


The Gender Cleavage: Updating Rokkanian Theory for the Twenty-First Century

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This article develops Stein Rokkan's cleavage theory to include the gender cleavage. It discusses the gender cleavage's structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions. The extent to which the gender cleavage becomes manifest is related to the overall cleavage structure. The gender cleavage has been comparatively more salient in Europe's Protestant North than in other Western countries. Incorporating gender conflicts into the Rokkanian framework may lead to a richer understanding of welfare regime development.

Introduction

Rokkanian cleavage theory is recognized as a classic approach in comparative politics and political sociology (Karvonen and Kuhnle 2001). The approach emphasizes the interrelationships of various structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions of political conflicts. In addition to the class cleavage, state–church, rural–urban, center–periphery, or communist–socialist cleavages have shaped political decision- and coalition-making. In comparison with theoretical approaches that originate in the analysis of class relations and conflicts, cleavage theory is more oriented towards the multidimensionality of political inequalities and conflicts, today termed intersectionality. It thereby allows a more nuanced understanding of how cross-interest coalitions come about (see Manow 2009, 2015; Mjøset 2000; Sass 2020). This makes the approach interesting for feminist and other scholars concerned with the development of welfare states.

However, conflicts related to gender have not, for the most part, been explicitly integrated into the theory. While the potential existence of a gender cleavage has sometimes been debated, denied, or implied (e.g., Aardal and Valen 1989; Brooks, Nieuwebeerta, and Manza 2006; Cowell-Meyers, Evans,

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and Shin 2020), the gender cleavage has not been adequately grounded in historical analysis. This article seeks to develop Rokkanian cleavage theory by conceptualizing the gender cleavage as fully fledged cleavage.

Incorporating gender into the Rokkanian framework may lead to a richer, more convincing understanding of welfare regime development and may also help to make sense of political conflicts of today. Gender conflicts have shaped political development across and beyond Europe in different ways, depending on how the gender cleavage has been interrelated with other cleavages. The extent to which the gender cleavage becomes salient—that is, does not remain latent beneath other cleavages—is related to the overall cleavage structure. For example, in Germany, women’s organizations were split along denominational and class lines. In Norway, the women’s movement was comparatively more united and cooperated first with the liberal movement and later with social democrats. Sections of the women’s movement were thus included in different cross-interest alliances (Sass forthcoming).

The article is structured as follows. The first section gives an overview of the original Rokkanian understanding of cleavages and their expressions in the formation of political parties and organizations. This is followed by a discussion of the legacies and the development of cleavage theory. We then introduce our concept of the gender cleavage. While this article does not aspire to a grounded empirical case analysis, we present examples from the Norwegian case to back up our claim that gender constitutes a cleavage of its own. We also believe that the gender cleavage was comparatively more salient in Europe’s Protestant North, contributing to the development of a more “women-friendly,” gender-equal welfare state regime (Hernes 1987). We will not be able to entirely substantiate this claim in a theoretical paper with limited comparative references. However, in the final sections of the article, we discuss how the concept of the gender cleavage relates to the literature on welfare and gender regimes and to the literature on gender and voting. This rich body of research provides much evidence regarding the impact of the comparatively strong women’s movements in the Nordic countries compared especially to the more conservative welfare regimes of the continent.

The Rokkanian Conception of Cleavages

Rokkan never defined the term cleavage. In his writing, his understanding of the concept remains implicit in his grounded historical analyses. A close reading of his work reveals that the term cleavage refers to a long-standing, polarized political conflict (Rokkan 1999). As Flora noted, we are looking at “fundamental oppositions within a territorial population” (Flora 1999, 7, 34–39), characterized by comparable importance and durability compared to other sources of conflict. Cleavages have structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions. They are composed of different “social constituencies,”

“cultural distinctiveness,” and “organizational networks” (Bartolini 2000, 25; Bartolini and Mair 1990, 212–49). Cleavages come to expression in politics over time, linking action and structure. Studying them requires substantial historical and comparative knowledge.

Cleavages can mutually reinforce, superpose, or cut across each other. They can vary in intensity, so that some become salient and dominant, while others remain latent. The political weight of cleavages and their position in a hierarchy of cleavage bases can change over time (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, 6). Cleavages should never be analyzed on their own since territorial areas are characterized by a set of interdependencies between cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Rokkan 1999, 309). Rokkan uses the term “cleavage structure” to describe a combination of cleavages characterizing a social structure and political system (Flora 1999, 7, 34–35). He identifies several critical junctures, which have resulted in cleavages and shaped political systems (Rokkan 1999, 303–19).

