Touraine's Thesis: End of Political Sociology?

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Abstract

Elections in capitalist democracies in Western have changed recently to such an extent that one is inclined to look upon election results as crucial evidence for Alain Touraine's argument in favour of a transformation from a Durkheimian ("structure") to a Weberian world ("actor")   in his La fin des societes (2013). The central aspect of party systems in Western Europe is not social structure today but now voter volatility, which can be measured allowing for an empirical application of Touraine's thesis.

Keywords: elections, volatility – gross and net, political sociology, rational choice, Lipset & Rokkan model, new parties, coalitions.

1. Introduction

The book The End of Society presents a thesis that aims to cover the emancipation of the ego from social and moral constraints, i.e. rules and institutions that have dominated men and women. The post-modern society would, according to Touraine, be less focussed upon social groups and more concentrated upon the individual actor. He admits himself that his long-time preference for French classic Durkheim, emphasizing "collective consciousness" and its implications for social action has to be abandoned in favour of a renewed appreciation of Weber. Weber's starting-point as atomistic, i.e. putting the individual at the basis of social action:

"Every thoughtful reflection on the ultimate elements of meaningful human action is bound primarily to the categories of 'means' and 'ends'"" (Weber, (1922), in Shils and Finch, 1949: 52)

This starting-point – the *Ich* of the actor – is more promising that the *Uns* of the group, when enquiring into the post-modern society today, where persons decide what to do but institutions have declined in economics and politics as well as groups in morals   – this is the *Touraine thesis*. And he states his problem as saving the possibility of human emancipation from greed, selfishness with guile and environmental degradation, while accepting individualism.

The "faiblesse" of French social science, neglecting empirism for theoreticism recurs in the way Touraine presents his argument as discourse. No systematic data are adduced, no set of facts are penetrated and explained with the new discourse, except many contingent references to homosexuality, immigration issues, identity politics or pseudo-nationalism and economic corruption. This is of course

Here, we relate the Touraine thesis to the development of politics, elections and parties in Western Europe. If Touraine is correct, then democratic politics would also have changed during the latter half of the 29th century, from groups – structure - to individuals - actors.

2. Political Sociology: The Chief Approach

The analysis of elections in Western Europe has been approached with the Lipset-Rokkan frozen party system hypothesis. We ask about this standard framework of analysis:

1) Is it testable?
2) What are the theoretical assumptions that the theory is base upon?
3) What are the empirical implications of this theory?
4) If they were true in the 1970s, are they still valid today?

The famous frozen party system hypothesis is in reality a theory comprising several middle-range hypotheses. It received almost unanimous approval by scholars in political sociology when it was launched in 1960s and 1970s, and it

stimulated lots of research into mass political behaviour and attitudes. First, I reject the position that the Lipset-Rokkan theory is not testable, as argued by Mair, 2002 but in reality first by Lybeck, 1986. Second, I compare the politics around the 1970 with the politics around 2000-2010 to show that this theory is not tenable.

There is an abundance of data to draw upon when submitting the Lipset-Rokkan theory to a re-examination. Besides macro data for a rather long time period, there is micro data available too. In a re-analysis of the data available to Lipset and Rokkan (1960-70s), one has to contrast their information with data on recent changes in Western Europe (2000-2010).

3. MAIR: Confirmation, Falsification and Testability

The aim of a re-analysis of a theory and its data base is to study its truth claims. A social science theory consists of a network of hypotheses or general statements about human interaction (micro) and social systems (macro). To support its truth claim, a social science theory is in need of empirical backing by means of the examination of a set of data. Data can validate or falsify a theory, but with no access to empirical information the theory is merely an intellectual guess that needs testing. Theory construction is half of scientific work and data analysis constitutes the other half.

A re-analysis of established theories by existing or new data, informs one about the coherence of the theory with data. When there is a high degree of coherence between the implications of the hypotheses of the theory with the available data, then one may conclude that what the theory states corresponds to reality with a certain probability – the case of *confirmation*. However, little coherence between theory and data entails the case of *falsification*. A theory may be"saved" by changing some of its hypotheses, or restricting its range of application. Finally, a re-analysis of the data pertinent to the evaluation may result in theoretical *innovation,* where a theory that is in more coherence with the data supplants the established one.

Now, what about the principle of testability? This notion comes in a few versions, one more or less fortunate that target the possibility of coherence or non-coherence between theoretical statements and data or fact statement. A theory is not testable when it is phrased in such a manner that there could not be any fact that would falsify the theory, as it would be coherent with whatever fact is conceivable. One may make a distinction between actual testability and potential testability. A theory may be so abstract that it its test implications are not observable at the present moment in time, but that does not exclude that new facts arrive that make the theory testable.

