

# Political Cleavages in a Media-Driven Environment

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## *Abstract:*

In this article we argue that the cleavage model of Lipset and Rokkan still merits the attention of students of contemporary electoral behavior. In particular, we argue that the normative and institutional elements inherent in the model may be more relevant

than the social base of cleavages. However, while the increasing influence of the mass media affects the relationship between parties and voters, it may also have consequences for the conceptualization and design of our analytical models.

*Keywords:* -cleavages,  
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THE QUEST FOR NEW THEORY<sup>1</sup>

SINCE World War II the pace of societal change has been greater than in any other historical period. In some of the emerging democracies the economic and political development has not only been compressed in time, but has also deviated from the sequential stages found in established democracies. Even in established systems social change has affected both the political structure and the behavior of citizens. All this represents major challenges for students trying to understand what is happening in society. In political science, paradigms have changed from socio-structural models (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) to value-based generational models (Inglehart 1977), cognitive mobilization models (Dalton 1984), moving on to models emphasizing social capital and networks (Putnam 1993). The basic rationale behind the change of models seems to be quite simple: New times require new cognitive tools. In particular, it seems to be widely agreed that social structure is becoming less relevant for the understanding of political processes and preferences. Consequently, the claim is that the traditional cleavage model of Lipset and Rokkan is outdated. “The ‘frozen’ democratic party systems that Seymour Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) once observed have become more fluid political environments where new parties are forming and electoral change is increasing over time” (Dalton 2000: 42). The old order is “crumbling” (Dalton 2000: 262).

In the wake of weakening bonds between parties and voters, scholars have shifted their focus from social structure to issue voting and the role of the mass media. Henry Valen has described this development as a change from “a class struggle to a struggle for the political agenda” (Valen 1999). Analyses of Norwegian data, for instance, suggest that the media agenda activates underlying social and ideological attachments (Aardal 2003b). However, despite the widely accepted position of the media as a major contender in contemporary politics, the media do not play a significant role in the above-mentioned models. Moreover, few if any of the new paradigms seem to satisfy the need for comprehensive interpretations of contemporary political behavior. Thus, the quest for new theories and models goes on and on.

But do we necessarily have to search in directions other than the “old” ones in order to find answers to contemporary challenges? In this article we first argue that the Lipset and Rokkan cleavage model may still be of

value, not necessarily by stubbornly saying that “nothing has really changed”, but by emphasizing elements that tend to be overlooked in the scholarly debate. We then ask what role the mass media play in modern politics. In particular, we ask what the implications of the changes in media structure are for our analytical framework.

#### THE LIPSET–ROKKAN APPROACH

Over the years, “political cleavage” has been one of the favorite concepts in Western political science, not the least in electoral studies. However, not only has it been one of the most frequently used concepts, it has also been one of the most imprecise and ambiguous concepts of the profession (Bartolini and Mair 1990, Zuckermann 1975). This fact is reflected in the many names assigned to the concept: ‘conflict’, ‘cleavage’, ‘opposition’, ‘dimension’, ‘syndrome’, ‘division’, as well as the many classifications or types, e.g. ‘social’, ‘political’, ‘structural’, ‘ideological’, or ‘cultural’. In some cases the terms are used interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> In other cases they denote different aspects of the “cleavage” in question (Rae and Taylor 1970). For some, the term ‘cleavage’ does not seem to mean more than statistically significant correlations at a given point in time. It has even been argued that any difference in the electorate’s attitudes toward a politically relevant issue may constitute a ‘cleavage’ (Nilson 1993: 147).

Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan’s monumental work *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (1967) is still an important reference for a discussion of political cleavages. The problem addressed in this book is linked to the historic roots of the political structure in Western democracies. The authors wanted to study the preconditions for the development of a stable system of cleavages and political conflicts in a national context, as well as the reactions and behavior of rank and file voters (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 1–2). When Lipset and Rokkan viewed the political landscape at the time of writing, they were struck by the extent to which current patterns of conflict reflected antagonisms that were prevalent at the time the party system found its form. Perhaps the most famous quotation from the book is: “The party systems of the 1960’s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structure of the 1920’s” – the so-called freezing hypothesis (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 50).

The historic-sociological analysis started out with the two revolutions: the *national* revolution laid the foundation for nation-states where local and regional bonds were broken up, while the *industrial* revolution supplemented the religious and cultural conflicts of the agrarian society with the economic conflict between competing social classes. The analysis was structured along two major axes: a territorial-cultural axis and an economic-functional axis (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 11). Despite the fact that “cleavage” is a frequently used concept in Lipset and Rokkan’s analyses, they do not present an explicit definition. Thus, we need to look more deeply into the origin of the concept, its theoretical status, and its most important characteristics if we are to really understand what their model was all about.

#### THE ROKKAN-VALEN MODEL

The frequently quoted statement of “frozen” political alternatives has in many cases turned out as a thesis of a static and historically bound model. Alan Zuckermann (1982) claims that the idea of political cleavages based on enduring economic conflicts has played so dominating a role in analyses of European politics that the cleavages almost appear as “theoretical axioms”. To the extent one perceives Lipset and Rokkan’s model as a general one – independent of time and space – it could be argued that the model plays a “tyrannical” role, as suggested by Seip (1975). However, this interpretation is not an adequate representation of what Lipset and Rokkan themselves presented in their book.