The oldest European cleavages are the center–periphery and the state–church cleavage, resulting from the Reformation and nation building in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. The center–periphery cleavage became especially salient in the smaller European countries, including those of the Protestant North, where it came to expression in the formation of peripheral movements uniting farmers, peripheral ethnic groups, and urban outsiders (Rokkan 1966; 1999, 304, 308). The state–church cleavage was less salient in the North, because Protestant state churches were integrated into nation-building processes. Small Christian democratic parties were founded in the North at different time points in the twentieth century, but except for the Norwegian Christian Democrats were not politically significant. In the religiously mixed and the Catholic areas on the continent, the state–church cleavage became dominant. In several countries, Catholic parties were founded to defend Catholic influence (Rokkan 1999, 329).

Industrialization led to the development of a rural–urban cleavage, dividing producers of primary goods in the countryside and the middle classes in the cities. In Europe’s Protestant North, this led to the founding of agrarian parties, which split with the peripheral liberal movements (Rokkan 1999, 375). In economies dominated by large-scale landed property, such as Prussia, England, or Scotland, agrarian interests were integrated into conservative alliances (Rokkan 1999, 307). In religiously mixed or Catholic areas, Catholic mass parties organized farmers and aggregated agrarian interests. Political Catholicism tended to superpose the center–periphery and later the rural–urban cleavage (Rokkan 1999, 309).

The industrial revolution also led to the development of the class cleavage between workers and business owners, expressed in the formation of labor parties, bringing European party systems closer to each other (Rokkan 1999, 290). Labor movements were often characterized by internal splits based on conflicting ideas about nationhood and international solidarity, most

markedly in countries where conflicts over national identity remained unsolved (Rokkan 1999, 307, 334–39).

Rokkan (1999) pays most attention to political parties as organized manifestations of cleavages. Parties can be based on several cleavages to varying degrees (Sass 2020, Sass forthcoming). Even if based primarily on one cleavage, they must position themselves in relation to other cleavages, which might be overlapping or crosscutting. In addition to the electoral channel, Rokkan (1999, 261–73) points to cleavages expressed in the corporatist channel of decision-making. In his work on Norway, in addition to discussing the role of unions, farmers' and fishermen's organizations, or employer organizations, Rokkan mentioned the Norwegian language movement, religious protest against the Lutheran church, the Folk High School movement, and the teetotal organizations, who were part of the "common platform" that comprised the early Liberal Party (Rokkan 1966, 77–78). Rokkanian cleavage theory should not be considered a theory pertaining to the party system only.

Rokkanian Cleavage Theory after Rokkan

Much of Rokkan's work remained unfinished after his death in 1979, scattered across papers and contributions. In 1999, Peter Flora published an edited collection of Rokkan's most important texts (Flora 1999). In the following years, efforts were made to update Rokkan's works (Bartolini 2005; Berntzen and Selle 1992; Caramani 2004; Ferrera 2005; Karvonen and Kuhnle 2001; Kuhnle 2009; Magone 2010; Mair 1997; Seiler 2015). The interest in macro-historical analyses of critical junctures and political processes survived in the historical–institutionalist literature (Mahoney 2000; Thelen 1999).

Some of Rokkan's central findings regarding European cleavage structures became common knowledge in welfare state research. For example, continental welfare states such as Germany were formed to a significant extent by the state–church cleavage. Christian democratic parties forged broad alliances including the rural population (Huber, Ragin, and Stephens 1993; Van Kersbergen 1995). Scandinavian welfare states were characterized by rural–urban and center–periphery cleavages, which encouraged social democrats to build alliances with farmers in the 1930s (Esping-Andersen 1990). The character of these alliances can only be understood by considering the cleavage structure in the Rokkanian sense, as class interests alone cannot explain why the middle classes sided with social democracy in some countries but with Christian democracy in others (Baldwin 1990; Manow 2009; Manow and van Kersbergen 2009).

While Rokkan's use of the term "cleavage" was more intuitive and based on qualitative case knowledge, Bartolini (2000) attempted a more explicit conceptualization of the term in line with his quantitative research strategy. He underscored the multidimensional character of cleavages as simultaneously

cultural, structural, and organizational divisions, and rightly criticized a reduction of the concept to only one or two of these dimensions as appears in certain electoral studies that concentrate only on “measuring the extent to which social group membership proves an effective predictor of partisan choice” (Bartolini 2000, 24). Such studies provide limited insight into the structural foundations, the cultural significance, and organizational set-up of cleavages. Nor can they tell us how cleavages are intertwined and why some cleavages become salient, while others remain latent.

