagram 2).

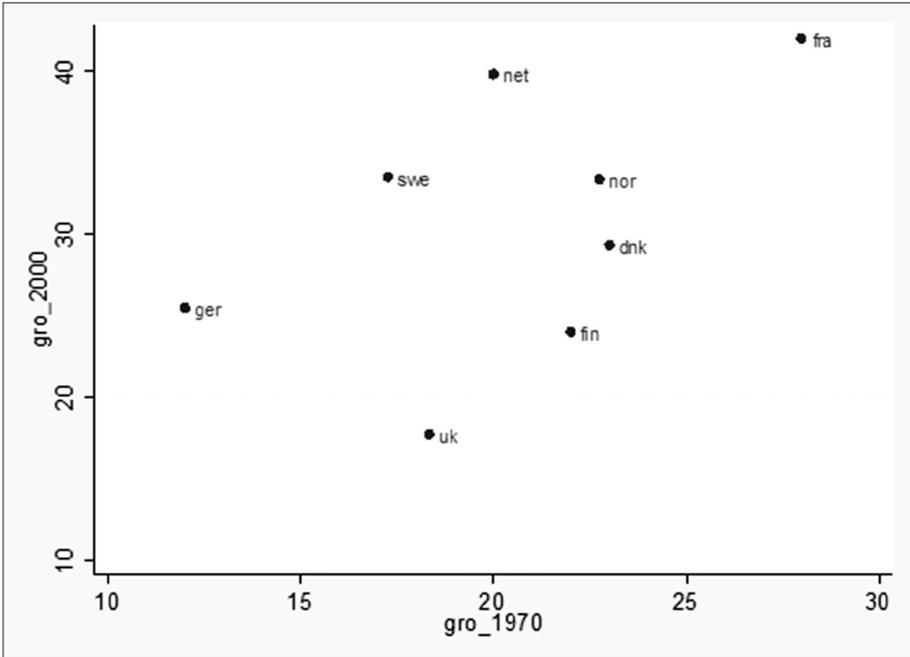


DIAGRAM 2: Gross volatility, 1970 and 2000

Source: See Table 1

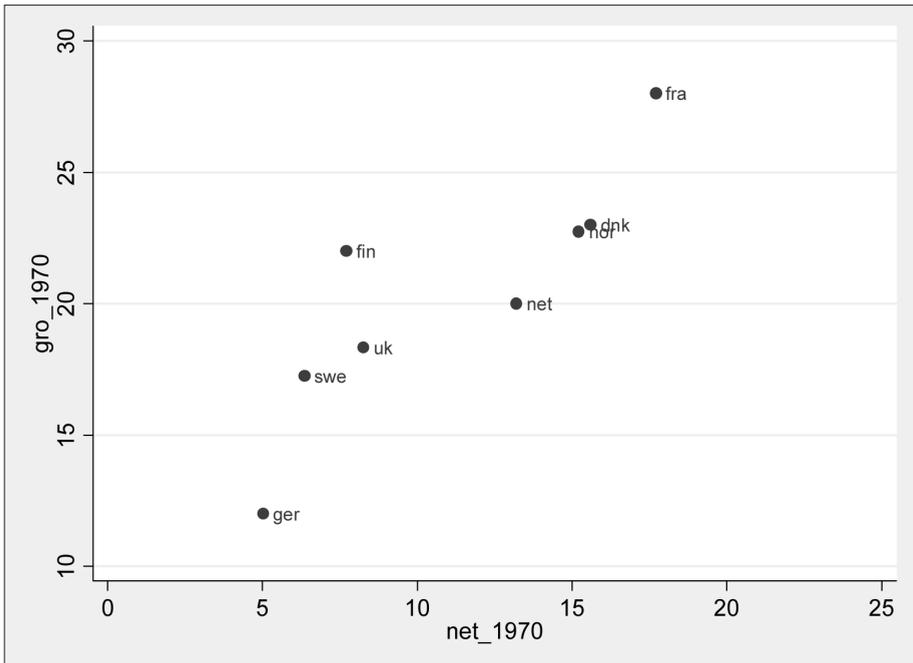


DIAGRAM 3: Volatility, 1970

Source: See Table 1

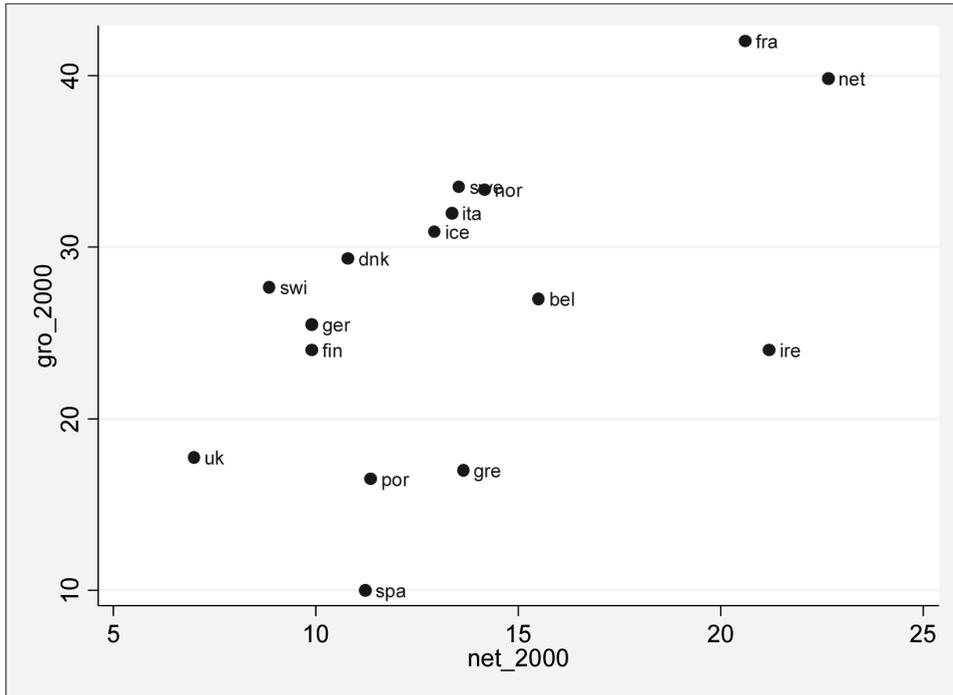


DIAGRAM 4: Volatility, 2000

Source: See Table 1

The empirical cases mostly fall to the right of the 45-degree line —evidence of a sharp rise in gross volatility.

The power of the concept of volatility—expressed in gross and net volatility—to indicate party system changes is evident when the pattern of volatility in 1970 (Diagram 3) is compared to that of 2000 (Diagram 4).

Neither gross nor net volatility is especially high in the 1970s, according to the Diagram 3. Diagram 4 presents an entirely different picture of this situation in 2000.

Both net volatility and gross volatility are dramatically higher in Diagram 4 than in Diagram 3. How can we account for this major change?

3. THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH I: LIPSET-ROKKAN

There is an abundance of data to draw upon to re-examine the Lipset-Rokkan theory. In addition to microdata, macrodata spanning a rather long period is available. To reanalyse the data available to Lipset and Rokkan, one has to contrast their information with data on recent changes. Their famous frozen party system hypothesis actually comprises several middle-range hypotheses. Their freezing hypothesis was almost unanimously approved by political sociology scholars when it was launched in the 1960s and 1970s and stimulated lots of research into mass political behaviour and attitudes.

The time has come to reanalyse this well known theory by comparing the old data with new data, a task that involves questioning standard political sociology positions regarding Western European politics. I dare to reject Lybeck's 1986 and Mair's 2002 arguments that it is not possible to test Lipset and Rokkan's theory.

3.1 *Mair's Position: Confirmation, Falsification and Testability*

Social scientists reanalyse a theory and its supporting data to study the truths the theory claims. A social science theory consists of a network of hypotheses or general statements about microlevel human interactions and macrolevel social systems. These truth claims depend on empirically verifiable data. Data can validate or falsify a theory. Without supporting empirical information, a theory is merely an intellectual guess that requires testing. Thus, theory construction makes up half of scientific work and data analysis constitutes the other half.

