

*Congrès AFSP Toulouse 2007*

**Table ronde 2**

**"Comment concevoir et saisir les temporalités du vote ? Pour une approche longitudinale de la décision électorale"**

*Session 1*

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**The generational bases of long-term change in party support**

*APOLOGY: Not only is this paper in English, but it is not the paper I had hoped to write in terms of the development and testing of an idea. Rather the idea is still embryonic and the data are used rather to describe this idea than to test it. Instead of using data for a large number of countries I have used data from only two (perhaps not well-chosen) on the grounds that these were the data I happened to have to hand. Nevertheless, the up-side is that the paper is a short one, and the idea still simple (perhaps simplistic). With luck this may yet stimulate the sort of discussion I had hoped for when the paper was proposed.*

## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship on social cleavages appears to be in danger of forgetting the original basis for academic interest in social cleavages: their importance for projecting into the modern world the conflicts of past centuries. The famous “freezing hypothesis” of Lipsett and Rokkan (1967) was framed as a proposed explanation for the apparent durability and resilience of European party systems which appeared in the 1960s still to be based on the same group differences that had characterized them fifty years earlier, despite the shocks administered by communist and national socialist challenges during the intervening years. This is what made the social bases of party organization and voter loyalties so eminently worthy of study. The decline of cleavage politics has put this resilience into question in the modern world. Yet if party alignments and voter loyalties in western countries are no longer molded by the cleavages of past centuries, what implications does this have for contemporary political change? One possibility – the apparent focus of much contemporary scholarship – is that political entrepreneurs now have the opportunity to encourage the development of new cleavages that will serve the function in today’s political world that Lipsett and Rokkan’s cleavages served in the world of the 1960s. This paper will argue that such developments are only possible to the extent that we redefine the concept of a political cleavage from what Lipsett and Rokkan had in mind. This may be no bad thing to do. The concept of a political cleavage as something more enduring than a mere difference of opinion about government policy may well be worth retaining, but in that case it is important to establish in what ways these new cleavages retain the characteristics of the social cleavages of old, particularly in regard to their ability to mold contemporary party systems and restrain the amount of political volatility that would otherwise be present.

What is the role of social cleavages in politics? Lipsett and Rokkan (1967) proposed that social cleavages brought into Twentieth Century politics the social conflicts of a bygone era, ensuring that social groups would retain political antipathies from as long ago as the Protestant Reformation. These antipathies – of Protestant against Catholic, urban dweller against rural dweller, geographic regions in the center of countries against regions in the periphery, and, most recently, industrial workers against their employers – provided fertile ground for political parties to recruit supporters generation after generation, bringing into the second half of the Twentieth Century party systems that dated back to the establishment of modern democratic government, at least in the western parts of Europe, and which proved themselves remarkably resilient in the face of threats from national socialism in the 1920s and 30s and from communism in the 1940s.

Writing in 1967, Lipsett and Rokkan proposed a ‘freezing hypothesis’ to account for the fact that political forces retained at that time the distinct imprint of the political forces that had characterized the Western world a hundred years earlier. And a few years later, Rose and Urwin (1970) documented empirically the fact that electoral support for political parties had remained largely unchanged over the course of decades and even generations.

The explanation given by Lipsett and Rokkan (1967) for the enduring political effects of social cleavages tied these effects to the forces of political socialization. Young people brought up in a social environment that was largely homogeneous would learn the values and mimic the political preferences of their family, friends and neighbors. By the time they reached voting age they would have internalized those values and preferences so that support for the political party of their social group would come naturally to them. And so those political parties would continue to receive support from those social groups election after election, decade after decade, and generation after generation.