Some recent studies of the oppositions resulting from European integration, globalization, immigration, or educational expansion, and the growth of parties of the far right and new left have attempted to build on Rokkanian cleavage theory. A “transnational cleavage” (Hoghe and Marks 2018), a “libertarian/authoritarian cleavage” (Kriesi 2010), or a “universalism–particularism cleavage” (Bornschieer et al. 2021) have been identified (see also Bornschieer 2010). Ideas about gender are sometimes mentioned as an element of ideology of the new left or far right (Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Bornschieer et al. 2021, 7). Rokkanian cleavage theory can thus be developed to illuminate contemporary political conflicts. In this article, we hope to contribute something to this undertaking by focusing on how gender conflicts could be integrated into the Rokkanian framework—not as an element of a new cleavage, but as a cleavage of its own, which has old roots.

The Gender Cleavage

To date, to our knowledge, no one has attempted to conceptualize the gender cleavage in detail. Rokkan (1999) himself, while considering a variety of social movements, had nothing to say about the women’s movement and its opponents. Recent research on women’s parties builds on Rokkanian cleavage theory to some extent by pointing out that these parties’ “principal analytical tools center on gender, as opposed to other cleavages” (Cowell-Meyers, Evans, and Shin 2020, 13; see also Evans and Kenny, 2020), without spelling out the structural, cultural, and organizational characteristics of this cleavage. In electoral research, some authors have examined the effect of gender on voting but have concluded that gender conflicts are not decisive enough to be called a cleavage (Aardal and Valen 1989, 250–275; Brooks, Nieuwebeerta, and Manza 2006, 106). Since then, the gender gap in voting has become more pronounced and a large literature on the topic has emerged (see below). However, a conception of cleavages based exclusively on elective choices is too narrow. Rokkan’s (1999) perspective was much broader, more historical, and not limited to the study of parties and elections.

In line with the theoretical considerations presented above, four conditions must be met for the gender conflict to qualify as a fully fledged cleavage: The conflict must be (i) sufficiently fundamental and long-standing and composed

of (ii) structural–economic as well as (iii) cultural–ideological dimensions, which establish the basis for a high degree of polarization. Finally, (iv) there must be organizations articulating the cleavage by mobilizing a significant number of people for collective action.

Below we will give empirical examples of these conditions drawn mostly from the Norwegian case. The Norwegian case is chosen as we are familiar with the history of the Norwegian women’s movement, and as the gender cleavage has long been comparatively salient in Europe’s Protestant North. Norway is a good example of a Nordic, comparatively “women-friendly” welfare state regime (Hernes 1987). In other cases, such as Germany, we believe that the gender cleavage has been superposed by state–church and class cleavages to a greater extent and has therefore remained comparatively more latent. Our examples do not of course constitute a fully fledged empirical case analysis. Thorough case studies will be necessary to further explore the fruitfulness of the concept of a gender cleavage.

The Origins and Development of the Gender Cleavage and Its Structural Dimension

Women have long been disadvantaged in structural and economic terms. Before industrialization, women’s work was important for the productivity of the household but considered less valuable than men’s. Women did not have full economic and legal maturity, did not inherit as much as men, and had less access to economic privileges (Sandvik 1999). During the nineteenth century, liberalism and individualism swept away old collective rights, including loopholes for women, and defined the legal individual and citizen as male (Nagel 1998, 331). With industrialization, women were increasingly relegated to the private sphere, where their unpaid care work continued to ensure human survival yet was not recognized in any monetary form while lower-class women were exploited as cheap labor in the early phases of capitalist production. Women’s lack of property and income, exclusion from many sectors of the labor market, and lack of political and social rights put them in a dependent position vis-à-vis men. As Therborn noted, “[t]he further south and east one ventured from northwest Europe, including within Europe itself, the more rigid were the patriarchal rules one would find” (Therborn 2004, 71–72).

