Brahmin Left Versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies

Quarterly Journal of Economics, forthcoming

Amory Gethin1 Clara Martínez-Toledano2 Thomas Piketty1

1 Paris School of Economics 2 Imperial College London
amory.gethin@gmail.com

Motivation

1. Rise of identity-based divides in Western democracies, embodied by the growing success of far-right and green movements.
2. On what dimensions of political conflict (education, income, etc.) have these transformations aligned? Is this change the outcome of recent events (China shock, immigration) or of a longer-run process?

A New Dataset on Electoral Divides in 21 Democracies

1. Collection of all post-electoral surveys ever conducted in Western democracies (Western Eur., US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand).
2. Harmonization of voting + sociodemographic variables: income, education, age, gender, religion, race/ethnicity, etc.
3. Part of a larger project on political divides in 50 democracies, the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database, presented in our book Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities → WPID.world.

1) The Disconnection of Income and Education

1. In the 1950s-1960s, higher-educated and high-income voters were significantly less likely to vote social democrats and affiliated.
2. Complete reversal of the educational cleavage, leading to a divergence between a “Brahmin Left” (high education) and a “Merchant Right” (high income). Robust to controls and alternative indicators.
3. Visible in nearly all Western democracies, despite their major historical and institutional differences (exceptions: Ireland & Portugal).
4. No major shift in other dimensions of electoral divides (age, rural-urban, religion), with the exception of gender.

Figure 1 – The Disconnection of Income and Education Cleavages in Western Democracies

2) The Fragmentation of Western Party Systems

1. Increasing party fragmentation in multi-party systems in recent decades, with the rise of anti-immigration and green parties.
2. This fragmentation has accelerated the reversal of educational divides, as these parties distinguish themselves in terms of education, not income.

Figure 2 – The Fragmentation of Political Cleavage Structures

3) The Rise of Sociocultural Divides

1. We match our surveys with the Comparative Manifesto Project database to study the link between political supply and demand.
2. The rise of anti-immigration and green parties has led to greater sociocultural ideological polarization, while economic polarization has remained stable.
3. Strong and rising correlation between parties’ sociocultural positions and the educational composition of their electorates → sociocultural divides play a key role in generating the divergence of income and education cleavages.

Figure 3 – Multidimensional Ideological Conflict and the Divergence of Income and Education Cleavages

Conclusion

1. New political conflicts in Western democracies primarily divide voters with different education levels – not income, age, or geography.
2. Future research could investigate:
   • Why education is dividing voters over sociocultural issues.
   • How this shift occurred (supply vs. demand).