Ironically, even as Rose and Urwin (1970) were analyzing the data that would lend support to the freezing hypothesis, that hypothesis was proving itself increasingly unable to explain contemporary developments. Starting at a point generally agreed as occurring at the end of the 1960s, the tight linkages between social groups and political parties started to break down. In Belgium, Britain, Canada, and Switzerland new electoral support started to be won by parties that based their appeal on linguistic and ethnic cleavages long thought to have been depoliticized. In other countries various new parties arose on the basis of causes that divided one-time supporters of established parties against each other: tax cuts for Glistrup's party in Denmark, civil liberties for Italian radicals, constitutional reform for Dutch D66, and traditional morality for new Christian Democratic parties in certain Scandinavian countries. Several countries saw a decline in the electoral support given to left parties (particularly in Britain and Ireland) whereas in certain other countries left parties did unexpectedly well at the polls (Australia, France and New Zealand). In several countries environmental 'Green' parties gained increasing electoral support.

Political scientists found it hard to discern a common pattern in changes such as increased volatility of party support, the emergence of new parties, and the general uncertainty about the evolution of party support (Irwin and Dittrich 1984). The problem of making sense of these developments was exacerbated by the fact that the effects of social structure appeared very different in different countries (Rose 1974). Meanwhile, where changes had started to occur these changes appeared to lack any common pattern.

Franklin (1992) proposed an answer to the puzzle by suggesting that what was happening was that social cleavages were losing their power to structure partisanship, in defiance of the freezing hypothesis. He found that where social structure retained its power to structure

partisanship neither volatility nor new parties could be found. Where what he called ‘cleavage politics’ had declined, either new parties or volatility or both were generally found. He discovered an apparent ‘developmental process’ that seemed to be under way in all countries but which had reached different stages in different countries, that seemed inexorably tied to this decline. By his account, Lipsett and Rokkan (1967) had indeed been correct in thinking that party support was, at the time they were writing, based on tight links between political parties and social groups, but that by the 1980s these linkages were everywhere in the process of eroding, removing a sort of straightjacket that had previously drastically limited the evolution of political support to the glacial rate of change in social structure. With the straightjacket removed, rapid change became possible. Lack of constraint implies political developments freely responding to circumstances, whatever they might be. Different circumstances in different countries led to different developments in different countries. Or so it seemed.

In the same volume, Van der Eijk et al. suggested that the power of ancient cleavages to structure partisanship had declined for the simple reason that, on the whole, the parties that based their support on those cleavages had achieved their political aims, losing their *raison d’etre* among those who might otherwise have continued to support them. In particular, in the years following World War II, left parties had throughout much of the western world succeeded in achieving the major objectives they had set themselves at the time of their foundation, of establishing a degree of security for working people in the face of unemployment, shortages of affordable housing, and the hazards of ill-health. With these major political objectives achieved, working class loyalties to left parties naturally started to erode. Much the same appeared to have happened to religious parties at about the same time, and perhaps as a by-product of the

successes of left parties, since religious differences as grounds for differential treatment in employment, housing and health care were effectively removed by the same reforms.

Today we understand even better than did van der Eijk and his collaborators in 1992 that one quick way to reduce a party's support is to enact its policies (Wlesien 1995, 2004). The decline in cleavage politics documented by Franklin (1992) appears to correspond to precisely the sorts of shifts away from support for established parties that Wlezien's more recent theories would lead us to expect.

The idea that social cleavages had declined in their power to structure partisanship was not accepted very quickly or very widely by academic scholarship in political science and (especially not) in sociology. At the end of the century Geoffrey Evans edited a volume entitled *The Death of Class Politics?* (1999) in which considerable differences of opinion were evident as to whether the class cleavage had in fact declined. But careful study of that volume shows that the ability to talk of social class as a continuing major force in party choice requires one to be willing to change one's definition of social class from something 'frozen' to something quite malleable. If one defines social class as having enough different strata, many of these strata do appear to retain cohesion over time, but their support can shift from one party to another for no clear reason associated with the concept of class itself. So the claim that social class retains its power to structure partisanship can be sustained only by redefining it so that it does not constitute a straightjacket. This makes it impossible to use the decline of class politics as a basis for explaining contemporary political developments but does not yield any other very useful explanation. But then sociologists are not in the business of explaining political developments, as pointed out by Mair (1999) in reference to the Evans volume.