Women’s resistance was not initially a collective resistance. This changed when women became organized politically as a movement. Feminist scholars usually divide the history of this mobilization into several waves of increased political activity of women. The historical origin of the gender cleavage can thus be traced to the first wave of the organized women’s movement, which took place roughly from the last decades of the nineteenth to the first decades of the twentieth century.¹

Following what Rokkan (1999) has termed the national revolution and the advent of mass movements for political, civil, and social rights for all (men), increasing numbers of women also began to organize. They did so even though women were not, at first, granted membership in political organizations, could not speak publicly, had no voting rights, and only very restricted access to higher education and paid work. In other words, women had to overcome high thresholds for their mobilization (Nagel 1995; Rokkan 1999, 244–60; 294–302). However, as Therborn (2004, 301) points out, proletarianization and urbanization in some parts of Europe “seriously disrupted the socio-sexual order,” opening up new opportunities for women. Increasing numbers of unmarried women had to make a living on their own. Partly for this reason, Norwegian women were put on a par with men in the inheritance law in 1845, unmarried women received legal economic maturity in 1863 and married women in 1888. At the same time, new ideas were circulating in Europe, coming to expression in Johan Stuart Mill’s book *The Subjection of Women* from 1869 or August Bebel’s book *Women and Socialism* from 1879 (Hagemann 1999, 189–90; 217–19).

The most important issue for the first women’s movement, which to some extent united activists from different class backgrounds, was the struggle for the vote (Hagemann 1999, 219–22). Women achieved the right to vote in Finland in 1906, in Norway in 1913, in Denmark and Iceland in 1915, and in Sweden in 1919. In the Nordic countries, also other women’s rights were enforced earlier than in the rest of Europe (Therborn 2004, 73–82). The Protestant state churches accepted the state’s right to regulate family matters. This was not the case with the Catholic Church on the continent (Therborn 2004, 78), although the first women’s movements achieved some progress also in continental Europe.

In subsequent decades, “[s]uccessful industrialization provided an economic basis for a restabilization” of patriarchal rules (Therborn 2004, 301), and the economic crisis of the 1930s and the reconstruction period following the World War II restabilized traditional gender roles further. New social rights lessened class inequality, but were organized around the male wage earner, implying disadvantages for women (Nagel 1998).

During the 1960s, women’s rights again became the subject of increased political debate. The second wave of women’s mobilization culminated in massive conflicts during the 1970s, as women’s organizations struggled for full legal, social, political, and economic equality—in the sense of equal rights, but also equal representation. In the following decades, more women entered political and economic arenas previously dominated by men, especially in Scandinavia (Karvonen and Selle 1995). In Norway, achieving equality for women gradually became a public concern and an institutionalized political field (Nagel 1995). The women’s movement became less visible as an independent political force during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the growth of “state feminism” (Hernes 1987) meant that women activists became more influential in the sense that

they could use their networks within parties and the state to advance what they considered women's interests (Blom 1999, 329–32). For example, in 1981, Gro Harlem Brundtland became Norway's first female Prime Minister, and in 1986 formed a government composed of 40 percent women for the first time.

Today, despite the progress that has been made, women continue to be disadvantaged regarding income, wealth, power, and as victims of male violence. Women with lower-class backgrounds and those belonging to ethnic minorities are the most disadvantaged. Women still do significantly more care and household work than men (Knudsen and Wærness 2006; Laperrière and Orloff 2019, 274). Change on all these issues remains slow (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019), nourishing the women's movements of today.

While there is no consensus among feminist scholars as to whether we are currently experiencing the third or the fourth wave, we are clearly in the midst of a new phase of women's mobilization and organization (Chamberlain 2017). As a result, we have seen women's marches, strikes, and heated debates across the world.

The Cultural–Ideological Dimension of the Gender Cleavage

As with all cleavages, the cultural or ideological expressions of the gender cleavage have changed over time. Even though current social movements, parties, and organizations are ideologically linked to their forerunners, it is up to each new generation to define political interests and thus the content of cleavages. In the case of the gender cleavage, women activists of different periods and backgrounds formulated new ideas and aims, in line with changes in women's conditions. Similarly, the opponents of the women's movement also adapted their views. What is considered the core of "women's interests" can thus not be defined out of context but rather has been defined historically by women as political actors. Women developed their identities, ideologies, and demands in opposition to narratives which culturally legitimized the subjugation of women.

For example, when Norwegian women struggled for the right to vote, they were met with the argument that society would collapse if women were to be admitted into the public sphere. It was claimed that the female brain was qualitatively different from the male brain and that it was women's natural role to take care of the family. Powerful men of various parties feared that giving women the vote would entail that they would neglect these duties. Women were depicted as not mature enough to take part in political matters. They would lose their femininity. As pointed out by the conservative politician and bishop Johan C. Heuch, political rights for women were considered un-Christian, for as the Bible said, women were supposed to stay quiet (Danielsen, Larsen, and Owesen 2013, 182–86).