The notion of testability in principle is employed to make a demarcation between science and meta-physics, as in the philosophy of science of logical empiricists or Popperians. Is the Lipset-Rokkan theory of the West European party system untestable, as some have argued? I answer certainly NO. The set of non-testable theories include religious propositions, race theories, animism, dogmatic Marxism, etc. The Lipset-Rokkan theory may be confronted with data when its components are listed and its coherence with facts may be evaluated in a re-analysis.

4. LIPSET & ROKKAN: Frozen Party Systems

The Lipset-Rokkan theory was the most successful attempt to model the politics of the full industrial society in Western Europe, adhering to the regime of parliamentary democracy in societies with a high degree of economic modernisation. Its core hypotheses focus upon the logic of election outcomes in a society with cleavages in the social structure, emphasizing the nature of the tie between the political parties and various social groups. Thus, it aims to account for the nature of West European democratic competition in regimes based upon the political parties as the *agents* of the basic principal, viz. the *demos*. Actually, this theory was testable in reality already when launched and it can certainly be re-tested in a re-analysis of the world of West European politics today.

Interpreting the basic text by Lipset and Rokkan: Cleavage Structures. Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction (1967), one arrives at the following hypotheses:

1) Micro: Voters tend to be loyal in one election to another;
2) Micro: Voters frame their choice of party on the basis of their position on a cleavage line;
3) Macro: The cleavages in society are finite and change very slowly, if at all;
4) Macro: The central cleavages in the fully blown industrial democracy include: class, religion and region.
5) Conclusion: The fully developed party systems in West European democracies are *frozen*.

Let me adduce a number of quotations, supporting my interpretation of the frozen party system theory, which implies low volatility, restricted fractionalisation, stable party outcomes and only a few types of party kinds:

I) "Central questions": i)"*the genesis of the system of contrasts and cleavages* within the national community" (page 1); ii)"*the conditions for the developments of stable system of cleavage and oppositions* in national political life" (page 1); "*the behavior of the mass of rank-and-file citizens* within the resultant party systems"

(page 2). One may interpret this list of key questions that the theory will attempt to answer as a search for stability in democratic party politics on the basis of social groups and individual voting behaviour.

II) Key aim: "...to throw light on....the *'freezing'* of different types of *party systems*....(p.3), "we seek to assemble materials for comparative analyses of the *current alignments of voters* behind the historically given 'packages' ...(p. 3).

These presuppositions and core assumptions were highly applicable for theory construction about West European politics in the societies of the 1960s and the 1970s. Clearly, they are verifiable or refutable, depending on the data availability of the world of facts. But are they suitable as a starting-point for an enquiry into the party politics of the now mature post-industrial society in Western Europe? I think not.

5. PEDERSEN: Earth-quake elections

The first scholar to raise fundamental objections to the political sociology approach was Dane Mogens Pedersen, suggesting some very interesting and relevant concepts, like volatility, flash parties and volcano elections.

He argued convincingly that to enquire into whether the Lipset-Rokkan theory is coherent with basic facts about West European parties and their electorates, one must gather empirical information about the following:

a) volatility: net and gross;

b) party fractionalisation;

c) types of parties in each country;

d) the occurrence of earthquake elections;

e) the transformation of the cleavages in the social structure.

One may employ indicators like these to compare West European politics between 1970 and 2010. The finding is that the frozen party system theory holds for 1970 but it is not true of politics in this century.

6. WEST EUROPEAN POLITICS 1970-2010

The Lipset-Rokkan model of West European politics identified certain salient features in how the electorate relates to the party system as well as how the political parties manoeuvre to form a representative government on the basis of the principles of parliamentarism. Today one would speak of the principal-agent relationships in a democratic polity.

According to the model, the interactions between voters, parties and governments are characterized by certain features, including:

a) a stable structure of cleavages in the electorate;

b) loyal voting behaviour from one election to another;

c) a stable pattern of government formation based upon coalitions in Parliament.

In order to make these hypotheses testable, one needs to develop a set of indicators to map the political realities of the 1960s and 1970s. Explicitly constructed indices may be employed for re-analysis of data that are pertinent to the existence of these features (a - c), including the aim to find out whether the model conjectures still hold for West European politics in 2000-2010. I suggest that the following indicators are central for the Lipset-Rokkan theory:

i) volatility

ii) fractionalisation and types of political parties:

iii) coalition structure.