In order to get hold of the “spirit” of the model we need to go back before publication of the 1967 book. It is no secret that the Introduction to the Lipset–Rokkan book was written by Stein Rokkan based on ideas developed not the least during his analyses of Norwegian political history. The first attempt at condensing the long trends in Norwegian political history is found in *The Mobilization of the Periphery*, written jointly with Henry Valen (Rokkan and Valen 1962). The point of departure is clearly empirical: “We shall present and discuss ... a set of data on turnout, party membership and candidate recruitment in Norway.” The empirical analysis is synthesized in three major conflicts: (1) a conflict between the capital and the districts, and between center and periphery, (2) a conflict between cities and the countryside (closely linked to the first-mentioned conflict), and (3) a class conflict between industrial

workers and land tenants on the one hand and employers on the other (Rokkan and Valen 1962: 134). Rokkan and Valen emphasized that the different conflicts had been cross-cutting over time, resulting in complex adaptations, both within party organizations and between voters. The model is present in full-fledged form in *Regional Contrasts in Norwegian Politics* (1964), also written with Henry Valen. In this article, the authors pursue an empirical analysis of Norwegian politics, summarized in *five* conflicts: (1) a territorial conflict, (2) a socio-cultural conflict, (3) a religious conflict, (4) an economic conflict in the commodity market, and (5) an economic conflict in the labor market (Rokkan and Valen 1964: 166). In both these articles it is clear that neither the number nor the character of cleavages was considered to be “axiomatic”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the famous cleavage model gradually found its form in a series of interactions between concrete empirical analyses and theoretical conceptualizations. It was definitely not presented as a fixed and finalized construction.

In *Regional Contrasts in Norwegian Politics* Rokkan and Valen show how the Norwegian party system evolved around the above-mentioned cleavages. This analysis was based on macro data. Micro data on voters was included at a later stage. In 1969 Henry Valen presented a detailed empirical analysis where the cleavages were operationalized in greater detail than previously, with data from voter studies (Valen 1969a). The analysis of voting behavior based on the individuals’ location in the overall conflict structure is in many ways a prelude to *Norway: Conflict Structure and Mass Politics in a European Periphery*, published five years later with Rokkan (Valen and Rokkan 1974). As in earlier works, a discussion of the historical roots of political cleavages is merged with an analysis of Norwegian voting behavior. In neither of these studies do the authors define what they mean by “political cleavage”, nor do they describe the principles that underlie the choice of themes and dimensions. This obviously raises the question of the theoretical status and ambitions of the cleavage model.

#### THEORETICAL STATUS

Discussions of a model’s strengths and weaknesses obviously depend on how one perceives the theoretical ambitions of the model. A model is designed in order to simplify and systematize complex social and political circumstances, and this will always lead to loss of information. How-

ever, it is important to be aware of what is lost in the process of model construction (Rokkan 1970: 74). Consequently, the question of what constitutes a political cleavage and the theoretical status of the cleavage model is an important part of the scholarly debate. Rokkan and Valen's model is – at least in principle – open for revisions without implicit causal explanations (Østerud 1978: 134–135). The retrospective approach makes it possible to separate between more short-lived and more lasting political events. On the other hand, retrospection may be influenced by belated wisdom and hindsight (Tilly 1981).

Among historians, the discussion of the cleavage model has often focused on its historical content. To what extent are the historical propositions of the model correct? Without going deeply into this debate, it is suffice to say that it is important to distinguish between the model's heuristic properties and its statements about historical events. These aspects are often not clearly separated. This leads to a discussion of the historical "correctness" of the model and not its fruitfulness as an analytical tool. According to Rokkan himself, the generation of hypotheses is both the most important and the most interesting part of the model, although its historical foundation must be seriously considered. However, the retrospective character of the model and the lack of explicit criteria for the selection of issue areas and cleavages complicate the discussion of the relevance of the model for contemporary purposes.

The weakening of the social bonds between parties and voters has been amply demonstrated in a number of studies both in Norway and elsewhere (Franklin et al. 1992, Valen and Aardal 1983). Moreover, propositions of new and alternative theoretical approaches (Dalton et al. 1984, Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Inglehart 1977, 1990, Putnam 1993, 2000) make the question of the cleavage model's continued relevance even more urgent. Let us first take a look at the central characteristics of the model.

