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Religion and Critical Junctures: Divergent Trajectories of Liberalism in Modern Europe

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The study of cleavages, critical junctures, and resulting trajectories in the evolution of politics and party systems was launched by Lipset and Rokkan in their classic study of Western Europe.¹ They focused on fundamental societal cleavages: center-periphery, church-state, land-industry, and owner-worker. According to their argument, the resolution of these cleavages crystallized in critical junctures, which in turn set countries on distinctive historical paths. In the intervening decades since 1967, numerous studies have extended, refined, and in some ways corrected their arguments about Western Europe, and a substantial body of research has applied this framework to other regions.

This essay discusses my work on critical junctures, presented in Origins of Liberal Dominance: State, Church, and Party in Nineteenth-Century Europe.² This study focused on the politics of liberalism in France, Belgium, Switzerland, and Germany from the restoration of conservative monarchies in 1815 to the outbreak of continental war in 1914. In this historical context, liberals sought to build representative and constitutional government, to develop national economic systems, and to confine clerical authority to religious affairs.³ Most scholars viewed 19th-century liberals through a prism that emphasized battles over private property and socialism; my work took the religious implications of liberalism as equally decisive.

This brief article traces the lines of influence that shaped my book, emphasizing among other points how the critical juncture framework provided a fresh, powerful, and most welcome new perspective on the study of religion and politics. This framework helped to move the discussion beyond what was too often a rather limited analysis of secularization in the context of modernization. Attention shifted instead to how, at

¹ Lipset and Rokkan 1967.
critical junctures, religion played a crucial and complex role in shaping European politics.

**Lines of Influence**

Institutional ties played a key role in keeping Lipset and Rokkan’s work at the forefront of my thinking. My book began as a dissertation at Berkeley, where David and Ruth Collier were leading scholars of comparative politics. Their work on critical junctures, eventually published as *Shaping the Political Arena,* influenced many graduate students in comparative politics, including those of us outside the Latin American field. In 1982, Berkeley hired the young scholar who became my principal academic mentor, Gregory Luebbert. He had done his graduate work with Lipset, at Stanford, and he situated his research squarely in the critical juncture tradition. This influence is clear in his first book, *Comparative Democracy: Policy-making and Governing Coalitions in Europe and Israel,* where he acknowledges his “great intellectual debt” to Lipset and Rokkan. Their cleavage theory became the core of Luebbert’s own account of how policy preferences shaped party leaders’ decisions about whether to participate in coalition governments. In Luebbert’s analysis, party leaders cared primarily about the policies at the core of a party’s programmatic profile, and this profile was interpreted to be determined by the societal cleavage that was most salient when the party was founded. This was a classic Lipset and Rokkan analysis: commitments undertaken at a critical juncture had long-lasting consequences that set parties on different paths into the future.

Luebbert offered a deterministic view of critical juncture theory. In *Comparative Democracy,* he argued that parties acquired profiles “by translating societal cleavages into lines of party conflict during the years before and just after the adoption of universal suffrage and, especially, the introduction of proportional representation.” In this framework, the metaphor of translation implied that the actions of political leaders simply reflected the underlying social and economic conflicts. The details of politics did not play a key role: cleavages had “precipitated” parties, and social and economic disputes “had given rise to the parties.”

In using such formulations, Luebbert understated the roles of specific people. Indeed, though Luebbert did hint that choices were involved, his analysis emphasized patterns more than people. Luebbert asserted that parties used social cleavages to their advantage whenever that cleavage involved socioeconomic issues—as opposed to cleavages that concerned “constitutional, producer-consumer, cultural-ethnolinguistic, regional or center-periphery, ethical-religious, and foreign policy” issues. This also occurred whenever two cleavages reinforced each other.

To summarize, societal cleavages gave parties policy profiles, and then leaders struggled to maintain their positions of privilege on the basis of that profile. As stated in the book’s closing paragraph, Luebbert found an “almost complete absence of evidence that the skills, ideologies, and aspirations of individual politicians made any difference in the final coalition outcome.” In other words, the key to predicting which parties would form a coalition was knowing which issues party leaders needed to prioritize in order to retain their positions as leaders.