In less extreme form, many women activists of the first wave adhered to housewife ideology, based on a view of the genders as complementary (Melby

1999). However, they often combined ideas of complementarity and equality of the genders with the aim to better the situation of women (Melby 2001, Sass forthcoming). In Norway, activists of the first wave argued that women should receive the vote, because their competencies as carers added something of value to political decision-making (Danielsen, Larsen and Ovesen 2013, 182). In the context of the early twentieth century this was a strategic ideological position that helped women gain political rights.

From the 1960s and 1970s onwards, fueled by women's increased participation in the labor market, housewife ideology gradually lost ground. The new women's movement questioned gender roles more fundamentally, demanding emancipation in all areas of life (Blom 1999, 327; Sass forthcoming). Nevertheless, the persistence of highly segregated labor markets indicates that ideas of gender complementarity still have relevance, also in Norway (Raaum 2001), and debates about women's role in the family, the economy, and in politics continue.

In addition, reproductive rights, violence against women, prostitution, and pornography, which have occupied women activists since the beginning of women's mobilization, continue to be at the heart of massive ideological conflicts. Examples are the #METOO debate or the recurring conflicts about abortion laws in many countries, which mobilize large numbers of people on both sides of the debate. In these debates, women activists have often underlined women's self-determination as opposed to the female body being a subject of male power (Danielsen, Larsen and Ovesen 2013, 305–13). Women have also questioned double moral standards, which have for example entailed the criminalization and condemnation of women in prostitution, while the male demand has been socially accepted (Aanesen 2018; Danielsen, Larsen and Ovesen 2013, 146–49).² Issues related to gender relations still generate highly polarized ideological oppositions.

Political–Organizational Articulation of the Gender Cleavage

Politically, the gender cleavage has found expression in the organizations of the women's movement, mostly outside, but also in connection to parties. The first women's organizations operated under difficult conditions, as women were excluded from the corporatist and electoral channels of decision-making. Nevertheless, many such organizations were founded across Europe during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In Norway, female university students started the discussion club *Skuld* in 1883, which in 1884 led to the establishment of the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights (*Norsk Kvinnesaksforening* [NKF]), the oldest currently existing women's rights organization in Norway (Breen 2018). Another prominent women's organization is the Norwegian Women's Public Health Association (*Norske Kvinners Sanitetsforening* [NKS]), founded in 1896 with the aim to organize women for social work and healthcare, in clear association with women's rights activism

and parts of the Liberal Party. It reached a maximum of 246,000 members in 1962 (Berven 2001, 85; Melby 2001, 46–48). Along with other women's organizations belonging to civil society, NKS was deeply involved in the shaping of the Norwegian welfare state (Berven and Selle 2001; Hernes 2013). Organizations of female teachers, nurses, or telegraphers also became an important backbone of the women's movement in many places. In Norway, female teachers organized from the 1860s on, and had a powerful national organization from 1912 to 1966 (Sass 2021, Sass forthcoming).

Organizations struggling for women's suffrage were founded in many countries. In Norway, the Association for Women's Vote (*Kvinnestemmerettsforeningen* [KSF]) was founded in 1885 and the National Association for Women's Vote (*Landskvinnestemmerettsforeningen*) in 1898. The first social democratic women's organization was founded in 1895. In 1901, this organization united with several labor unions for women, forming the Women's Association of the Labor Party (*Arbeiderpartiets Kvinneforbund*). In 1904, several women's organizations started cooperating through the Norwegian Women's National Council (*Norske Kvinners Nasjonalråd*), which was joined by the newly founded Association of Norwegian Housewives (*Norges Husmorforbund*; today *Norges Kvinne-og familieforbund*) in 1915. The latter's presence led the labor movement's women to stay out of the National Council, as they were opposed to the Association of Norwegian Housewives on the issue of housemaids' working conditions. The women's movement was thus not entirely united, but divided into social democratic, liberal, and conservative currents.

Similar divisions could be found in other Western countries, where women also were divided along class or state–church cleavages. As a result, the gender cleavage found organizational expression not only in women's organizations of the political left, but also in liberal, conservative, or religious women's organizations, which considered themselves a part of the women's movement and struggled for their conception of women's interests (see footnote 1). Nevertheless, women of different backgrounds had some common concerns resulting from their experiences as women in society. Women's organizations of different political coloring thus often tried to cooperate.

In Norway, for example, liberal women joined the labor movement's march for the vote in 1889. In 1898, even the comparatively conservative women of KSF marched side by side with socialist women (Hagemann 1999, 221). An impressive illustration of women's capacity to organize came about in 1905, when the Norwegian Parliament decided to hold a referendum about union with Sweden. Women activists suggested that women should be allowed to take part. When the men in parliament refused, they collected around 280,000 women's signatures in support of Norwegian independence. This amounted to over half of the adult female population (Danielsen, Larsen and Owesen 2013, 197–200; Melby 2001). The national cause gave a boost to women's struggle for the vote, as it united women across class and territorial boundaries in a common political effort (Melby 1999, 238–45).