Sociologists are not the only ones to have redefined past views of social cleavages. Recent scholarship on this topic appears to be in danger of forgetting the original basis for academic interest in social cleavages: their importance for projecting into the modern world the conflicts of past centuries. The famous “freezing hypothesis” already referred to was framed as a proposed explanation for the apparent durability and resilience of European party systems which appeared in the 1960s still to be based on the same group differences that had characterized them fifty years earlier, despite the political (and military) shocks administered during the intervening years. Yet today it would be hard for anyone to claim that contemporary party systems and voter loyalties are no different than they were in the 1960s. Those who contest the idea of declining cleavage politics are generally less than helpful in providing alternative explanations for contemporary developments in party systems and voting behavior (Franklin 2002).

Yet if party alignments and voter loyalties in western countries are no longer molded by the cleavages of past centuries, what implications does this have for contemporary political change? One possibility – the apparent focus of much contemporary literature – is that political entrepreneurs now have the opportunity to encourage the development of new cleavages that will serve the function in today’s political world that Lipsett and Rokkan’s cleavages served in the world of the 1960s. This may indeed be the case, but how would we know if it was? Certainly new issues arise that cause political divisions between supporters of one side of the issue from supporters of the other, but when does such a division cease to be a political difference and become a political cleavage? If all political differences are seen as political cleavages then the distinction between an issue and a cleavage is lost, and political science is the poorer.

On the other hand, holding up Lipsett and Rokkan’s (1967) definition of a political cleavage, as a longstanding social division that finds political expression through the mediation

of political parties (or other social organizations) that give the cleavage formal expression and whose supporters come from the social groups that define the cleavage concerned, may well be to raise too high a standard. The decline of old fashioned cleavage politics may have left us with no actual examples of social cleavages that would meet Lipsett and Rokkan's (1967) definition, in which case we have lost a useful distinction just as surely as if we totally confound the notion of a cleavage with the notion of an issue.

In this paper I want to argue for an intermediate position, one that retains the notion of a political cleavage as something more enduring than a mere difference of opinion about government policy, but which adopts a different standard for establishing a threshold of durability that differentiates a cleavage from an issue. I believe that understanding the way in which the cleavages of old acquired their durability can give us a handle on why new cleavages might do the same, particularly in regard to their ability to mold contemporary party systems and restrain the amount of political volatility that would otherwise be present.

### **Restraining political change**

To my way of thinking, the most important unique contribution of Lipsett and Rokkan's (1967) 'freezing hypothesis' was to suggest the idea that there were political divisions more enduring than mere issues: political divisions that engaged the mechanism of generational transmission that is inherent in socializing processes in order to transmit party and other loyalties forward in time beyond the period in which they acquired their salience. Such mechanisms give durability to political ideas and predictability to party support, standing against the sort of rapid changes in political preferences that are associated with political volatility.



But it is not obvious that such mechanisms exist in the world we now inhabit, except to the extent that old cleavages still exist and still transmit loyalties established a hundred years ago or more.

In fact there are at least two other mechanisms that might be responsible for durability of political divisions that would not require the socialization mechanisms that were inherent in Lipsett and Rokkan's freezing hypothesis. The first is the well-known fact that, in order to have political consequences, issues need to be brought into the left-right dominant axis of political contestation (Marks and Steenbergen 2004). Having been aligned with the dominant left-right axis of politics, issues can retain an effect on party policy long after interest in them has waned. However, this is not a mechanism that seems very useful for giving durability to new cleavages. It is rather a mechanism that might help to explain the residual importance of old cleavages.

The second mechanism is a weaker version of the socialization mechanism that does not involve childhood socialization but rather the well-known tendency for people to get stuck in their ways. People who make the same choices repeatedly – even a relatively small number of times – appear to engage forces of inertia that are inherent in the human makeup. Some people get stuck with the same car manufacturers or holiday places, apparently for no better reason than that they made the same decision a very few times in succession. In economics this is the basis of 'brand loyalty'. In politics it underlies concepts of 'party identification'. We also refer to 'habitual voting' as something that people acquire, along with partisanship, as a consequence of repeated affirmation of party choice by voting for that party at the polls.