Reanalysing established theories with existing or new data reveals the coherence between the theory and relevant empirical evidence. When there is a high degree of coherence between the implications of the theory's hypotheses and the available data, analysts *confirm* that the theory corresponds to reality, given a certain probability. Conversely, analysts *falsify* a theory when they discover that the theory does not cohere with relevant data. Theorists can save their work from falsification by recasting their hypotheses or restricting the range of application for their ideas. Finally, by reanalysing pertinent data, analysts may contribute to a theoretical *innovation* by supplanting an established theory with one that is more coherence with the data.

Now, what about the principle of testability? This notion comes in a few versions, one more or less fortunate, that target the possibility of coherence or non-coherence between theoretical statements and data or fact statement. When a theory is phrased in a manner that precludes any fact from falsifying the theory—as it would be coherent with whatever fact is conceivable—analysts cannot test the theory. Yet there is a distinction between actual testability and potential testability. A theory may be so abstract that supporting empirical evidence is not currently observable—it can't actually be tested. But the same theory could potentially be tested with the arrival of new data.

In principle, the notion of testability demarcates science and metaphysics, as in the philosophy of science of logical empiricists or Popperians. Is the Lipset-Rokkan theory about the Western European party system untestable, as some have argued? I answer with certainty: No. While religious propositions, race theories and animism belong to the set of untestable theories, Lipset and Rokkan's theory can be confronted with data. The components of the theory can be listed and reanalysed to establish their coherence with facts.

3.2 *Testing Lipset and Rokkan's Theory*

According to the Lipset-Rokkan theory, the main political parties would be mass parties that correspond to basic cleavages in the social structure, such as class, religious, and regional differences. These cleavage-based party alignments would be frozen, meaning they have low

volatility in election outcomes. The Lipset-Rokkan theory was the most successful attempt to model the politics of Western Europe's fully industrialized parliamentary democracies in societies with a high degree of economic modernization. The theory's core hypotheses focus on the logic of election outcomes in a society with social structure cleavages to emphasize the nature of the tie between political parties and various social groups. Thus, the theory aims to account for the very nature of Western European democratic competition in regimes in which political parties are the *agents* of the basic principal, viz. the *demos*. Actually, this theory was testable when it was introduced and can certainly be retested in an analysis of current Western European politics.

In *Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction* (1967), Lipset and Rokkan hypothesize that:

- 1) voters tend to be loyal to a political party from one election to another (micro);
- 2) voters frame choose a political party based on their position along social cleavage lines (micro);
- 3) societal cleavages are finite and change very slowly, if at all (macro); and
- 4) central societal cleavages in fully industrialized democracies are based on class, religious, and regional differences.

Given these hypotheses, Lipset and Rokkan conclude that fully developed party systems in Western European democracies are *frozen*.

My interpretation of the frozen party system theory—which implies low volatility, restricted fractionalization, stable party outcomes, and a limited variety of party types—is adducible.

One may interpret, from Lipset and Rokkan's key questions, that the theory attempts to search for stability in democratic party politics on the basis of social groups and individual voting behaviour. These questions, forming the basis of this interpretation, include enquiries as to: "*the genesis of the system of contrasts and cleavages within the national community*" (p. 1); and "*the conditions for the developments of stable system of cleavage and oppositions in national political life*" (p. 1); and "*the behavior of the mass of rank-and-file citizens within the resultant party systems*" (p. 2).

Lipset and Rokkan state that their key aims are "to throw light on . . . the 'freezing' of different types of *party systems*," and to "seek to assemble materials for comparative analyses of the *current alignments of voters* behind the historically given 'packages,'" (p. 3).

During the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists frequently constructed theories about Western European politics that applied Lipset and Rokkan's hypotheses as presuppositions. Clearly, analysts can verify or refute their micro- and macrolevel claims, depending on the data available. But are these claims a suitable starting point for enquiries about today's party politics in post-industrial Western Europe? I think not.

Despite the accepted misunderstanding that Lipset and Rokkan's claims could not be tested, a compact set of their theory's implications can certainly be confronted with data and factual statements. Arguments claiming otherwise rest on a variety of claims, such as the suggestion that their theory is static, or that the theory contains a confused notion of frozen party systems.