The Lipset-Rokkan model amounts to a middle-range theory, focussing upon the outcomes of elections, the parties making up a party system and how these parties create viable governments. The emphasis is definitely upon stability. So let us first focus upon electoral volatility.

6.1 Volatility

The enquiry into the links between voters and political parties was much enhanced through the distinction between net and gross voter volatility (Pedersen 1979). It allows one to examine at depth whether electoral behaviour is so to speak "frozen", meaning changing little. Table 1 states the scores for 1970 against 2000.

The finding is that volatility has risen considerably, from between 5-10 per cent to 15-25 per cent. Net volatility results from gross volatility, or party switching among voters, being usually twice or trice as strong as net volatility.

Table 1. Volatility 1970-2010: Net and Gross

Country	net_1970	net_2000	gro_1970	gro_2000
Austria	2,6	16,6		
Belgium	6,9	15,5		27,0
Denmark	15,6	10,8	23,0	29,3
Finland	7,7	9,9	22,0	24,0
France	17,7	20,6	28,0	42,0
Germany	5,0	9,9	12,0	25,5
Greece	23,1	13,6		17,0
Iceland	12,6	12,9		30,9
Ireland	8,5	21,2		24,0
Italy	6,1	13,4		32,0
Luxembourg	12,3	7,2		
Netherlands	13,2	22,7	20,0	39,8
Norway	15,2	14,2	22,8	33,3
Portugal	11,7	11,4		16,5
Spain	12,1	11,2		10,0
Sweden	6,3	13,5	17,3	33,5
Switzerland	7,7	8,9		27,7
United Kingdom	8,3	7,0	18,3	17,8

Note: Net volatility: The gains and losses of political parties participating at two elections as measured by the Pedersen index.

Gross volatility: Measured as party switching by voters changing parties over two consecutive elections.

Sources:

Net volatility: Based on data presented in Ersson (2012)

Gross volatility: See Appendix.

The rise in volatility is dramatic for some countries that used to be well-known for their electoral stability: Sweden, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway.

One may say that volatility 1970, net and gross, goes together but deviate considerable from net and gross volatility 2000. The pattern of voter-party relations in one election to another has changed from the industrial society of the Lipset-Rokkan model to the post-industrial model true of the early 21rst century.

Diagram 1- 2 provides ample evidence for the changes in voter volatility. The more the empirical cases fall outside of the 45 degree line, to the right or to the left, the more change is indicated by the data.
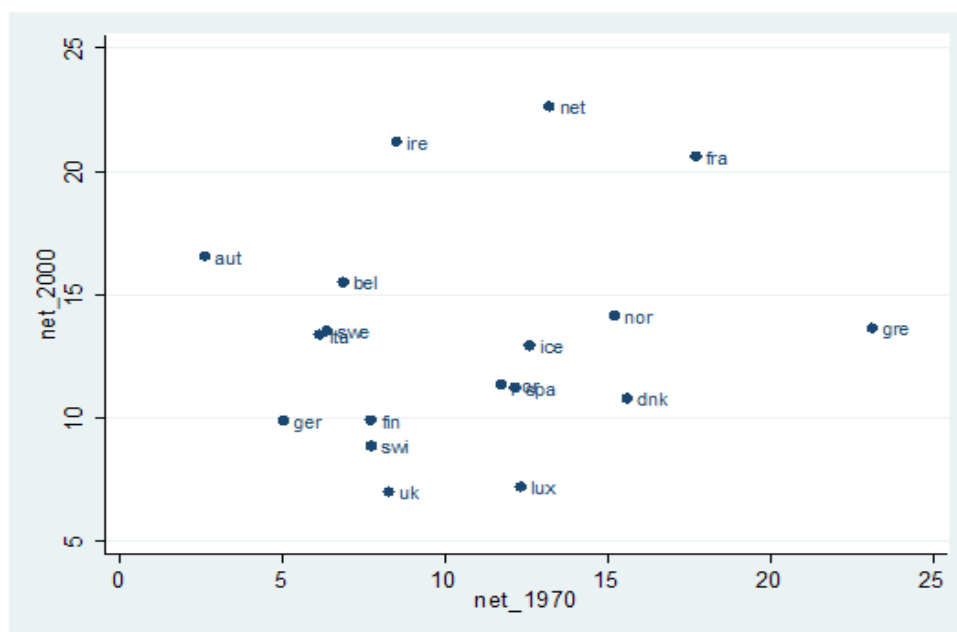