#### DEFINING ELEMENTS OF THE CLEAVAGE MODEL

One of the most systematic attempts at explicating the characteristics of the cleavage model was made by Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair (1990; see also Gallagher et al. 1992, ch. 4). They claim that the central analytical content of the cleavage model is based on three elements: empirical, normative and organizational. While Rae and Taylor (1970) make a dis-

inction between three mutually exclusive classes of cleavages, Bartolini and Mair (1990: 215) emphasize that the three elements are different aspects of *any* cleavage. The empirical element points to the social foundation of the cleavage. The normative element emphasizes that a political cleavage presupposes a collective identity reflecting shared values and beliefs in the group. Thus, the model is not a mechanical model where political preference and behavior are derived from the group's or the individual's location in the social structure (Aardal and Valen 1989: 52). Dalton and Wattenberg's (1993: 196–197) interpretation that the “sociological approach emphasized continuity and stability and thus had limited value in explaining electoral change” is therefore quite misleading as a description of the Lipset–Rokkan approach. The organizational element points to the fact that the social foundation alone does not implicate any form of organization. It is only when parties, unions, or other kinds of organization are established that the cleavage is institutionalized. The institutionalization process is particularly important because cleavages tend to develop autonomy with respect to economical, cultural, and political factors: “Thus not only do cleavages become more stabilized than do social classes or groups, but they are themselves a means of political stabilization, providing individuals with a constellation of pre-existing alternatives for their own social and political integration” (Bartolini and Mair 1990: 218–219). This implies that the initial formation of parties and the party system depletes the political space. Moreover, established parties will be eager to define what is ‘right’ versus ‘wrong’, or even ‘important’ versus ‘unimportant’, when challenged by new parties and issues. Furthermore, formal frameworks such as electoral systems may be designed in a way that reduces the opportunities for new parties to be represented. Because the establishment of cleavages is channeled through different organizational forms, the institutionalization process will be colored by particular historical and national experiences. Bartolini and Mair assume that this process is based on *formal* organizations. However, the main point is that political alternatives are institutionally encapsulated – i.e. stabilized patterns of actions and beliefs – rather than being established as formal organizations in the traditional sense. We base this argument on the way Rokkan himself deals with institutionalization processes in his analyses of state-building and nation-building in Europe.

Even though economic disparities may affect individual preferences and behavior, Bartolini and Mair reserve the term cleavage for a conflict that comprises *all* the above-mentioned elements. Hence, they dislike approaches that make a distinction between value-based cleavages and economic cleavages (Bartolini and Mair 1990: 214). Anyway, the three elements seem to be a perceptive explication of the defining principles underlying the Lipset and Rokkan approach, as well as the Rokkan and Valen approach. Moreover, it is consistent with Selle's (1984) argument that the cleavage concept must include both normative and organizational factors.

#### MUST A CLEAVAGE HAVE A SOCIAL BASE?

One of the most controversial questions has to do with the link between socio-economic disparities and political cleavages. Zuckerman (1975) traces Lipset and Rokkan's emphasis of social structure back to Marx and Weber. He claims that political cleavages and economic interests by definition are closely linked. However, Zuckerman totally disagrees with the view that there is a necessary link between the two. With respect to Rokkan and Valen, it is obviously incorrect to make such a claim. Readers familiar with Norwegian election studies may think that this statement is at odds with reality. Social structure has always been an important element in these studies. However, both Rokkan and Valen emphasized from the very beginning that economic conflicts were not a *sufficient* condition for establishment of a political cleavage. Even when there is a distinct social base for a potential cleavage it is necessary that voters internalize the conflict and actively link it to the particular political alternatives. Moreover, the tension between economy and culture is a recurring theme in Stein Rokkan's work.<sup>4</sup> It is also important to note that the so-called counter-cultural cleavages in Norwegian politics are not linked to social groups in the same way as economic cleavages are. Rokkan (1970: 106) emphasizes that even in the case of economic cleavages, there are important cultural aspects and elements of ideological encapsulation.

One example in Lipset and Rokkan's own book indicates that a distinct social base is not a necessary precondition for political cleavage. Allardt and Pesonen (1967) demonstrate that even though conflicts about foreign policy have played an important role in Finnish history,

they cannot be linked to differences between particular social groups. Moreover, Allardt and Pesonen make a distinction between *structural* and *non-structural* cleavages in order to emphasize that the origin and basis of a cleavage may vary. Similarly, Robert A. Dahl (1966) argues that disagreement on foreign policy in the US cannot be linked to particular group interests. The same is true for Norway, as Rokkan and Valen themselves point out (Rokkan and Valen 1964; see also Valen 1969b). Moreover, Dahl warns against seeing political cleavages solely as expressions of social and economic conflicts (1966: 368). In line with Rokkan, Dahl accentuates the need to include a historical analysis of the roots of contemporary political issues, as well as the important role played by the institutional framework.

Returning to Rokkan and Valen's own studies, the question of social anchoring of cleavages should not be seen as a matter of necessity, but rather as a reflection of the preconditions of the historical periods they were studying. Valen in particular makes a point of the fact that the salience of particular cleavages varies over time. Thus, the relationship between voters and cleavages is more dynamic than a straightforward socio-structural model would imply (Converse and Valen 1971, Valen 1981). It is not accidental that Rokkan refers to socio-cultural conflicts and not to social conflicts (Lipset and Rokkan 1967:26).

#### COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND STABILITY OVER TIME

Even though social and particularly economic conflicts play an important role in Rokkan and Valen's analyses of Norwegian politics, they also include "non-economic" cleavages such as teetotalism, religion, and language. The distinguishing characteristics of the latter cleavages are first and foremost their ideological encapsulation in the organizations dedicated to counter-cultural causes, and not their social and economic bases. Thus the emergence of collective identities and organizational anchoring may be more fundamental to the concept of cleavage than a direct link between parties on the one hand and social and economic groups on the other.