Generally speaking, the postmodern condition is not one of huge mass parties. Party membership has declined significantly across Western Europe. Instead, parties now find financial support from the state somehow. One mass party, once a force to reckon with in France, Italy, and Finland has disappeared entirely: the Communists. The religious parties have survived but only as a Christian party. Lipset and Rokkan envisioned small parties comprised of members compelled by regional differences to fight for autonomy or independence, like the Scottish Nationalists. They did not envisage the rise of populist anti-system parties like France's National Front, the Freedom Party of Austria, or the Populist Party—an anti-immigration and anti-EU party found in many Western European countries including the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. Of course, there is also party continuity as evidenced by the enduring Social Democrats, Conservatives, Liberals, and Agrarians.

4. SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATION II

Western Europe's current democratic societies or capitalist democracies are very different from the post World War II era's fully industrialized democracies. The difference is so dramatic that it is hard to disagree with Touraine when he speaks of the change from a Durkheimian, or structure-driven world, to an actor-driven Weberian world in his book, *La fin des sociétés* (2013).

4.1 *The End of Society*

Touraine's end of society thesis argues that the ego will be emancipated from social and moral constraints, that rules and institutions will cease to dominate men and women as they have for a long period of time. Postmodern society, according to Touraine, will centre more on individual actors than on social groups and the cohesion of these social groups. Despite admitting his longstanding preference for the French classic, Durkheim, Touraine advocates abandoning collective consciousness and its implications for social action in favour of a renewed appreciation of Weber.

Weber sharply distinguished his assertion of intentional—rather than reactive behaviour—by stating, “Every serious reflection on the ultimate elements of meaningful human conduct is immediately tied to the categories of ‘means’ and ‘ends.’” (Weber, 1985 (1922), p. 214). He also constructed a taxonomy of basic social science concepts that adhere to a Hayek-like logic of methodological individualism (1949). From a set of micro- intentions, motivations, and meanings, he introduced macrolevel concepts by combining social actions with emerging properties of aggregates, like the market, the state, and politics. Weber did not deny Durkheim social facts or macroscopic relation, but he did insist on the necessity of microlevel interpretations.

Touraine, when investigating today's postmodern society, selects the *me* of the actor as a more promising starting point than the *we* of the group. Touraine's thesis argues that the institutions of religion, morality, economics, and politics have declined. Accepting individualism, states Touraine, will emancipate humanity from greed, selfishness, and environmental degradation.

In a typical French manner, Touraine presents his thesis as a discourse. He does not adduce systematic data or analyse a data set. He does make contingent references to homosexuality, immigration, identity politics, and economic corruption. Of course the *faiblesse* of French social scientists is their tendency to neglect empiricism for theoreticism.

Yet the recent transformation of societies in Western Europe (Touraine, 2013) truly has promoted the emergence of an entirely different kind of party politics and transformed democratic contest. Stunningly, gross volatility can now reach fifty per cent—every second voter is shifting. The huge cleavage parties—the Communist, Christian, and Social Democratic—are shrinking considerably if they haven't already been washed away. The number of parties has increased, as has the emergence of flash parties. The carpet underneath the political parties is all but stable. The established parties are not prepared for new issues. The voters choose as they wish, without the binds of group pressures or old legacies, making the lives of parties difficult and hazardous.

4.2 *Postmodern Individualization and Social Trust*

Is the Touraine thesis on the victory of individualism in collision with Welzel's individualization argument (Welzel, 2013)? Drawing upon attitude data from the various value surveys, Welzel states:

Individualization diminishes people's dependence on support groups they have not chosen at the same time as it increases their chances to join and form groups which they prefer. Thus, individualization does not bring the end of people's tendency to connect. Instead, it brings the freedom to connect and disconnect as people choose. As a consequence, social relations, group loyalties, and collective affiliations become more of people's liking. As this happens, society gains in intrinsic value" (Welzel, 2013, pp. 4862-4867).

Yet, perhaps the opposition between Touraine's claim—that individualism in postmodern society leads to electoral volatility, but not to criminal or asocial egoism—and Welzel's argument—that individualism abandons old social pressures for new social relations—is more verbal than real? Both speak of a decline in the relevance of Durkheimian social facts or collective consciousness, and of the class, religious, and regional differences of Rokkan's cleavage terminology.