During the second wave of women's mobilization, a range of new organizations were established, while some of the older organizations retreated into the background or were abandoned. In Norway, the largest organizations of the second wave were the New Feminists (*Nyfeministene*) and the Women's Front (*Kvinnefronten*), of which only the latter exists today. In addition, a range of smaller organizations organized groups of women, such as lesbian or migrant women (Blom 1999, 327–29). The new organizations had fewer members than the older organizations, but many sympathizers. They made an impact with radical demands and new methods of organization and action (Aanesen 2018; Danielsen, Larsen and Ovesen 2013, 293). In 1971, Norwegian women's capacity to cooperate across party lines was exemplified again by the "women's coup" in the municipal elections during which women of all parties came together with the aim of increasing the number of female politicians on the municipal councils. Women voters were taught how to strike out male candidates and replace them with women. The campaign succeeded to such a degree that women became a majority on the municipal councils of Oslo, Trondheim, and Asker. Their action also contributed to an increase in women on the parties' lists (Danielsen, Larsen and Ovesen 2013, 313–14).

Today, organizations of the first and of the second wave continue to organize women, and sometimes also male sympathizers of women's rights, in many European countries. New organizations and even parties have also been established, such as the Feminist Initiative (*Feministisk initiativ*) founded in Sweden in 2005. Some of the older political parties increasingly identify as "feminist" and represent a channel for women's rights activism. Most parties now seem to feel compelled to position themselves in relation to the gender cleavage.

Opponents of the women's movement have often been conservatives or Christian democrats, but could historically also be found among liberals, social democrats, or union activists, illustrating the crosscutting nature of the gender cleavage. Importantly, the gender cleavage has never consisted simply of an opposition of men against women. Even though women's movements of different times and places have been made up mostly of women, they have always had the support of some men. At the same time, women have been included in organizations that oppose women's rights. In many countries, the opposition to the women's movement can today be linked to the growth of anti-feminist organizations and parties of the far right (see below).

The Gender Cleavage in Relation to Other Cleavages

To sum up, gender has long been a politically divisive issue of significant importance, which has structural, cultural, and organizational dimensions. Conflicts based on gender relations should thus be considered a cleavage of its own, irreducible to any of the other cleavages. While the gender cleavage has old roots, we also believe that it is becoming increasingly salient today, linked

to some extent to the development of new parties and oppositions, a point to be examined in more detail in future work. Here we would like to underline that the extent to which the gender cleavage becomes salient is related to the cleavage structure.

As the analysis above suggests, there has never been a completely “united feminist movement” representing “all women” (cf. [Siim and Borchorst 2005](#), 101), because the gender cleavage has been intertwined with other cleavages. Different groups of women have had different conceptions of women’s rights, based on other aspects of their identities such as class, religion, or ethnicity. As a result, women’s movements have differed in character and strength. When women’s movements are fragmented, the gender cleavage becomes less salient than in cases where women’s movements are comparatively united. It is therefore necessary to analyze the relationships between the gender cleavage and other cleavages.

For example, in the United States, the gender cleavage has long been intertwined with ethnic and class cleavages, which have politically divided white and nonwhite women of different classes ([Junn and Masuoka 2020](#); [McCall and Orloff 2017](#)). In Germany, the Catholic women’s movement has long been a force of its own and remains firmly integrated into Christian democracy ([Illemann 2016](#); [Sack 1998](#)). The dominance of the state–church cleavage has thus meant that the gender cleavage has been less salient than in Scandinavia, where the women’s movement has been comparatively more united and influential. In Norway, the early liberal movement and later, the social democratic movement, cooperated with the women’s movement. Center–periphery, class, and gender cleavages overlapped to some extent in a way that strengthened the women’s movement ([Sass 2021](#), [Sass forthcoming](#)). While the gender cleavage was not among the most salient cleavages in either Norway, Germany, or the United States, it nevertheless played a relevant role for the development of cross-interest coalitions and welfare policies in all these cases. How the gender cleavage is intertwined with other cleavages in different places, and has been so historically, is an empirical question worthy of further investigation.