Collective identity – a sense of "we" against "them" – is both an important consequence of political mobilization processes and a precondition for the ability to transform "objective" conflicts to subjectively perceived

political cleavages. It is difficult to conceive how cleavages can be stable over time without well-defined perceptions of “friends” and “foes”. On the other hand, the institutionalization of a cleavage, whether through parties or not, may have lasting impact on its continued relevance. The interaction between mobilization and institutionalization is of vital importance for the duration and intensity of a cleavage over time. The latter comment may seem superfluous, but it is not. Rae and Taylor (1970: 1), for instance, define cleavages as “criteria which divide members of a community or sub-community into groups”. Furthermore, they argue that the relevant cleavages are those which divide members into groups with important political differences at specific times and places. A definition like this covers almost all kinds of political tensions, and makes the concept of “cleavage” diffuse and of little analytical value.

Summing up, the Lipset–Rokkan approach is not structurally confined. Sartori (1968) makes an important distinction between Berelson et al.’s (1954) approach, which he calls a “sociology of politics”, and Lipset–Rokkan’s approach, which he calls “political sociology”. Moreover, Sartori argues that one advantage of the Lipset and Rokkan model over the former is that it gives equal attention to any kind of conflict or cleavage: “Conflicts are not only economic and related to the class structure, but also regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and ideological” (Sartori 1968: 173). This means that a variety of political issues may be linked to underlying cleavages. In addition, the Lipset–Rokkan model focuses on the vital question of how conflicts have been transformed into the political system over time. Importantly, a vital part of the transformation process was the politicization of issues and creation of collective identities among groups of voters.

#### ISSUES, VALUES, AND IDEOLOGY

We are not arguing that the perception of the Lipset–Rokkan model as a socio-structural model of political behavior is unfounded. On the contrary, the link between individual political preference and social location has been a vital part of the model, not least in the historical analyses preceding the outline of the model. What we do argue, however, is that important *other* aspects of the model tend to be overlooked. In particular, the empirical element in the form of a cleavage’s social foundation has received far too much attention at the expense of normative and

organizational elements. This perception of the model had important consequences when the traditional social bonds between voters and parties began to wane in the early 1970s.

Shortly after the publication of the Lipset and Rokkan book, the “frozen” alternatives began to thaw. In Norway, which we take as an example of the international trend (see also Franklin et al. 1992), Labor had been the dominant party since the 1930s, and the party’s electoral base had for long been the working class. The first signs of change materialized in the early 1960s, when a new party was established for the first time in 30 years. To make matters worse for the reigning party, the founders of the new Socialist People’s Party were expelled from the Labor Party. In 1963 the dominance of Labor as the “natural” governing party was broken, although only for a three-week interlude, by a non-socialist coalition government. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the debate on Norway’s entry into the European Community accelerated fundamental changes in the relationship between parties and voters. Since then, voter volatility has increased greatly, and today almost half of all voters wait until the election campaign before deciding which party they will vote for (Aardal 2003b).

Concomitant with the weakening of traditional structural factors, there has been an increased interest in “issue voting” (Carmines and Stimson 1976, Nie and Andersen 1976, Niemi and Weisberg 1976). To a large degree this shift of attention corresponds with a change from collectivism to individualism. Even though issue-voting was initially conceptualized in the US, it quickly caught on in European election studies – not least in the Scandinavian countries (Holmberg 1981, Martinussen 1972, Nielsen 1976, Petersson 1977). However, issue-voting seems to mean different things to different people. Borre claims that:

[E]mpirical studies of single elections nearly always include one or several chapters on the relationship of issues to party preference. But they go about it in ways that often fit an *ad hoc* model to the concrete election and which cannot be compared with other survey studies.... It is clear that the assessment of issue voting varies according to the method used. (2001: 12)

Issue-voting denotes the electoral impact of values, issue positions, issue priorities, and performance of political parties (and leaders) on issues. A more consistent approach has been formulated by Ronald Inglehart in

his theory of “post-materialist” values (1977, 1990). According to Inglehart, the public’s basic value priorities have undergone fundamental change, moving away from materialist values and over to post-materialist values. Moreover, this change is linked to the transformation from industrial to advanced, post-industrial societies (Bell 1973). According to this perspective, paradigms based on socially generated conflicts have gradually become obsolete, while value priorities are emerging as the most important determinants for behavior and attitudes. We will not go into a full-fledged discussion of Inglehart’s paradigm here; it is suffice to say that the predictions of a fundamental change in values and behavior do not seem fulfilled – at least not yet. Inglehart deserves credit for reminding us about the importance of values and ideological orientations in analyzing political behavior. However, as our discussion of the Lipset-Rokkan and Rokkan-Valen approach has shown, the idea itself was not new. This does not prevent that the role of values and ideological predispositions is more implicit than explicit in these models. For Rokkan, subjective orientations did not arouse the same enthusiasm as objective structural factors.<sup>5</sup> Henry Valen and his associates, on the other hand, included attitudes towards issues already in the early voter studies (Pettersson and Valen 1979, Valen 1981, Valen and Martinussen 1972).<sup>6</sup>

The first Norwegian election study to include a larger number of questions on individual attitudes and values was the 1977 study. On factor analyzing survey data, Valen found an underlying pattern of subjective orientations partly reflecting the normative elements of traditional structural cleavages (left-right, moral-religious), and partly reflecting norms and values emerging in the early 1970s (environmental concern, gender equality). Unfortunately, however, Valen used the term ‘ideological *cleavage*’ to characterize short-term influences on the vote, in contrast to long-term structural factors (1981: 13). Given the importance of ideological mobilization for the emergence of any political cleavage, we believe that it is inconsistent with the original model to separate ideological cleavages from other kinds of cleavage.