Now, those who adhere to Durkheim and favour his emphasis on the importance of social cohesion in groups or nations may argue that Inglehart and Welzel's survey studies offer a powerful antidote to Touraine's individualism. Namely, these adherents would cite the concept of social trust.

The concept of social trust—also referred to as *social capital* and *interpersonal trust*—has been hotly debated and extensively and empirically investigated during the last two decades (Inglehart and Welzel, 2009). Would the existence of this trust limit the consequences of Touraine's individualism? Perhaps a trusting attitude among the population is central to social solidarity, replacing the old frozen cleavages? Table 2 shows the variation in trust attitudes in Western European countries.

TABLE 2: Percentage surveyed who agree that, “generally speaking, most people can be trusted.”

	1981	1990	1999	2008
Austria	-	32	34	36
Belgium	29	33	31	36
Denmark	51	58	67	76
Finland	-	63	58	65
France	24	23	22	27
Germany	-	35	35	40
Iceland	41	44	41	51
Ireland	42	-	36	38
Italy	25	34	33	31
Luxemburg	-	-	26	33
Netherlands	44	53	60	63
Norway	61	65	65	74
Portugal	-	21	10	20
Spain	34	36	39	35
Sweden	57	66	66	70
Switzerland	-	43	41	55
UK	44	44	30	40

Source: European Values Survey

The percentage of survey participants who responded positively to the question, “Can people be trusted?” increased in several countries and even rose to or exceeded 70 per cent in three Nordic countries. In most countries, trust is lower than 50 per cent. Trust is declining in several countries.

It is empirically significant that this indicator of generalized trust is opaque, as it is basically elliptic. It begs the questions: Trust by whom? Trust for whom? and Trust under which conditions? Thus, a number of more precise indicators have been developed, but they do not always coincide with each other. The attempt to use fundamentally different indicators, such as associational behaviour, has not resulted in findings that coincide (Putnam, 1983).

It is theoretically important that whereas the denotation of *social capital* is usable but somewhat amorphous, the connotation of the concept is all but clear. If there were an unobservable like social capital, then it would link up with several observables, such as trust attitudes, social relationships, and other non-observables or theoretical constructs (Hempel, 1965). But that is not the case. One finds the following definitions of social capital:

1. solidarity valuations;
2. interpersonal trust;
3. support for public sector services;
4. emphasis upon public domain;
5. preference for equality;
6. ecologism;
7. participation in new social movements; and
8. individualism (Svensen and Haase, 2010).

But I doubt very much that microlevel correlations among attitudes towards these eight items reveal a basic latent dimension beneath the observable data. Maybe social capital is only a figment of the imagination?

5. THE PRINCIPAL-AGENT APPROACH TO VOLATILITY: HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE AND HIDDEN ACTION

Turning to a rational choice framework to account for the increase in volatility, one encounters the principal-agent model. It is no longer a matter of collectivism versus individualism, or cleavages versus atomism. Volatility can be modelled as a sequential game based on asymmetric information.

In such a game, the principal is the electorate. Of course the principal's objective is to garner favourable policies. The agents in this game are the political parties, whose objective is to win votes and offices. The principal and the agents engage in two or more rounds of play (two or more elections) employing the strategy of opportunism with guile. Finally, the context, characterized by asymmetric information, results in adverse selection, this in turn equates to pretending and moral hazards, and the agent ultimately reneges.

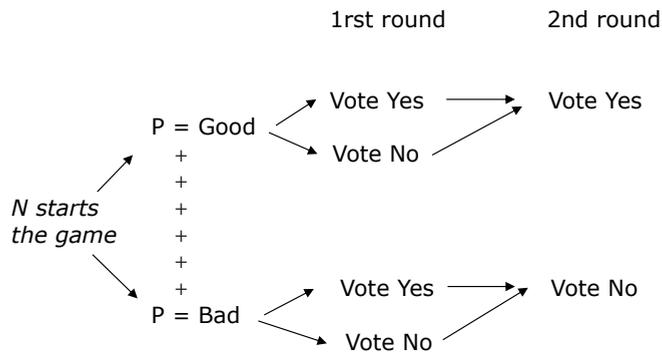


DIAGRAM 5: Volatility as principal-agent interaction with Nature (N) with asymmetric information = +

As the game diagram above indicates, voters do not know whether they are on the upper or lower node. Thus, voters can only reach their best outcome in the second round of play.