Diagram 1. Net Volatility 1970 and 2000

Source: See Table 1

For most countries hold that net volatility is much higher around 2000 than 1970, although I find a few notable exceptions. In any case, the 2000 pattern is entirely different from the 1970 pattern. This is even clearer about gross volatility (Diagram 2).
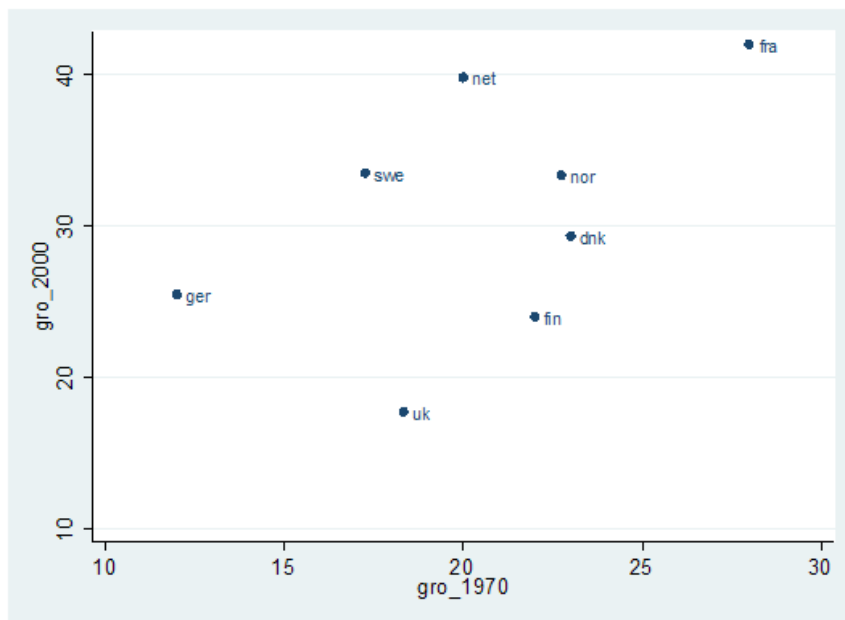

Diagram 2. Gross Volatility 1970 and 2000

Source: See Table 1

The empirical cases fall off the 45 degree line to the right mostly. providing evidence of a sharp rise in gross volatility.

To sum up

The concept of volatility, gross and net volatility, is a most powerful indicator on party system change. One may compare the pattern of volatility for 1970 (Diagram 3) with that of 2000 (Diagram 4).
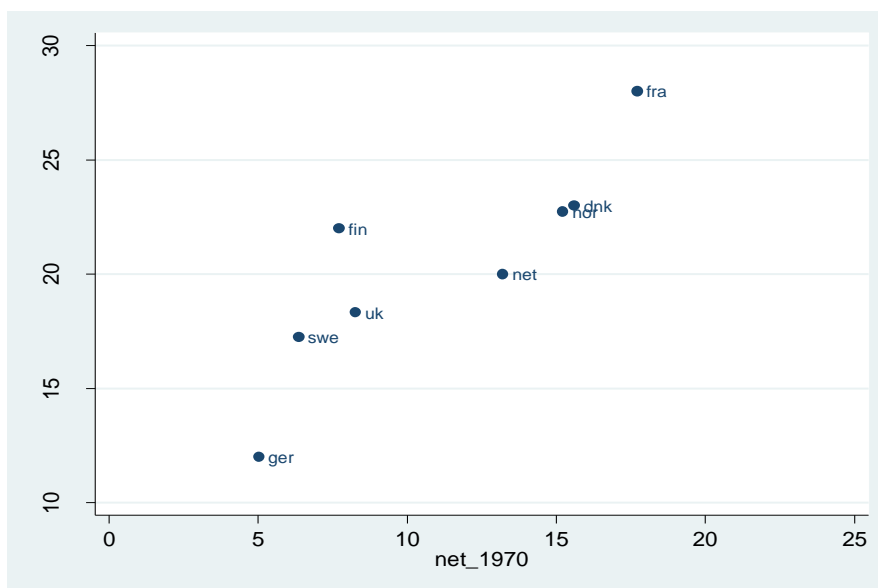

Diagram 3.