To conclude the discussion, shared beliefs and values are vital elements in the emergence and persistence of *all* political cleavages (Bartolini and Mair 1990, Knutsen and Scarbrough 1995, Aardal 1994). The emphasis on ideological orientations in the Norwegian election studies since the 1970s therefore emerges as a natural continuation of the Rokkan-Valen

paradigm. In particular, this applies to subjective perceptions of the left–right and the moral–religious dimensions. Moreover, it also represents an attempt to redefine the model – making it more relevant for contemporary analysis. An example is the inclusion of environmental concerns and anti-welfare state/anti-immigration sentiments expanding the model in a “non-structural” direction.

However, issue-voting is closely related to the role of the mass media. Through its control over the political agenda, the media may decide which party will lose or win an election. According to Budge and Farlie (1983) political parties actively try to manipulate the salience of issues that are favorable to them. The basic assumption is that there are latent dimensions that can be brought to the surface by the parties and the media during an election campaign (see also Narud 1996: 46–48). Underlying the salience theory is the idea of issue-ownership, in the sense that voters associate an issue with a particular party, believing that the party may have a better policy or may be more competent to handle a particular problem than other parties (Narud and Valen 2001, Petrocik 1996). Issue-ownership thus provides the link between issue-voting and the agenda-setting role of the mass media.

#### POLITICAL ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

As our discussion so far indicates, there is no question that changes in social structure have had major implications for the analytical tools used in capturing the mood of the times. While the cleavage model emerged in a situation where the media were active supporters of particular parties, today’s roles give them a much more independent position. Rokkan was well aware of the importance of the media. When he formulated his famous sentence “votes count, but resources decide” in the mid-1960s, he added that what happens in the corporate and the numeric-democratic channel is influenced by the balance between the different groups in the third channel – the mass media (Rokkan 1966). However, Rokkan did not elaborate on the importance of the media channel. Moreover, the media structure has changed dramatically since the 1960s, such that his analysis would not necessarily have been relevant today. This leads us to the question of what the changes in the communication structure, i.e. the media, really are, and how they affect the relationship between parties and voters.

Let us again use the Norwegian situation as a mirror reflecting general trends. Until the early 1960s the Norwegian media were characterized by party loyal newspapers that served as *channels* for parties and politicians (Bjørklund 1991, Østby 1997). With few exceptions the media were reliable partners for the parties, with politicians controlling the political message sent to voters. During the next decade the link became weaker as more and more newspapers took on an independent position vis-à-vis the parties; in addition, there was the establishment of television as a major political medium. The media now functioned more and more as an *arena* giving public exposure to political actors with different values and attitudes. Even though the politicians preserved the political initiative, their control of the message had been eroded. Until the mid-1970s the trend towards a more independent political journalism continued, and now both television and most newspapers took on the role of political *actors*. The media now wanted full control. Political initiatives were no longer reserved for politicians, and politicians increasingly had to respond to initiatives taken by the media.

In addition to the role of arena and actor, television gradually took on the role of a political stage where politicians who wanted to reach out to the voters had to play the roles given to them by the media. Today, visibility is a decisive factor in politics, and politicians who perform well on television visually and verbally are much better off than colleagues lacking such qualities.

Through its central position in today's society, the modern mass media are controlling important sectors of political life. Even though the media cannot distance themselves totally from political substance, they are doing so on their own terms. The media construct their own image of politics rather than reflect what is happening. The media have *situational control* through their ability to decide when they want to focus on an issue, how to frame the issue and what priority they give to it. Moreover, the media have *channel control* by the fact that they decide who will be allowed to voice their opinions, when and how. The fact that some politicians are so strong that the media hardly ever deny them access does not refute this argument. The media have *form control* through their particular format, logic, and style (Altheide and Snow 1979, Altheide 1985). Politicians capable of adapting their message to the terms of the media are rewarded with much more attention than politicians who are

not versatile at this game. In this sense the strategic game of politics is played much more on the media's home turf than on that of the politicians. The politicians have to bear this in mind when planning strategic moves. The tendency is particularly evident during election campaigns, which are predominantly designed to fit in with the media's formula. While the form and content of television's coverage of campaigns previously were based on mutual agreement between the media and the parties, the media now control the whole process (Allern, forthcoming).

#### THE AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION

Contemporary politics is a struggle about the political agenda, with politicians, the media, and voters as the main actors. Research has shown that the media's agenda-setting function is an important part of this triangle. The agenda set by the media greatly influences the issue priorities of the voters (Dearing and Rogers 1996). In particular, the media articulate, organize, and present attitudes and priorities for the voters, but they are at the same time the most important sources of information for the politicians (Negrine 1996). Politicians can hardly avoid dealing with the issues that the media put on the agenda. The media thus play an important political role. However, studies comparing the media agenda with that of voters and parties do not present an unequivocal picture of the relationship in favor of the media. In some instances sharp differences can be seen between the agenda of the media and the views of voters (Norris et al. 1999, Aardal 1999).