Recent scholarship has discovered a powerful long-term effect of habitual voting on turnout (Franklin 2004). The evolution of turnout over very long periods is strongly influenced by the early electoral experiences of successive cohorts of voters. Voters who experience high

turnout elections during early adulthood are more likely to retain a high turnout profile as they age whereas voters who experience low turnout elections during early adulthood are more likely to retain a low turnout profile as they age. The early electoral experiences of successive cohorts thus leave 'footprints' in the cohort structure of an electorate, like the rings of an aging tree, bringing forward in time the record of past experiences. Taking together all the footprints accumulated over a fifty-year period (the length of time the average cohort remains active in the electorate) yields a 'baseline expectation' for turnout around which actual turnout varies from election to election as a result of short-term forces. Generational replacement then removes the oldest cohorts and replaces them with new cohorts whose initial experiences were often different. This natural effect of generational replacement can have progressive effects on baseline turnout levels even without short-term forces being taken into account.

Could it be the same with partisanship? It seems very likely that it would be. After all, it seems reasonable that as people acquire the habit of turning out to vote at election time so they also acquire the habit of voting for some particular party (or perhaps a party tendency, in some countries). It is hard to imagine people having the habit of voting at random. But if this is the case, then much will depend on which partisan choices actually acquire this baseline character. The apparent finding regarding turnout is that the transition to habitual voting occurs for those who have voted three times in succession. This also was the number of successive affirmations of partisanship that Butler and Stokes (1975) found to be needed for voters to become 'immunized' (in their terminology) against later political influences. This process would limit change in party support of established political cohorts, providing a backbone for any party system and promoting its durability. Change in party strength (and the rise of new parties) would then arise mainly from the entry into the electorate of new generations of voters who, during the

first few elections that they experience as young adults, are rather open to new ideas and political trends. It is well known that new parties find their greatest support among young voters, but the corollary of this in terms of the role of more established cohorts in resisting political change has not been so well understood.

### **Evidence from voting studies**

How can we discover whether the sort of mechanism described above actually exists? What sorts of research findings would support my supposition? In what follows I will sketch the outline of a research strategy for determining whether in fact political change can be limited by the forces of inertia, as outlined above. This is not the place to do the actual research, but a couple of illustrative research findings will be used to exemplify the sorts of findings that would prove my point.

The first has to do with the behavior of individuals. If people become stuck in their ways as they age, this will show itself in the extent to which they find themselves cross-pressured or ambivalent as between different political parties that might receive their support. If my ideas are right, then older voters should be more likely to have developed a preference for a single party than younger voters, who should be more ambivalent in their preferences. Much research, particularly in the Netherlands, has suggested that such a structure of preferences exists. Starting in the early 1980s, Dutch election studies have questioned respondents about the chances that they would ever vote for specific parties. Each voter was questioned about all parties receiving representation in the Dutch Parliament and responses have been found to constitute a rating of political parties, much like the Downsian concept of party utility (Downs 1957; van der Eijk and Neimoller 1980, 1984; see also Tillie 1995, van der Eijk et al. 2006). Voters who give the same rating to more than one party can be seen as equally likely to vote for each of the parties to which

they give the same rating (in recent work this has been referred to as the ‘propensity to vote’ for a political party – see van der Brug, van der Eijk and Franklin 2007).

From these data it is possible to calculate for each voter the highest propensity to vote for a party and then to see how many parties are given an equally high rating. What we should see if my expectations are correct is that fewer young voters than older voters have only a single party to which they give their highest rating, and that younger voters should on average have more parties to which they give their highest rating. Moreover, there should be a greater differentiation between the lowest and highest ratings given to different parties as people age – the extent to which people differentiate between parties in terms of their propensity to support them should increase.