Source: See Table 1

Neither gross nor net volatility is especially high around the 1970s, according to the Diagram 3. For the situation about

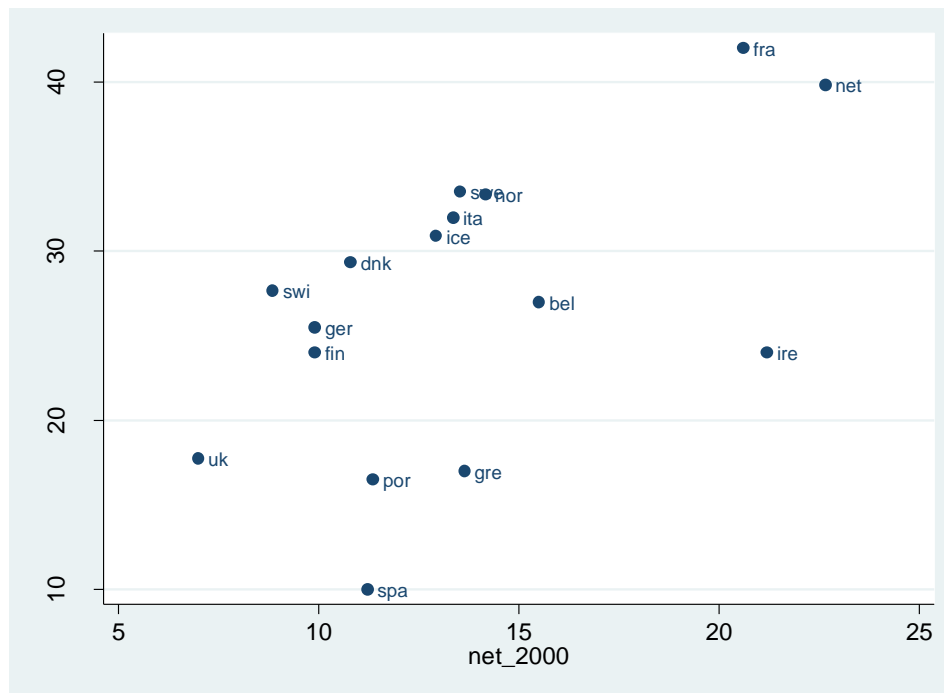2000, Diagram 4 presents an entirely different picture.

Diagram 4.

Source: See Table 1

Both kinds of volatility are sharply higher in Diagram 4 than in Diagram3.

6.2 Fractionalisation and New Parties (Betz)

Hans-Georg Betz (1997) was one of the first scholars who recognized that a new kind of party was created in post-modern society. Some of the new populist or nationalist parties have been receiving enough support to survive several elections and even entering government coalitions.   Some have operated like Pedersen's flash parties, receiving much support at one election only to be phased out at later ones. As spectacular as the flash parties is the slow death of a mass party like the Communists as well as the sudden disappearance of the Italian Christian Democrats. However, strong Left-Wing parties have become influential in both Greece and Spain.

To what extent can one speak of the same parties when comparing elections around 1970 with elections about 2005? According to the Lipset-Rokkan theory, the main parties would be mass parties responding to the basic cleavages in the social structure, i.e. class, religion and region. These alignments would be frozen, meaning low volatility in election outcomes.

Generally speaking, the post-modern condition is not one of huge mass parties. Party membership has declined significantly all over Western Europe, the parties finding financial support with the state somehow instead. One mass party has disappeared entirely, the Communists who were a force to reckon with in e.g. France, Italy and Finland. The religious parties have survived but only as a Christian party. By regional parties, Lipset and Rokkan had in mind small parties fighting for autonomy or independence like the Scottish Nationalists etc. They did not envisage the rise of populist anti-system parties like the National Front in France or the Austrian Freedom Party. The Populist Party is now to be found in many West European countries as an anti-immigration and anti-EU party, like in France, the Netherlands and Denmark as well as Norway and Sweden and Finland, where they are sizeable. Of course, there is also party continuity as with the Social Democrats, the Conservatives, Liberals and Agrarians. How to portray parties' change with quantitative numbers?

A few attempts have been made to map the existence and strength of various political parties that may be used for a re-analysis of the Lipset-Rokkan theory. One such classification targets the size of Left and Religious parties – the mass or cleavage parties: socialist – left-socialist-communist-agrarian and religious parties.

