

## Inequality and the structure of political conflict in democracies: A global and historical perspective

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In our new book, *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities*,<sup>1</sup> we investigate where and how class divides emerge and how they interact with other social conflicts (ethnic, regional, generational, gender and the like). In what contexts do we see inequality become politically salient and why? What determines the strength of identity-based divides, and how do these conflicts interact with the structure of social inequalities? Drawing on a unique set of surveys conducted between 1948 and 2020 in 50 countries on five continents, our volume sheds new light on these questions and provides a new data source to investigate voting behaviours in a global and historical perspective: the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (<http://wpid.world>).

Among the many findings of the book, three interesting facts emerge from the analysis of this new dataset.

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### The intensity of class divisions varies widely in contemporary democracies

We document a gradual decoupling of two complementary measures of social class in many European and North American democracies: income and education. In the early post-World War II decades the party systems of these democracies were class-based: social democratic and affiliated parties represented both the low-education and the low-income electorates, whereas conservative and affiliated parties represented both high-education and high-income voters (figure S4.1.1). These party systems have gradually evolved towards what we can call multi-elite party systems: social democratic and affiliated parties have become the parties of higher-educated elites, while conservative and affiliated parties remain the parties of high-income elites.

In contrast to the gradual decoupling between income and education that we find in many European

and North American democracies, in other regions there are large variations in the configuration and intensity of class divides. These variations can often be explained by the relative importance of other dimensions of political conflict. The interaction among class, regional, ethnic, religious, generational, gender and other forms of divides thus plays a key role in determining the ways through which inequalities are politically represented in democracies around the world today.

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### Ethnic diversity is not synonymous with ethnic conflict

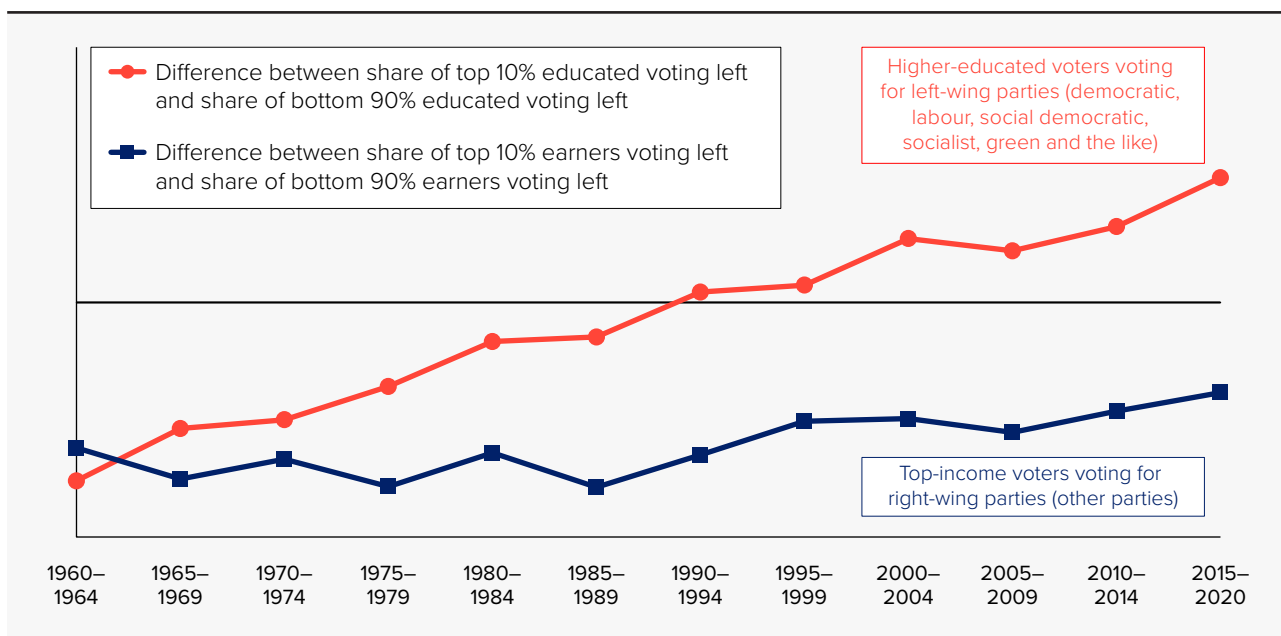
Another major finding of our global perspective on political divides is that ethnic and religious conflicts vary widely across countries and over time. In particular, more diverse countries are not necessarily those where ethnic or religious conflicts are more intense. Instead, varieties of political cleavage structures can be accounted for in part by history, such as the ability of national liberation movements to bring together voters from different origins. They also have an important socioeconomic component: in democracies where ethnoreligious groups tend to cluster across regions and differ markedly in their standards of living, political parties also tend to reflect ethnic affiliations to a greater extent.

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### Identity politics take different forms

The large variations in class and sociocultural divides in contemporary democracies point to a more general pattern. Political cleavages can take multiple forms, depending on the nature of underlying social conflicts and on the ability of political parties to embody these conflicts in the democratic arena.

**Figure S4.1.1** The emergence of multi-elite party systems in Australia, Europe and North America



**Note:** In the 1960s both higher-educated and high-income voters were less likely to vote for left-wing (democratic, labour, social democratic, socialist, green) parties than lower-educated and low-income voters by more than 10 percentage points. The left vote has gradually become associated with higher-education voters, giving rise to a multi-elite party system. Data are five-year averages for Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Estimates control for income, education, age, gender, religion, church attendance, rural or urban location, region, race, ethnicity, employment status and marital status (in country-years for which data are available).

**Source:** Authors' calculations based on data from the World Political Cleavages and Inequality Database (<http://wpid.world>).

In European and North American democracies, for instance, the rise of conflicts over immigration and the environment have come together with the decline of class divides and of traditional left-wing parties, perhaps because they are perceived as unable to propose convincing redistributive platforms. It has also coincided with a decline in turnout among low-income and

lower-educated voters, pointing to a more general dissatisfaction among these voters with the functioning of democracy. Nonetheless, the shift to identity politics observed in many democracies today is neither inevitable nor generalized. In several countries outside Europe and North America the class-based dimension of political conflicts has intensified in recent decades.

## NOTE

1 Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2021.