Welfare and Gender Regimes

The literature on the development of welfare states was initially dominated by the belief that variations in welfare state regimes were a result of “differences in the strength and coherence of working class parties and trade unions,” which were predominantly male ([Flora and Alber 1981](#), 43). Cross-cutting “religious, linguistic and/or ethnic cleavages” were only considered relevant in so far as they could “deflect . . . attention and support from class issues and retard . . . the development of welfare states” ([Flora and Alber 1981](#), 43). Inequalities in how welfare policies affect the genders and women’s

central role in the production and distribution of welfare were ignored. Nor was there much interest in women's activism regarding welfare or in the reactions of male holders of power to challenges posed by women's organizations.

This also holds for Esping-Andersen's (1990) study on *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*. However, this study sparked a theoretical debate that gave rise to a rich comparative literature on welfare and gender regimes (Korpi 2000; Laperrière and Orloff 2019; Lewis 1992; O'Connor 1996; Orloff 1993, 2009; Sainsbury 1994, 1999). In response to feminist criticism, Esping-Andersen (2009, 2016) developed his typology to include gender to a greater degree. For example, he analyzed the "women-friendliness" of welfare states in terms of whether they provide childcare and child leave entitlements (Esping-Andersen 2009, 2016; Sümer 2009).

In Esping-Andersen's work, the Nordic welfare states are seen as contributing most to gender equality, fitting with the observation that women's movements have been comparatively more influential here than in other Western countries. However, Esping-Andersen is not concerned with the women's movement, but is mainly interested in studying the effects of the changes in gender relations on welfare. Although feminist scholars in this field have done more to recognize women as actors, this literature has focused more on how regime types produce different consequences in terms of gender equality than on how women as activists have contributed historically to the development of these regimes.³

More specifically, the literature on welfare and gender regimes has focused most on what Rokkan (1999, 132) has termed the *redistribution phase*, the final of four phases of development of the modern territorial state, connected to the establishment of social citizenship. Rokkan (1999), however, focused more on the three antecedent phases: initial *state-building* by the elites, subsequent *nation-building*, and increasing *mobilization and participation* of the population in movements aiming at the institutionalization of civil and political rights (Kuhnle 1983, 11). Going this far back in time is valuable, as historical legacies have shaped welfare states to a significant degree. However, the women's movement is largely missing from Rokkan's (1999) and Rokkan-inspired analyses of political mobilization during these earlier phases (Flora and Alber 1981; Flora and Heidenheimer 1981; Kuhnle 1983).

In other words, we are arguing for the inclusion of a focus on gender relations and gender cleavage in the study of welfare states' historical roots. Different types of welfare states were shaped in part by the organizational activities and cultural demands of women, with lasting consequences.⁴

A gendered version of Rokkanian cleavage theory could therefore prove analytically fruitful for comparative-historical, case-oriented work on women's mobilization in relation to specific rights and policies, on their coalition-making, on the women's movements' impact on the development of mass democracies, and on the establishment of citizenship in different forms. Such studies should not conceptualize the women's movement as an isolated entity,

but should focus on the connections between this movement and other movements, with the aim to explore how cleavages were interrelated and how this influenced coalition- and policymaking. This would help to understand why and how women activists were integrated into political projects in different places, and how this contributed to the development of welfare state regimes.

Gender and Voting

The literature on gender and voting has also tackled issues related to our discussion. A quick look at national elections in Sweden, Norway, Germany, or the United States suffices to see that there are differences between the voting behavior of men and women (see [figure 1](#)). This gap has become more pronounced in recent years. Much of the literature on the gender gap in voting has attempted to reduce this gap to other variables by focusing on the effect of socioeconomic positions of men and women, including women's higher level of education, of attitudes towards immigration, populism, and the like. These attempts have not been entirely successful, especially regarding the parties of the far right ([Campbell 2017](#); [Spierings and Zaslove 2017](#)). Men are more likely to vote for far-right or right-wing populist parties, independent of other factors, while women are turning increasingly to the political left ([Abendschön and Steinmetz 2014](#); [Campbell 2017](#); [Immerzeel, Coffé and van der Lippe 2015](#); [Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010](#), 110–33). As argued by [Campbell \(2017, 8\)](#), future research on the gender gap should try to tackle the topic of gender equality more directly by measuring parties' positions on this.

It has also been shown that issues such as childcare, healthcare, elderly care, or education are more salient for women than for men independent of socioeconomic factors or position on a left/right axis and that women, including conservative women, support higher social spending than men ([Campbell 2017](#); [Campbell and Childs 2015](#); [Finseraas, Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2012](#)). Even though, as discussed above, the interests of women are likely to be defined differently by women activists of different times, places, and backgrounds, it seems that there are sufficient similarities in women's life experiences to produce these outcomes. This supports our argument that gender conflicts should not be reduced entirely to other cleavages.