The priority the media give to certain issues at the expense of others influences voters in two ways. First, it affects the *intrapersonal* agenda, i.e. the issues voters know of, the issues they perceive to be important and that mold their view of the world around them. People who focus on environmental protection may perceive the major cleavages of a given society differently from those who believe that industrialization development and economic growth are more important. Second, the issue priority of the media influences the *interpersonal* agenda of the voters, i.e. the issues voters discuss with their family, friends, and colleagues. The impact of the media on the intrapersonal agenda is important for voters' assessments of social conditions, but the impact on the interpersonal agenda has a wider scope. The issues that people are confronted with both in the mass media and in conversations with friends and colleagues

are conceived to be more important than issues that are not met with any interest in the local environment. Personal discussions demonstrate that the issue is important even for others. It is a well-known fact that personal communication is decisive when people are making decisions about political matters (Lenart 1994, Weimann 1994).

It is not just the media's priority of some issues over others that is important for the political discourse, how the media present and frame the issues makes a difference (Entman 1993, Ghanem 1997). In general, the media's framing illuminates their overall approach to political issues, with an important distinction between episodic and thematic news formats (Iyengar 1991). While an episodic frame emphasizes singular events and concrete properties linked to individuals and issues, a thematic frame emphasizes the general and abstract aspects of what happens in society. An important consequence of increased use of an episodic news format is that political issues are presented isolated from each other in a concrete perspective, rather than comprehensively in a principal perspective. Thus voters are presented with a fragmented image of the world. Consequently many events are not being targeted as news because they do not fit in with the episodic format. In particular, this applies to events that are not easily concretized, personified, and visualized, which means that for example international events are more readily transformed into news if violent confrontations are involved. The news format even influences the presentation of causal factors. An episodic format tends to individualize the news, presenting persons rather than public authorities and social structures as the cause of a certain problem. If crime is presented as a problem caused by the personal traits of criminals, this implies that the solution to the problem lies with the criminals and not with the public authorities or politicians.

The mass media's focus on selected social problems and way of presenting these problems is important with respect to which criteria the public build their assessments of political life and political actors on (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). Problems that are prominently displayed in the mass media will also be more present in the minds of the voters, and thus feature in their assessment of parties and politicians (Willnat 1997, Zaller 1992). A priming effect like this influences the criteria used by voters when evaluating the performance of political leaders. Politicians known for their intellectual capacity will be more in demand when the

media stress that a particular situation demands a leader with profound knowledge than when they stress that the situation calls for a flexible leader able to conciliate opposing interests and groups. In this way the media directly affect the potential for political success just by focusing on different evaluation criteria. President George Bush was popular among US voters during the Gulf crisis in 1990–1991, but despite this he lost the 1992 Presidential election to Bill Clinton. During the Presidential campaign the focus was not on foreign policy and war, but on domestic economic problems. Measured by performance in the Gulf War, Bush was a good president; measured in terms of economic problems at home he was not (Miller and Krosnick 1997).

#### MEDIA STRATEGIES

Independent and market-oriented media with no political loyalties are dependent on maintaining the public's attention, and over time the mass media have refined strategies to obtain this goal. Today, these strategies are important elements in the political discourse, and contribute to what has been described as a “media bent society” (Hernes 1977). First, the media simplify. In political terms this means that they seldom leave room for details and nuances, and that they reduce multiplicity and complexity to something easier to handle. By doing this, the media favor politicians with simple solutions to complex issues, preferring media friendly issues as their main issues. Second, the media are concrete. This implies that they emphasize single events over serial events. The particular dominates over the general, and concrete aspects are given prominence over principal issues. This presents a view of reality where totality and long lines are drowned in details, and where the importance of structural factors is toned down. Third, the media intensify. Intense events capture the attention more readily than day-to-day routine and sober contributions to the political debate. Profiled politicians confront each other, often with emotional overtones. This leads to a militant form of democracy where politicians benefit more from bold attacks and hefty emotional outbreaks than from silent work behind the curtain. Fourth, the media polarize. Controversial issues receive more coverage than consensual issues, and cocksure opinions are more popular with the media than careful and deliberate opinions. The media prefer politicians with a no-compromise attitude to politicians seeking consensus. It is thus imperative that politi-

cians emphasize issues where they present a totally different view from that of their competitors.

But even though the media simplify, concretize, intensify, and polarize, the politicians have to play along. The consequence is what has been called a “medialization” of politics, where the public are influenced by and have to adjust to media requirements. To a great extent the media form the public sphere of politics. Politicians who want to reach out to the voters have to use the same strategies to arouse media attention as the media themselves use to arouse the attention of the public (Asp and Esaiasson 1996). In this way the media influence not only the public’s understanding of politics, but also the politicians’ shaping of politics.

#### POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

The changes in the way the media cover politics give them an important staging role. On the one hand the political arena has been reshaped. For organizations and individuals wanting to influence politics it is no longer sufficient to relate to political institutions, even though formal decisions are taken by these institutions. They also need to have a presence in the media. As the media are strengthening their communicative power, established political bodies are losing their role as intermediaries between governors and the governed. Politicians are getting better information more quickly about what is happening at grassroots level through the media, and voters do not need to take part in organized political activities to be informed. This obviously weakens the backbone of the parties and channels influence beyond them. On the other hand, the media’s horse-race journalism gives priority to the political game, tactics, and processes at the expense of well-conceived arguments (Broh 1980, Holley 1991, Perloff 1998). The media emphasize confrontation between individuals more than what they disagree about.

An important consequence of the media’s role as political stage director is that the level of tension and conflict in politics has increased. Inter-media competition is greater than ever, and exclusivity and originality are important means by which to attract an audience. The desire to be ahead of the competition and able to present hot issues in a more appealing fashion increases the political temperature and speed in the hunt for political “titbits”. The media thus put continuous pressure on politicians, who have to be prepared to answer questions at any time. The

time for reflection and careful assessment of the situation *in toto* is reduced, and the ability to make quick decisions is more important than ever. Journalists are also more aggressive. They keep a close watch over mail journals and want straight and simple answers to a large number of questions. The politicians themselves rarely decide when and how to present a particular case to the public, and experience tells us that it is almost impossible to hide aspects of a case from the media. Moreover, journalism has become more negative. Journalists tend to be conflict-oriented, with a particular fondness for personal conflicts involving politicians. In their world there is little room for middle positions, and if they feel there is too little conflict they arrange their own media events where they pit politicians one against the other (Dayan and Katz 1992).

All in all, this has led to a situation where today's politicians are poorly shielded from the public eye. At the same time they have smaller margins than they had when their meeting the public was only at carefully orchestrated meetings, and when it was clearly easier to emphasize strong sides and hide weak ones. Today the tolerance for error is much smaller. It is not only content, argument, and logic that count, but also the overall personality of the politician. The increasingly powerful position of the mass media has had major consequences for the content of politics, for the roles played by the parties and the politicians, and for the stability of the voters. The media thus represent a major external constraint for the parties.

#### A FUTILE QUEST?

One question remains. What does all this mean for the analysis of electoral behavior? In sum, we observe two interlinked trends; first a gradual erosion of loyalties based on membership in structurally defined groups. Eventually this undermines models emphasizing socio-structural characteristics as determinants of political behavior and attitudes. The second trend, however, – the fundamental change in the way politicians and parties communicate their message to the public – has not received the same attention. Whereas the change in social structure may undermine cleavage models such as that of Lipset and Rokkan, the change in media structure may undermine *any* attempt to establish new paradigms based on stable, individual patterns – whether linked to values or other objects of identification. Neither the social nor the political climate of today

encourages lasting loyalties of the kind needed if theoretical models are to be of any value. It may thus be pertinent to ask whether the quest for new theories is but a futile one. Will the next stop be the fragmented world of postmodernism?

Although persuasive, general trends may be misleading as predictors of actual behavior and perceptions. True to the spirit of the original cleavage model, we return to empirical data compiled under the auspices of the Norwegian Election Studies. Since 1957 the program – started by Rokkan and Valen – has collected a wealth of data at all national elections except one. Recent re-analyses of the time series covering almost 50 years present surprising results (Berglund 2003a, b). First, the idea that social structure no longer matters is plainly wrong. Admittedly, social structure is not as important as it used to be, but it still has an impact on the support of some parties. The reduced size of the working class and the decrease in class identification clearly impair the electoral fortunes of the Labor Party. At the same time, however, we see that the social profile of the Conservative Party is remarkably similar to the way it was in the 1960s. Moreover, the social characteristics of the Center Party and the Christian Peoples' Party are about the same as they used to be. Geographical and counter-cultural patterns are still surprisingly strong. Thus, despite the fundamental changes described above, we find the idea of cleavages to be a necessary tool for understanding contemporary political behavior. We do, however, acknowledge that the trend is pointing downwards, although the process is slower than expected. Nonetheless, changes in social structure are producing complex and dynamic processes of great interest to students of parties and voters even in the twenty-first century.

The second point to be made is linked to the normative elements of the cleavage model. As mentioned above, the Norwegian Election Studies have incorporated a large number of questions mapping values, beliefs, and ideological predispositions. During more than 25 years, we have established a set of ideological orientations that are playing an important role in attitude formation and in the way people vote. True to the original design of the cleavage model, we have pursued a theoretically guided inductive research strategy, building four indexes: one relating to left–right (public–private) values, one relating to moral–religious values, one to environmental concern (economic growth versus environ-

mental protection), and, finally, one relating to immigration policies and welfare state policies. The research strategy has been to find empirical indicators reflecting underlying ideological dimensions. In order to capture the mood and issues of each election campaign, we have changed indicators tapping the same dimension over time. Despite this, the panel correlations of the ideological indexes are nothing less than impressive. For the public–private index the individual correlation between two elections four years apart averages 0.66. For the moral–religious index the average correlation is 0.62, for environmental values the average is 0.55, and for immigration 0.67 (Aardal 2003a). Despite the well-founded arguments against having any kind of stable political identifications, we thus find clear evidence that such patterns really do exist.