Table 1 shows that these expectations are in fact born out in the Netherlands. When the electorate is divided into five-year cohorts, those cohorts do show a progressive development in

**Table 1** Differences in propensity to vote by cohort, Netherlands 2004

Cohort	Proportion with one party top	Mean number of parties rated	Mean difference in Ratings, top-bottom
Pre-1949	0.88	1.19	5.91
1949	0.81	1.29	5.71
1954	0.89	1.13	5.37
1959	0.78	1.27	5.06
1964	0.81	1.30	5.18
1969	0.80	1.31	4.87
1974	0.77	1.38	5.11
1979	0.69	1.52	4.90
1984	0.74	1.40	4.86
1989	0.71	1.47	4.76
1994	0.69	1.48	4.86
1999	0.58	1.67	4.95
2004	0.50	2.05	4.64

the expected direction in terms of all three variables. The proportion of each cohort with only a single party in the top position of each member's party ratings increases from just half of the incoming cohort in 2004 to 88 percent of the pre-1949 cohorts in that year. Similarly, the mean number of parties to which respondents give the identical highest rating almost doubles from 1.19 among the oldest cohorts to 2.05 among the youngest cohorts. Finally, the distinctiveness with which parties are rated in the Netherlands in 2004 (the difference between the highest and lowest ratings given to different parties by each individual) increases on average from 4.6 among the youngest cohorts to 5.9 among the oldest cohorts.

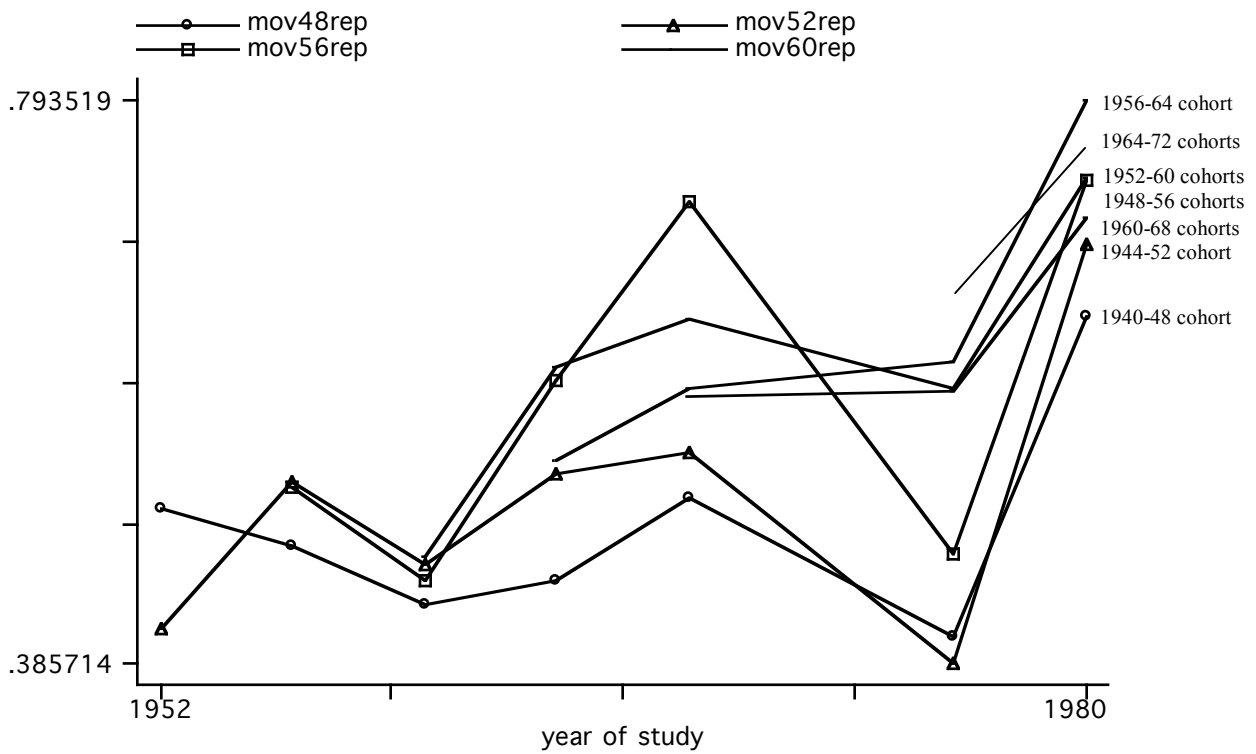
These findings need to be replicated for additional countries, and work undertaken to investigate whatever differences may be found between countries, but at least we can say that this approach to establishing the existence of greater inertia among older electoral cohorts appears promising.