The political party, as an agent, engages in strategies to capture the vote. But how can the voter discern truths amid all the signalling of the party: talk, promises, accusations, legacies, and so on? Asymmetric information enters the election game both *ex ante* (adverse selection) and *ex post* (moral hazard, or renegeing). The implication is that by switching parties, voters can restrain the parties' information advantage. In the third round of this sequential game, the first round is repeated.

Volatility fulfils a crucial function in a democracy: it allows the voter to disclose pretending. For example, when the party is pretending—announcing one intent or action but actually pursues another intent or action in reality—voters can correct their electoral choice when the party reneges on its promises. Re-election strengthens voters in relation to their agents.

6. A FEW CONSEQUENCES OF INCREASES IN VOLATILITY

Volatility has grown alongside an increase in the number of political parties contesting elections. New parties have been created. While some of these new parties have survived a few elections, others have operated like flash parties, receiving substantial support at one election only to be phased out by subsequent elections. Just as spectacular as flash parties are the deaths of mass parties such as the slow demise of the Communists or the sudden disappearance of the Italian Christian Democrats.

A few attempts have been made to map the existence and strength of various political parties—these maps could be used to reanalyse the Lipset-Rokkan theory. One such map focuses on the size of mass or cleavage parties, spanning Left, Socialist, Communist, Agrarian, and religious parties. Diagram 6 shows the combined size of the Lipset-Rokkan cleavage parties (Left, Religious, and Agrarian—LR-ALT) in 1970 and in 2000.

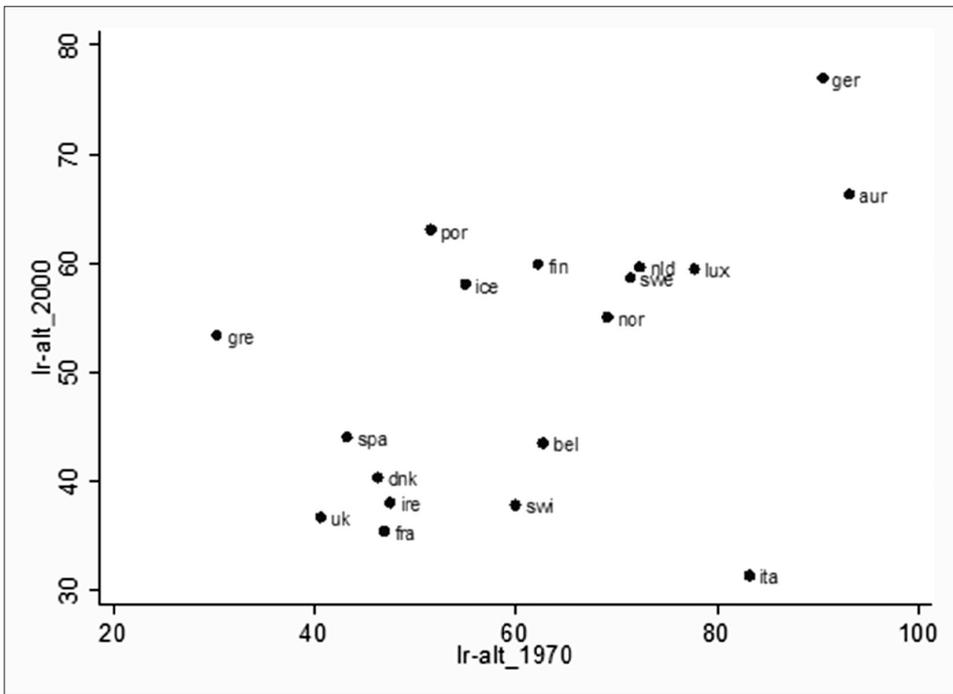


DIAGRAM 6: Mass parties: Left, Religious, and Agrarian in 1970 and in 2000

Note: LR-ALT measures support for Socialist + Left-Socialist + Communist + Agrarian + ethnic parties.