Diagram 5 shows the combined size of the Lipset-Rokkan cleavage parties 1970 and 2000.
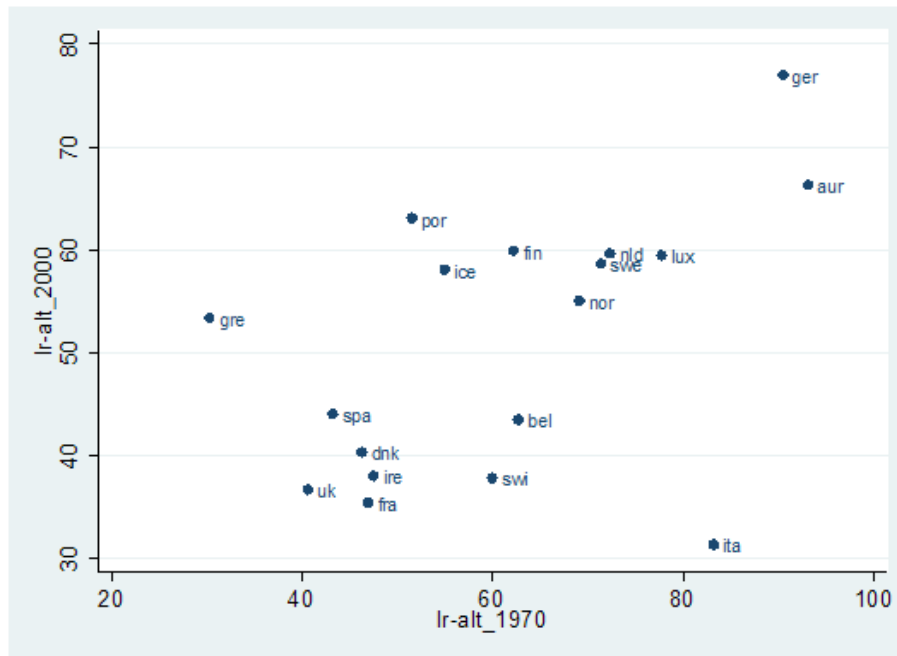
Diagram 5. Mass parties: Left + Religious + Agrarian

Note: LR-ALT measures the support for socialist + left-socialist + communist + agrarian + ethnic parties

Source: Based on data available from Armingeon et al. (2013)

One observes the decline of the cleavage parties in Diagram3, providing evidence of party system change. Most of these mass parties are *below* the 45 degree line.

Another indicator that may be employed to map party system transformation is to try to measure the size of new parties. In Diagram 6, the category "Others" designate political parties that are NOT socialist, conservative, agrarian, communist or liberals. Again, one may note that these parties are mostly *above* the 45 degree line in Diagram 6.
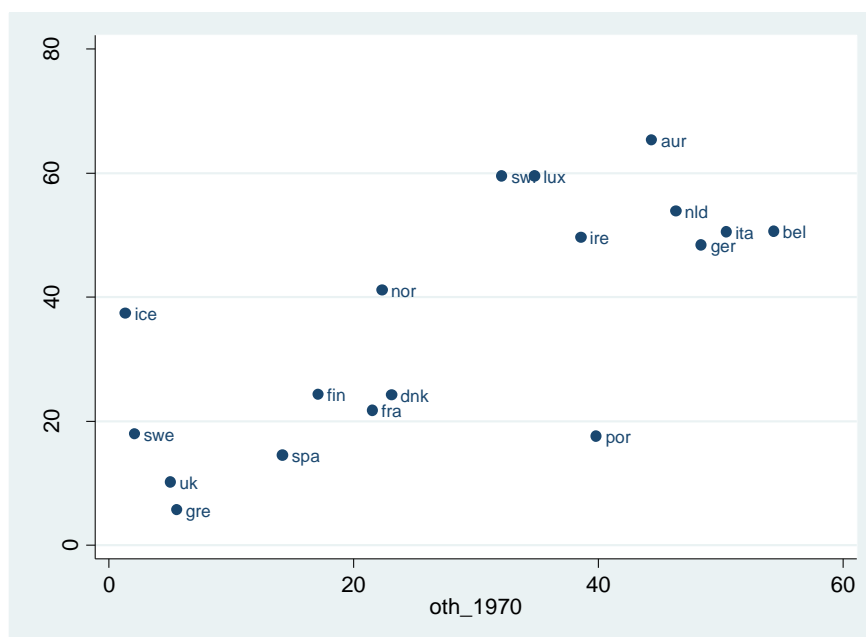

Diagram 6. New Parities

Note: Following Sundberg (1999) OTH measures the support for new parties as 100 −(socialist + agrarian + conservatives + communists + liberals)

Source: Based on data available from Armingeon et al. (2013)

7. GOVERNMENT COALITIONS: Riker versus Lijphart

According to political sociology, electoral formulas do not establish governments, as with Duverger (1954), but are themselves endogenous to the cleavage structure. Thus, Western Europe will have predominantly PR election systems that promote multi-party politics because of the fractionalisation of the party system.

One would expect to find the following governments in a system of multi-party politics with fixed alignments and strong cleavages:

   a) several minority governments;

   b) fewer minimum winning coalition governments;

   c) oversized governments.

