

Voters' notions of 'us' and 'them' may consolidate a new cleavage in Western European politics

West European party systems have become characterised by increasing fragmentation and the rise of new challenger parties. [Delia Zollinger](#) writes that while these developments may suggest a future of political volatility, this need not be the case. Drawing on a new study, she illustrates that we may instead be witnessing the rise of a new political divide that has the potential to structure politics in the years to come.

Historically, voting for the left was a matter of identity for many people – of feeling oneself a 'worker' or 'working class'. Similarly, support for Christian democracy throughout Western Europe was anchored in identification with the Catholic faith as a central element of one's worldview and self-understanding. Such notions of group belonging – nurtured from cradle to grave through family ties, community networks, and institutions with links to political parties such as social clubs, unions, or churches – made for remarkably stable politics throughout much of the 20th century.

A [limited number of key conflicts](#) (including class and religious conflicts) shaped political life in most West European countries. These conflicts originated in the processes of nation-building and the industrial revolution, but once they became reflected in party systems, they dominated politics for decades. Electoral alternatives were largely given and stable, and many voters' positions in their communities provided them with a quasi-life-long social identity (e.g. as a 'worker' or 'Christian') that came with knowledge of where they belonged politically.

This picture of stability started to fragment from the 1970s onwards, and there is much to suggest that we have long since entered a new era of politics. Far-reaching changes to the economy and society – linked to economic modernisation and globalisation – have given rise to new political demands and grievances. Across Western Europe, new parties voicing these demands have emerged at the expense of established parties.

On the left, green parties have become the standard-bearer of a socially progressive agenda. Championing a diverse and inclusive society (e.g. advocating liberal migration policies, LGBTQ rights, or gender equality) these 'new left' parties have become successful among a growing educated, urban middle class. At the other end of the political spectrum, far right parties have gained ground among those with lower to medium education, people living outside urban centres, or among manual workers. They have done so especially by espousing socially conservative and anti-immigrant positions or by calling for a protection of national sovereignty.

This fragmentation of the political landscape might be seen as [evidence of politics becoming increasingly volatile](#). Indeed, in a more highly educated and individualised society, voters might be expected to critically assess parties' performances prior to each election, flexibly adjusting their electoral behaviour. However, [recent evidence](#) from Switzerland suggests that – rather than reflecting general disorder and instability – electoral politics are perhaps becoming more fundamentally reorganised, with strong group identities playing no less an important anchoring role than they used to.

The third ingredient of a new divide

Obscured behind the apparent political fragmentation and instability of West European party systems, we have seen a deepening conflict emerge over whether society should be more *open* (cosmopolitan, diverse, with equal rights for all) or *closed* (conservative, nationally defined, with strong borders).

This debate has been expressed by political parties, notably in opposition between far right and new left parties, the latter including but not limited to green parties. Moreover, the debate also has a clear foundation in the structure of society, with those who have higher levels of educational attainment tending to favour the *open* approach, and those with lower levels of educational attainment tending to hold the opposite perspective. We have thus seen the first two ingredients of a major new divide emerge in West European politics: socio-structural divides linked to political divides.

The question remains whether this emerging conflict has *also* become ingrained in how voters think about who they are socially and politically, as the class conflict once was. A sense of collective identity can be seen as the third ingredient of the major conflicts that characterised West European politics throughout much of the 20th century. Might the open-closed divide be evolving into something comparable?

Identity-based conflict today: merging economics and culture

In a [recent study](#) of voters in Switzerland, my co-authors and I trace the identities linking far right versus new left support to socio-structural characteristics such as education and occupation. Switzerland is a well-suited case for studying emerging identities since it exemplifies structural and political transformations that are by now underway in most West European countries. Notably, early educational expansion and the growth of a high-skilled service sector led to the emergence of a large urban, educated middle class in Switzerland, while jobs in industry largely disappeared.

At the political level, the demands of this new middle class gave rise to the Green Party and also prompted the Swiss Social Democrats to adopt a socially progressive 'new left' agenda. In opposition to this large 'new left' bloc, the Swiss People's Party has become one of the strongest far right parties in Western Europe, with its increasing popularity among workers and small business owners dating back to the 1990s. If new collective identities are forming anywhere, we should by now be able to observe them in Switzerland.

Indeed, our analysis, which is based on an online survey with 1,000 respondents, reveals that Swiss voters' subjective notions of group belonging are clearly rooted in their objective socio-structural characteristics, which runs counter to the idea of increasingly individualised 'unrooted' politics. Beyond educational and occupational identities, for instance, cosmopolitan as opposed to national identities are clearly related to educational attainment or urban residence (implying that so-called 'culture wars' have an unmistakable basis in economic structure).

The closed-ended questions we asked about Swiss voters' group identities indicate that economically rooted divides have become politically mobilised primarily in cultural terms: identities related to cosmopolitanism, nationality and cultural lifestyles are by far most distinctive between far right and new left voters. The only politicised identity which clearly reflects the corresponding sociodemographic divide is urban-rural residence. Education and occupational class come up more marginally.

These observations suggest that even economically rooted social identities need to be culturally politicised to unfold their structuring potential. Hence, although the translation of structural divides into politics is not always straightforward, our study provides evidence that the 'third ingredient' for a lasting new political divide exists.

The role of political actors

The Swiss case indicates that, in the grand scheme of things, the open-closed divide (or the 'universalism-particularism' divide, as we call it in our study) has the potential to structure politics in the 21st century, in the lasting and pervasive ways the class conflict once did.

In Switzerland, this divide shapes how voters think about their place in society and politics. Beyond Switzerland, whether, when, and how such new collective identities arise depends also on party agency – the success of challenger parties, or the strategic reactions of established parties on the centre-right and centre-left. Our analysis of Swiss survey data at least suggests that the potential for a major new political divide complete with antagonistic identities exists across countries undergoing comparable structural and political transformations.

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper (co-authored with Simon Bornschier, Silja Häusermann and Céline Colombo) at [Comparative Political Studies](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Edrece Stansberry](#) on [Unsplash](#)