Source: Armingeon et al. (2013)

In Diagram 6, the decline of the cleavage parties is clear and provides evidence of party system change. Most of these mass parties are *below* the 45-degree line.

To map party system transformation, we can also try to measure the size of new parties. In Diagram 7, the category “others” designates political parties that are *not* Socialist,

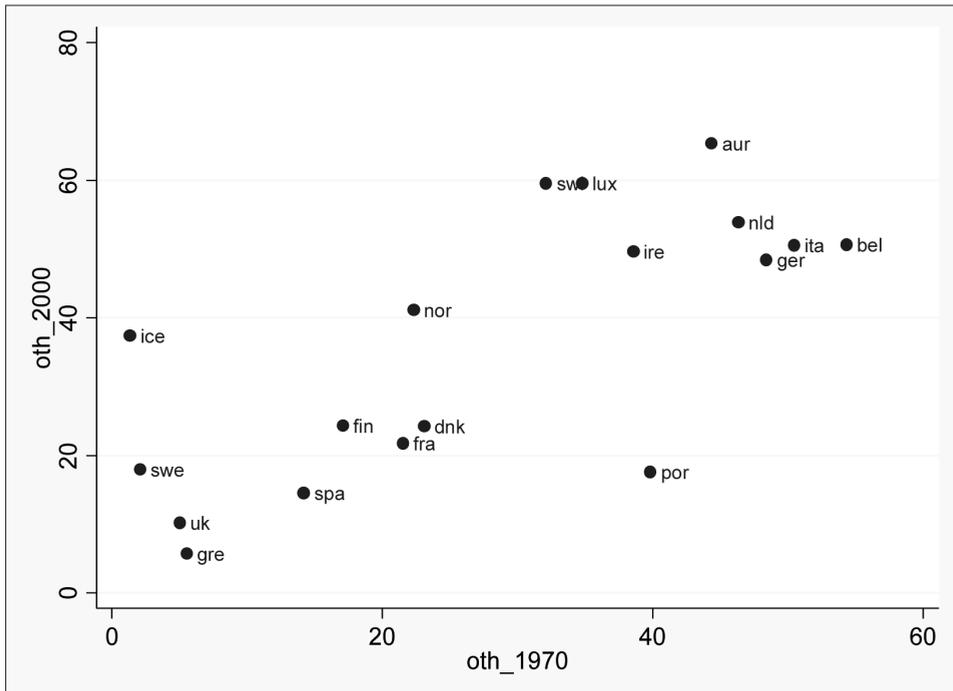


DIAGRAM 7: New Parties

Note: OTH measures the support for new parties as $100 - (\text{Socialist} + \text{Agrarian} + \text{Conservatives} + \text{Communists} + \text{Liberal})$ (Sundberg, 1999)

Source: Armingeon et al. (2013)

Conservative, Agrarian, Communist, or Liberal. Again, one may note that these “others” (OTH) are mostly *above* the 45-degree line in Diagram 7.

According to the logic of the Lipset-Rokkan theory, a country’s pattern of government formation must reflect party alignments derived from basic social cleavages. For Lipset and Rokkan, electoral formulas do not—as Duverger (1954) argued—establish governments, but are endogenous to the cleavage structure themselves. Thus, Western Europe will have predominantly proportional election (PR) systems that promote multiparty politics. Thus, in a system of multiparty politics with fixed alignments and strong cleavages, one would expect to find several minority governments, fewer minimum-winning coalition governments, and some oversized governments.

When historical patterns of voter alignments do not count as much, parties have more freedom to form coalitions. After all, all other things being equal, majority governments are easier to run than minority governments.

In a few Western European countries, PR methods have been used as the basis for so-called consociationalism (Lijphart, 1968). Consociationalism is an effort to bring all, or most, players on board for consensus policy-making. The creation of grand coalitions would constitute a tool for the political elite to minimize conflict and avoid any tendency for civil

war between the so-called camps (*zuilen*, pillars) in a cleavage-dominated society. But in a postmodern society with borderless strata and communities, a grand coalition may simply be an alternative to a weak minority government

In a postmodern society, oversized or grand coalitions make little sense, except for convenience. When two large parties that cannot form a simple majority government or a minimum winning coalition dominate a party system, then they may temporarily resort to the oversized format. Only Switzerland employs the *collegiado* as a matter of principle.