My own project was even more closely connected to Luebbert’s second book, which he was writing as he advised me on my choice of dissertation topic. In *Liberalism, Fascism, or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Intervar Europe,* he noted that European countries which acquired liberal regimes by the outbreak of World War I—that is, the United Kingdom, France, and Switzerland—retained those regimes throughout the tumultuous years leading up to World War II. Those were the countries that developed neither social democratic regimes nor successful home-grown fascist movements. This observation set the stage for Luebbert’s main argument, which sought to explain why some countries developed social democratic regimes, as in Scandinavia and Czechoslovakia, while others fell to fascism, as in Germany and Italy.

His central concern was working-class politics. Thus, the explanation for different political regimes focused principally on the national political coalitions that emerged out of a “fundamental historical transition: the emergence of the organized working class as a major contender in national politics,” as David Collier and Lipset put it. The transition from elite to mass politics was the critical juncture par excellence; choices made as the franchise expanded would shape party systems, coalition formation, and even political regimes.

In advising me on the choice of a research question, Luebbert proposed that I investigate why liberal regimes were successfully established in some countries but not in others. He saw an opportunity to add crucial nuance to his argument by exploring the idea that “where liberal movements were successful before 1914, their appeal was reinforced by a religiously deterministic philosophy of ‘strategies’ as a response to the social cleavages present in the community.” In this framework, the terms “strategies,” “payoffs,” and “costs” suggested that leaders were making choices. These choices could of course be viewed fairly deterministically within some choice-theoretic frameworks, or they could be understood less
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size contrasts between the two best-known cases, the United
Kingdom and Germany. The German case of attempted liberal
reform that ultimately failed, I argued, could best be under-
stood by studying these processes in other countries situated in the middle of the spectrum of likely success of reform.

Drawing on a critical junctures approach, I focused on how a common process—the launching of liberal reforms—
could evolve differently in comparable cases. I argued that the attempt by liberals to reform political regimes was a critical juncture in the four cases. I distinguished between two phases of the critical juncture, the first marked primarily by elite politics and the second by mass politics. And I posited, in a nutshell, that each country’s path through the common process was strongly shaped by the implications of political reform for religious authorities. Institutions present at the onset of liberal reform, especially whether or not churches were incorporated into state institutions, influenced reform dynamics. Ultimately, the outcomes of these efforts differed across the cases: repeated failures in Germany, multiple successes in Switzerland, and checkered reforms in Belgium and France (see Figure 1).

The Elite Phase

How should these contrasting patterns of success and failure be explained? Religion was a key factor. The nineteenth century opened with churches being incorporated into the gov-
ring institutions of some states, but not others. Would-be

How Religion Shaped Political Regimes

In the course of my research, a crucial insight began to emerge: the political significance of religion changed as the franchise expanded. In the period of elite-dominated politics in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, clerical support for liberal reform hinged mainly on whether clerical authority would be curbed in a reconfigured state. However, as mass political support became increasingly decisive for the success of par-
ties in the 1870s and after, the middle-classes and peasants


liberal reformers encountered authoritarian regimes in all four cases, but those regimes had incorporated churches in just two of them, France and Germany. In those two countries, liberals cast their programs as a challenge to both political and clerical authority, and clerical leaders definitely viewed liberal reform as threatening. In France in particular, the Catholic Church had been deeply integrated into the pre-Revolutionary administration and had been a major landowner across much of the country, especially in the south-east. The Church opposed liberal reform. By contrast, in Belgium and Switzerland churches played only limited roles in the state and rural economy. Here, liberal reformers sought political change but did not call for reduced clerical authority within the state. In these cases, liberal reform even held out the possibility for clerical leaders of achieving greater political autonomy and/or supremacy over minority religions. Clergy supported liberal plans to reform political institutions only when such reform would enhance the scope of their authority. My chapters on these contests focused on the revolutions and attempted revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and concluded with the regimes that emerged in the 1850s.