However, if social structure and ideological orientations still matter, what can be said for the role of the mass media? There is no doubt that voters rely heavily on information gathered through the media, in particular during election campaigns. But despite the reasonable assumption that this will encourage a fragmented and short-sighted perception of politics among the voters, there are enduring patterns of the kind mentioned above. Moreover, the empirical evidence from a number of Norwegian election studies indicates that the media do not influence the vote through agenda-setting alone. Perhaps more important is the way the media’s focus on particular issues activates underlying social and ideological attachments among the voters (Aardal 2003b, Aardal and Valen 1995, Aardal et al. 1999). Somewhat paradoxically, the media may not necessarily eradicate long-term loyalties, but instead make them more applicable and relevant to contemporary issues. Thus, the role of the modern mass media may seem more complex than previously assumed. Despite recent studies on election campaigns (Norris et al. 1999, Aardal et al. forthcoming), there is still a need for more empirical research, not the least regarding the relationship between parties, media, and the voters.

#### OLD HABITS DIE HARD?

How can the opposing tendencies discussed in this article be reconciled? How is it that the old cleavage model – or at least part of it – may still be of value in the twenty-first century? Disregarding the tendency to idealize human nature by claiming that material self-interests are ways of the

past, we agree that the old class struggle is of little relevance today. However, this does not mean that economic and social differences disappear when living conditions improve. Feelings of deprivation will always be subjective and relative. However, we can see a clear tendency in Norwegian politics that the political space is compressed. Voters do not necessarily see one party as their only alternative. Several parties may be perceived to be close to the political persuasions of voters. This implies that voters may change party from one election to the next – which they do – without sacrificing basic political values.

In sum, the simple models of the past need to be replaced with a dynamic model incorporating both the “objective” and the “subjective” elements inherent in the traditional model. However, the most challenging question remains. How can political parties established in the 1920s still be attractive to new voters? One important factor is the parties themselves. Rokkan highlights three important functions of political parties:

Parties have an *expressive* function: they develop a rhetoric for the translation of contrasts in the social and the cultural structure into demands and pressures for action or inaction. But they also have *instrumental and representative* functions; they force the spokesmen for the many contrasting interests and outlooks to strike bargains, to stagger demands, and to aggregate pressures. (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 5)

Furthermore, “parties do not simply present themselves *de novo* to the citizens at each election: they each have a *history* and so have the constellation of alternatives they present to the electorate” (Rokkan 1970: 77). Consequently, parties play an important role in upholding and reproducing favorable circumstances for their continued existence. In doing so, the parties are far from being passive victims – neither to impassive social forces, nor to expanding mass media.

In many ways we are back to the organizational element of the cleavage model. By institutionalizing patterns of behavior and ways of perceiving issues, the established political culture is an important determinant of contemporary behavior. The phenomenon is known in organizational theory as “path-dependency” (Krasner 1988, Selznick 1957). Obviously, this does not prevent changes in the relationship between political parties and voters from taking place, but it implies that

new ways of perceiving political alternatives will not escape the “burden” of the old ways. Perhaps the Lipset–Rokkan and Rokkan–Valen approach still has a lesson or two in waiting for us?

### Notes

1. This article builds upon Waldahl, Ragnar. 1999. Medier, meningsdannelse og den politiske dagsorden. *Politica* 31 (2):117–132, Aardal, Bernt. 1994. Hva er en politisk skillelinje? En begrepsmessig grenseoppgang. *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*, 217–248.
2. Lipset & Rokkan Lipset, Seymour M., and Stein Rokkan. 1967. Party Systems and Voter Alignments. New York: The Free Press., for instance, use conflicts, cleavages and oppositions as synonyms.
3. The authors use phrases like: “We may schematically describe the system as the resultant of three major conflicts in the political community” Rokkan, Stein, and Henry Valen. 1962. The Mobilization of the Periphery : Data on Turnout, Party Membership and Candidate Recruitment in Norway. *Acta Sociologica* 6:111–158., and “We may conveniently distinguish five dimensions of conflict in the system” Rokkan, Stein, and Henry Valen. 1964. Regional Contrasts in Norwegian Politics. In *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party System*, edited by E. Allardt and Y. e. Littunen. Helsinki: Westermarck Society..
4. Aptly, a commemorative volume of Stein Rokkan’s contributions – edited by Bernt Hagtvedt – is called “Politics between Economy and Culture” Hagtvedt, Bernt, ed. 1992. *Politikk mellom økonomi og kultur. Stein Rokkan som sosiolog og forskningsinspirator*. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal..
5. According to Henry Valen (personal conversation) Rokkan once objected to the inclusion of left-right self placement in an empirical analysis because it did not “fit in” with the model. Interestingly, Ole Berg , in a *Festschrift* to Valen’s 60’th birthday, emphasizes that Valen “takes ideologies and issues seriously, as something that may exist independent of (own) interests” Berg, Ole. 1984. Henry Valen – mannen og faget. In *Fra valg til vedtak*, edited by O. Berg and A. Underdal. Oslo: Aschehoug.
6. This may, of course, be linked to the fact that Valen more than Rokkan was involved with individual survey data.

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