The second approach to establishing the role of inertia in limiting political change is to look at actual changes in party support that have occurred over time in a specific country, and investigate the extent to which younger electoral cohorts can be seen to lead the changes (and older electoral cohorts to have been laggard in this respect). If we find this to be the case it will demonstrate that the extent of change has been limited by the inertia of older cohorts: change would have been quicker if older cohorts had not been so set in their ways.

This research is hard to do, and as an exemplary country I have taken one in which most analysts would deny that political change has a generational basis: the United States. We do know that there has been a realignment in that country, at least in the Southern states, where the 'solid South' that was solidly Democratic until 1948 has progressively over a fifty year period been transformed into a bastion of Republicanism. Much of the change results from migration of

Northern Republicans to the American Sun Belt, and many accounts explain the transformation on this basis, but if I am right about the generational basis of political change it should nevertheless be possible to discern differentiation by cohort in the American South when Southern whites are divided into electoral cohorts and their support for the Republican party tracked over time, from 1952 (the first Republican victory since 1928 and the first year at which

**Figure 1** Southern white proportion Republican, by cohort, 1944-1980

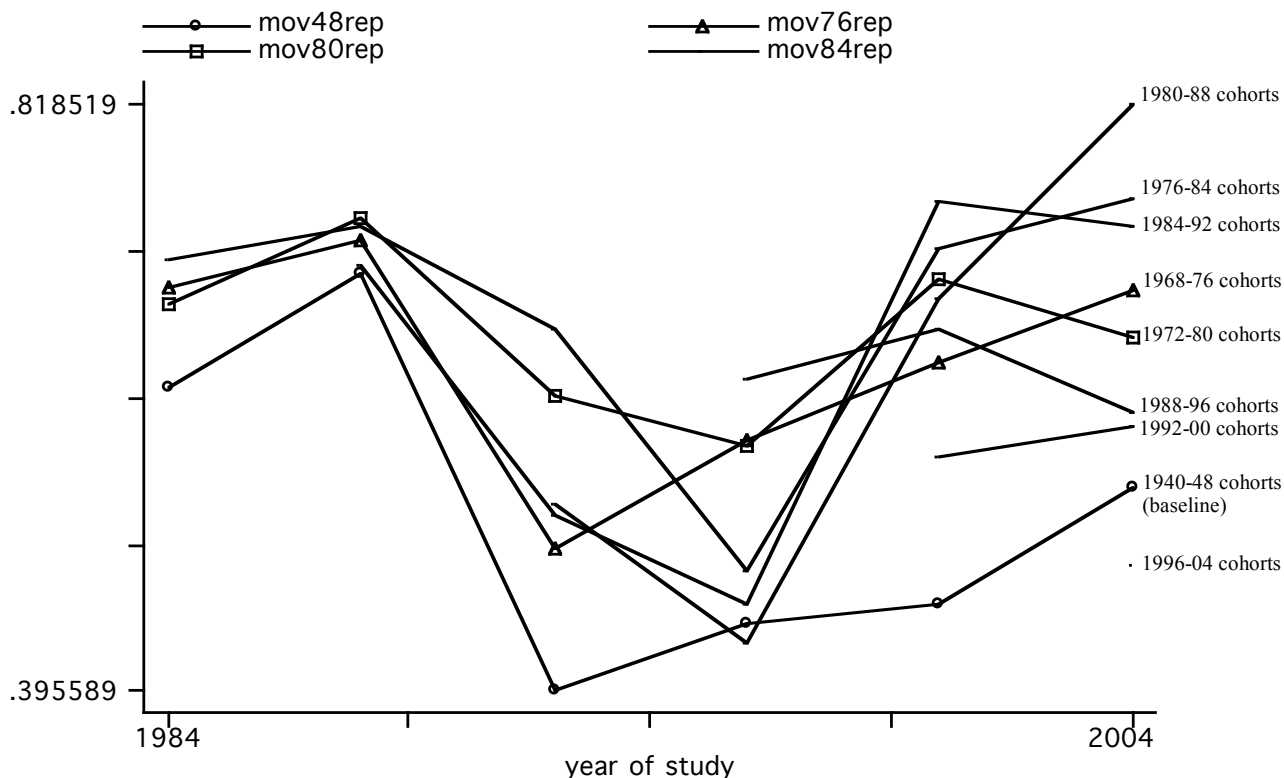


appropriate survey data are available for re-analysis) to 1980 (the year of the Reagan victory over Jimmy Carter. The lines on the graph are three-cohort moving averages, needed to give any sort of stability to the results (which are made volatile by the small number of respondents, especially when the sample is restricted just to Southern respondents) in any given electoral cohort. And the cohorts do move around a lot, showing that even older voters do shift their support from one party to the other (and back) in large numbers. However, most of this

movement appears to be cyclical. Members of a given cohort who shift to the Republicans in any given election appear to shift back again in a subsequent election. What gives the chart its upward movement towards a more Republican mean position over time appears to be the entry into the electorate of successive cohorts of voters who either begin their political lives with a more Republican orientation or acquire such an orientation in one of their earliest elections. The cohorts are almost (though not quite) arranged with the youngest cohorts at the top of the chart and the oldest at the bottom.

Continuing the chart through later years (Figure 2) we actually witness a swing back to the Democrats among Southern whites, starting in 1992, which might be what gave Bill Clinton (a Southerner) his victory in that year. But, interestingly, that swing is again led by the youngest cohorts. Cohorts that entered the US electorate during the period shown in Figure 1 retain their Republican orientation even as later cohorts show a more Democratic orientation. Note that the 1996-04 group of cohorts is actually less Republican than the baseline 1940-48 cohorts.