Diagram 5 shows that minority governments were more frequent around 1970 than 2000. This finding deviates from Riker's stylised coalition theory, predicting the virtual dominance of the minimum winning coalitions, or even minimum sized coalitions. In a frozen party system, it may be easier to manoeuvre with minority governments, making deals in Parliament and its committees.
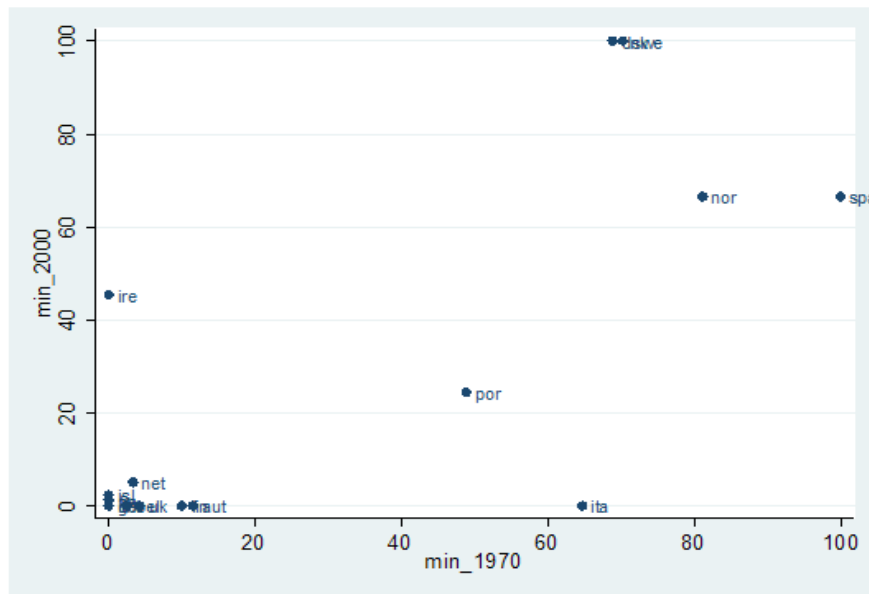

Diagram 8. Minority governments

Note: MIN measures the per cent of time a minority government has been in power.

Source: Based on data in Andersson et al. (2014)

In a post-modern society, political parties are no longer constrained by cleavage legacies, thus being more willing to form majority coalitions like for instance the MWC, or minimum winning coalition that barely supersedes the 50 per cent power threshold (Diagram 9).
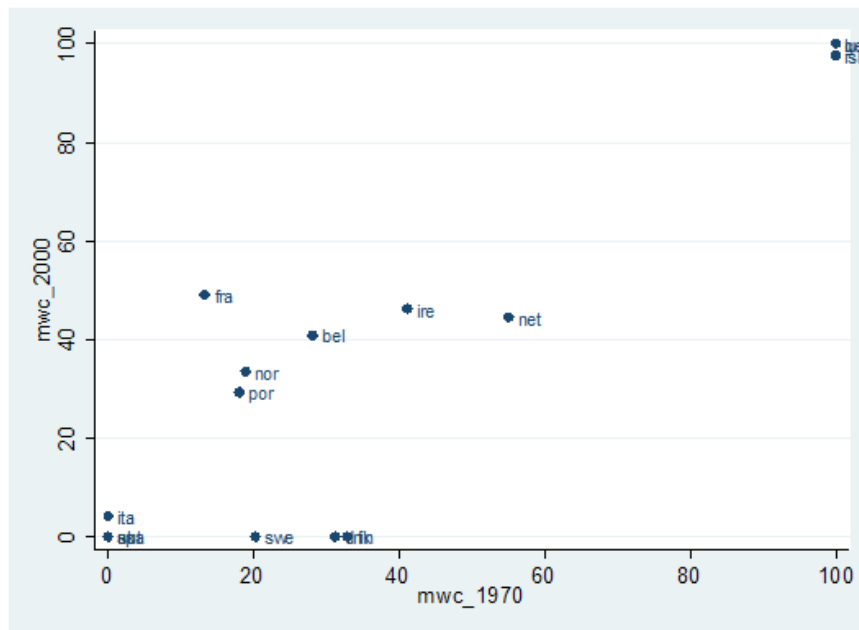
Diagram 9. Minimum Winning Coalitions

Note: MWC measures the per cent of time a minimum winning coalition has been in power.

Source: Based on data in Andersson et al. (2014)

When historical patterns of voter alignments do not count as much, coalition making possesses more degrees of freedom. Majority governments are after all easier to run than minority governments, all other things equal.