Two alternative outcomes emerged. In Belgium and Switzerland, liberal regimes were established with executives responsible to a legislature, and a formal separation of church and state at the national level. By contrast, Prussia’s governments depended mainly upon the Kaiser’s support and France’s depended upon that of Napoleon III; legislatures did not make governments on their own. Other scholars overlooked that Prussia’s and France’s authoritarian rulers integrated churches into the ruling apparatus.

The Mass Phase

In the context of these elite-dominated regimes, pressures for greater participation and mass franchise increased and brought new actors into the set of coalitional possibilities. Conservatives and liberals alike reached deeper into the urban and provincial middle classes, and into the peasantry. They sought the electoral support needed to prevail in contests in which most of the adult male population was eligible to vote, as was common throughout these cases in the 1870s and thereafter. I labelled this period the “mass phase” to signal the common process of expanding participation and inclusiveness in national politics.

This shared process yielded different coalitional possibilities in each case. A key factor shaping coalitions was how provincial middle classes and peasants responded to the specific threats they faced. In France, these two groups feared both socialism and a revived Catholic Church; whereas their counterparts in Belgium, whose property did not derive from forced secularization of land, feared only socialism. In Prussia and Switzerland, where Protestants ruled over large Catholic minorities, Protestants viewed the Catholic Church with deep suspicion. In Prussia and France, monarchs seemed viable as checks against socialist-inspired expropriation, but not in Bel-
grium or Switzerland, where neighboring powers checked the ambitions of would-be royal rulers.

The expansion of participation thus reinforced a liberal regime in Switzerland, but it strengthened the monarchy in Prussia. In Belgium, it brought a Catholic party to power that preserved parliamentary sovereignty and expanded clerical authority in education. In France, universal male suffrage rejected the presidential ambitions of generals and empowered radicals, such as Léon Gambetta, who declared clericalism to be the enemy of a constitutional republic. The expansion of participation in national politics, a quintessentially “modern” process, thus emboldened authoritarianists in Prussia and republicans in France. In Belgium it buttressed Catholic constitutionalism, while in Switzerland it reinforced greater direct democracy.

**Competing Explanations**

The book sought to evaluate competing explanations for the successes and failures of liberalism. The historical scholarship on each country gave central attention to case-specific factors, including the personalities of political leaders and the outcomes actually experienced in a given country. Hence my book, like many works in comparative-historical analysis, faced a creative tension with works of history. The tension lay in my claiming greater comparability of explanatory factors, across diverse contexts, than many historians found plausible. Yet at the same time, I drew on these historians’ very own work as basic sources of data.

I used a critical junctures framework and cross-case comparison to generate insights that scholarship on individual countries did not offer. For instance, I found that liberals in Germany were well aware that established Lutheran churches encouraged support for monarchy; as a result, German liberals supported so-called free churches that incubated support for liberal politics. I learned about these efforts in works of history. The tension lay in my claiming greater comparability of explanatory factors, across diverse contexts, than many historians found plausible. Yet at the same time, I drew on these historians’ very own work as basic sources of data.

To take a different example, for scholars of French politics, “republicans” could not be liberals; they were viewed as too popular to be liberal, which was supposed to be an attribute only of the elite supporters of the Orléanist monarchy. Yet excessive fealty to how terms were deployed in particular cases obscured a key fact about France in the 1870s: a political movement advocating constitutional governance successfully attracted a mass following by activating concerns over the scope of a church’s authority.

With regard to modernization theory, which was commonplace in works by political scientists, I offered two responses to the argument that economic development accounted for liberalism. On the one hand, my case selection acknowledged that Europe’s most economically developed country, Britain, provided the most hospitable setting for liberal reform, in contrast to the underdeveloped peripheral states in Southern and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, my book showed that levels of development in the middle-range could not account for differences between such key cases as France and Germany, much less between Belgium and Switzerland. Moreover, my analysis showed that assessments of the relative sizes of the middle class in various countries were often measured in ways that excluded Catholics by definitional fiat; I carefully avoided such bias.