**Figure 2** Southern white proportion Republican, by cohort, 1984-2004



It is quite hard to disentangle the lines in Figure 2 in order to see what is going on, but it is worth the effort. We see that the 1940-48 cohort continued its rise in terms of Republicanism that began in 1980, but only for one more election, after which it returns to its previously pro-Democratic orientation, reinforcing the apparent message of Figure 1 that established cohorts only abandon past partisanship temporarily, which does not constitute the basis for a realignment. At the same time, the behavior of new cohorts that entered the electorate during the course of Figure 2 show the same resilience in the face of short-term forces as did those who entered during the course of Figure 1. The largest changes seem to be due to new cohorts of voters behaving differently than more established cohorts.



Evidently the story told in Figures 1 and 2 is only that, a story. There is not yet anything that could be called hard evidence for the mechanism I am putting forward. Just as my table for Dutch voters needs to be replicated across multiple countries and multiple years, so do my charts for US voters. Other realignments need to be investigated using the same (and perhaps other) tools.

Still, the findings are sufficient to give my ideas greater plausibility than if they had been simply asserted, and on the basis of these findings I feel emboldened to suggest that reference to political cleavages should be restricted to situations in which attitudinal positions have become established through the engagement of forces of inertia that develop over the course of four or five elections, while the term ‘issue politics’ should be employed for more short-term political developments. The distinction could be helpful to political scientists because we need a way of referring to political differences whose evolution over time cannot be understood without taking account of generational change.

## **Discussion**

This paper has developed at least the rudiments of a theoretical basis for understanding generational (long-term) change in party systems and voter loyalties in the contemporary political world, using examples from recent elections in Europe and North America, and has suggested ways in which the distinction between long-term and short-term political change can help us understand the evolution of party support over time. Perhaps the same ideas can help us understand how newly democratized political systems metamorphose into established democracies (and also the way in which established democracies can sometimes take on the character of newly democratized political systems as a result of the exogenous shocks to their party systems).

My feeling is that what distinguishes newly established democracies might turn out to be no more than the fact that long-term forces have not yet had the chance to become engaged. And what distinguishes established democracies that are subjected to major political shocks is that long-term forces are disrupted and have to be re-established from scratch.

All these ideas are at the moment embryonic, and much in need of development. My hope is that in putting them on paper I will stimulate the discussion that might lead to this.

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