In Western Europe, PR methods have in a few countries been used as the basis for so-called consociationalism (Lijphart, 1968), meaning an effort to bring all players, or most of them, on board for consensus policy-making. The creation of grand coalitions would in a cleavage dominated society constitute a tool for the political elite to minimize conflict and avoid any tendency to civil war between the so-called camps (zuilen, pillars). But in a post-modern society with border-less strata and communities, a grand coalition may simply be an alternative to a weak minority government (Diagram 10).
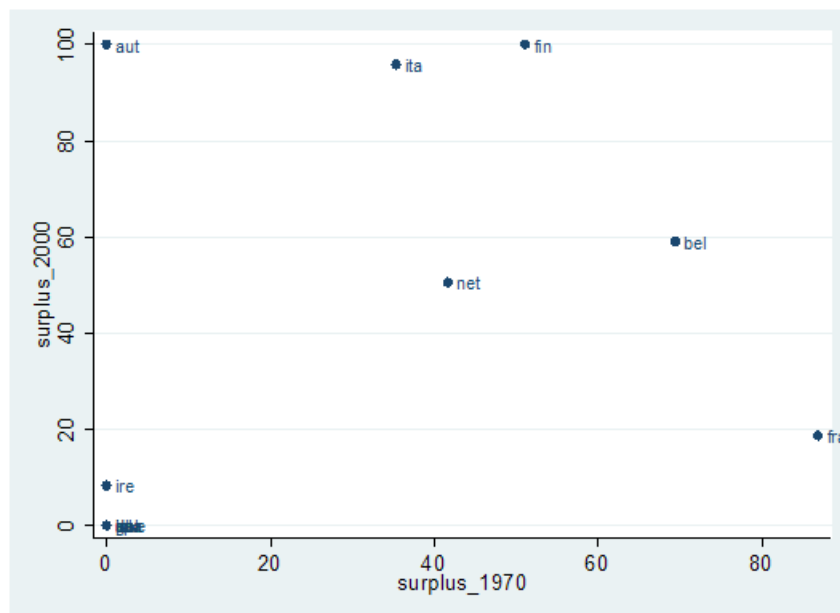

Diagram 10. Oversized Coalitions

Note: SURPLUS measures the per cent of time an oversized coalition has been in power.

Source: Based on data in Andersson et al. (2014)

In a post-modern society, oversized or grand coalitions make little sense. When a party system is dominated by two large parties that cannot form a simple majority government or a minimum winning coalition, then they may resort to the oversized format: Austria. Only Switzerland employs the collegiado as a matter of principle since 1959, although it works as a mechanism to empower government and Parliament against the referendum democracy of this country (Neidhart).

Political parties that can create a minimum winning coalition by means of a coalition with itself are not frequent in Western European parliamentary democracy.

8. Conclusion

The social carpet or Durkheim's social structure   or Rokkan's cleavages underneath the political parties is all but stable, with new issues coming up for which the established parties are not prepared – e.g. the massive flow of refugees from Arab countries. The voter chooses as he or she wishes – individual means-end choice with Weber - without group pressures or old legacies – social structure, making the life if parties difficult and hazardous.

The recent transformation of societies in Western Europe (Touraine, 2013) has promoted the emergence of an entirely different kind of party politics and democratic contestation. Stunningly, the gross volatility can now reach 50%, every second voter shifting. The huge cleavage parties – Communism, Christian Democracy and Social Democracy – have shrunk considerably or been washed away. The number of parties has increased – fractionalisation - as well as the probability of flash parties.

In the literature on party systems (Sartori, 1975; Keman and Budge, 1988), the classical focus is upon the number of parties – fractionalisation or effective number of parties - and the effects of the electoral institutions – Duverger's two-partism against multi-partism. However, once one move to a dynamic analysis of rapid change in party systems, the focal interest will be upon volatility. What restrains too much of volatility is the workings of transaction cost minimising mechanism. It is costly to change parties entirely from one election to another, both for the politicians involved and the voters. Table 2 documents the long-run trend towards more and more of volatility.

Table 2. Net volatility in Western European elections

Summary of volatility			
Decade	Mean	Std. Dev.	Freq.
1970-79	10.591514	6.5865799	55
1980-89	10.231104	6.9730458	58
1990-99	11.483612	5.9708036	53
2000-09	11.738517	5.9025244	55
2010-15	18.529448	10.333016	24
Total	11.734261	7.1916167	245

As Table 2 shows, net volatility keeps increasing in West European elections.

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