The final alternative explanation was the claim that Catholic political theology opposed liberalism, while Protestant political theology supported it. It simply did not bear sustained scrutiny to argue that national and regional religious elites conformed to uniform applications of doctrine. Protestant clergy supported direct democracy in Switzerland and opposed it in Germany, while Catholic clergy supported Belgian constitutionalism, but frequently sided with monarchists in France. Clerical elites, as well as members of churches, took stances on liberal reform mainly for local and institutional reasons.

My book confirmed Luebbert’s suggestion that religious cleavages provided crucial opportunities to Europe’s most successful liberal movements. The book filled in key gaps in sustaining this argument across diverse cases, such as by explaining how the struggle against the Catholic Church in the 1870s could weaken liberal movements in Germany and Belgium but strengthen it in France and Switzerland. The fight against Catholicism alienated many middle-class voters who feared socialism but not the institutional power of the Church. At the same time, it bound together those who saw the Church as a threat to parliamentary sovereignty and the rural economy, as in France and Switzerland.

Like Luebbert, I argued that Lipset and Rokkan’s framework could be used to explain not just party systems, but also the characteristics of the political regimes in which partisan competition took place. Political regimes are more short-lived than patterns of partisan support and opposition, which often survive interludes of authoritarianism. Yet explaining episodes of liberal reform did indeed aim squarely at a core goal of comparative politics, which is to understand the conditions for self-government.

**The Study of Religion, Then and Now**

At the time I was doing research for my book in the 1990s, Lipset and Rokkan’s 1967 work had already endured thirty years—an eternity in modern social science. Their work was a touchstone for almost all research on religion in comparative politics, bringing religion into a broad and exciting research agenda. As noted, the field had long been influenced by the often unacknowledged, yet widely shared, assumptions of secularization theory, with the idea that economic modernization would inevitably diminish the personal, social, and political importance of religion. Potential successors to modernization theory—such as neo-Marxism and dependency theory—neither challenged long-standing assumptions about secularization nor provided useful ways to guide research on how religion shaped politics.

By contrast, Lipset and Rokkan contended that conflicts among different religions, and between religious and state auth-
orities, created enduring legacies. Cleavages were conceived as boundaries between social groups that identified, on an ongoing basis, with one side or the other of old conflicts. As politics democratized and participation expanded in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political parties formed with the objective of representing the interests of groups that were defined by these historically given conflicts. Thus, long after modernization theory and its critique had become less salient for comparativists, Lipset and Rokkan endured as a valuable model for investigating the politics of religion.

Nearly two decades into the 21st century, of course, scholars continue to be called upon to explain religion’s role in politics. Islamist movements have thrived throughout Muslim-majority countries—in democratic or semi-democratic contexts such as Indonesia and Turkey, as well as repressive ones such as in Egypt and Pakistan. In Europe, religious settlements that seemed firm and unchallenged have re-emerged in a highly contentious form, as states confront new religious heterogeneity.

In the original critical junctures formulation, the key role of religion was rooted in the past, given that the legacies of religious conflict endured for decades. My elaboration of critical juncture analysis, while it similarly interpreted religion as embedded in historically derived institutions, emphasized that liberalizing movements could gain strength from religious leaders and movements that sought greater freedom and autonomy. This insight was crucial to understanding the divergent effects of Protestantism in Germany and Switzerland and Catholicism in France and Belgium. Religion has proven far more capable of renewal than most scholars of comparative politics previously allowed, making research on the political commitments of religious movements ever more pressing today.

Lipset and Rokkan’s insights should be considered more relevant today than many scholars recognize. Several features of their work do limit its appeal. Key terms were rooted in Western European events, such as the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. In addition, Lipset and Rokkan favored a deterministic view of causality, and gave sparse attention to the details of how politicians attempted to assemble coalitions of supporters. My own research is similar to Lipset and Rokkan’s in this regard. It focused on particular cases, in one region (Europe) and in one historical period (the nineteenth century). It also could be characterized as overly deterministic. Yet, for all of these limitations, Lipset and Rokkan’s work helped my book show that religion was a key determinant of support for liberalism and of regime outcomes. Moreover, my research did validate a general claim: that religion can have a decisive political impact when politicians threaten—or promise—to change the scope of religious authority. And this lesson is certainly relevant today.

References