CONCLUSION

The party systems in Western Europe are dynamic, as emphasized in Sartori's classic framework (Sartori, 1975). Today, two of its basic dimensions have changed fundamentally—as shown in Diagram 8, portraying net volatility against the effective number of parties (fractionalization).

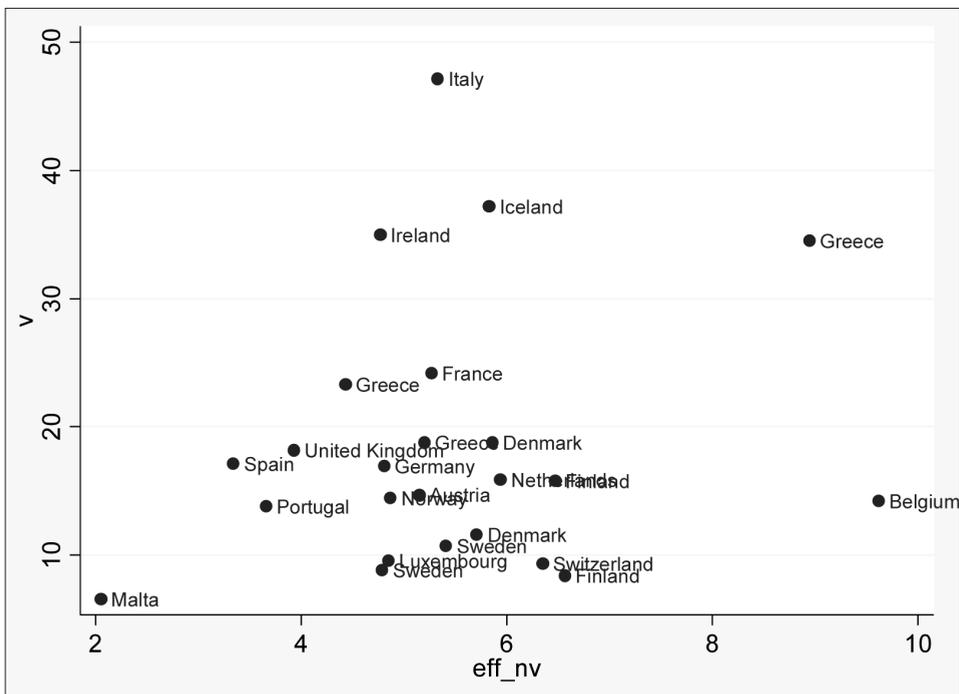


DIAGRAM 8: Net volatility and effective number of parties in Western European countries from 2011 to 2015

More specifically, the increase in net volatility appears in Table 3, depicting volatility development from 1970 to 2015.

TABLE 3: Net volatility in Western European Elections from 1970 to 2015

Summary of v			
Decade	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1970-79	10.591514	6.5865799	55
1980-89	10.231104	6.9730458	58
1990-99	11.483612	5.9708036	53
2000-09	11.738517	5.9025244	55
2010-15	18.529448	10.333016	24
Total	11.734261	7.1916167	245

Also, in Table 4, it is clear that the number of effective parties has augmented.

TABLE 4: Number of effective parties from 1970 to 2015

Summary of eff_nv			
Decade	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1970-79	4.2903636	1.4693964	55
1980-88	4.1234483	1.5086855	58
1990-99	4.6964151	1.9037505	53
2000-09	4.5745455	1.6080985	55
2010-15	5.3816666	1.5883233	24

In the volatile political world of West European democracies, an election that will be the Pedersen index's earthquake is almost always just around the corner. And this threat smashes Lipset and Rokkan's stable world. Remember, gross volatility is approximately two times net volatility. This makes the strategy of political parties fragile, but improves the situation of the principals, voters, in relation to their agents, parties.

APPENDIX: DATA AND SOURCES

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