Nevertheless, we are aware that other cleavages influence women's voting behavior to a significant extent. For example, women tended to vote for conservative and Christian parties more often than men and continue to do so in many countries. This is related to women's higher religiosity and more frequent church-attendance, as well as to their historical dependence on marriage and lower participation in the workforce ([Duncan 2017](#)). In Germany, where the state–church cleavage has been dominant, women's support for Christian Democracy has been of great importance for political outcomes (see [figure 1](#)). In the United States, a majority of Evangelical, white women vote

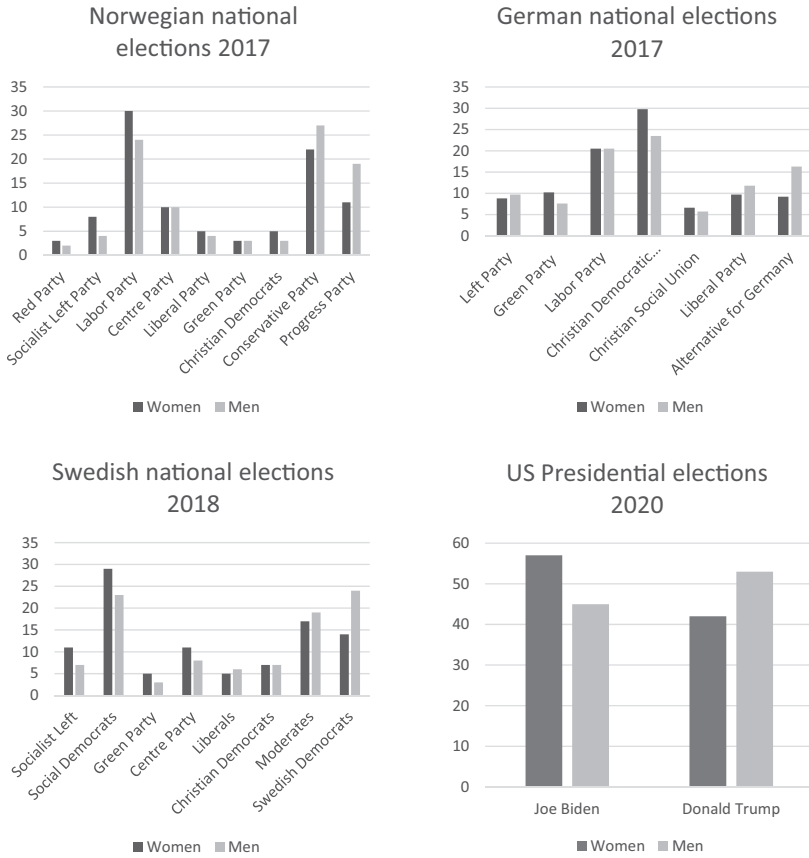


Figure 1 National elections in Norway, Germany, Sweden, and the United States, 2017–2020, party support by gender, in percent (This figure is only meant to illustrate that gender matters somehow for the outcome of elections. Quantitative and qualitative analysis is required to identify and understand differences in voting decisions between groups of women and men and how these differences may be related to the cleavage structure.)

Sources: Representative election surveys published by Statistics Norway, Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), SVT VALU, Edison Research.

for the Republican Party, while women of color tend to support the Democratic Party (Junn and Masuoka 2020, 1140; McCall and Orloff 2017). These observations do not discount the argument that gender is a relevant factor. Why women are, on average, more religious than men are, and how women’s religiosity interrelates with their life experiences, their class and ethnic background, and their political interests are questions that could be explored in more detail.

There would also be much to gain from examining the rise of right-wing populist, neoconservative, and far-right parties from a gender cleavage perspective. One of the defining features of right-wing populism is its anti-feminist agenda (Akkerman 2015; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). From this perspective, the far right can be considered a countermovement to the women's movement and to changes in gender relations. A substantial minority of men and a smaller minority of women seem to be attracted by the anti-feminist stance of right-wing populism. Feminist research has tackled the increasing polarization over gender issues in recent years, examining how far-right movements mobilize against organized feminism, or "genderism," which is framed as an anti-democratic, colonizing actor of neoliberal globalization (e.g., Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Rawłuszko 2021; Vaggione and Machado 2020). For example, Biroli and Caminotti (2020, 1) conclude that "[a]lthough conflicts concerning women and LGBTQ rights are not new, only recently have they become a dividing line in the public identities of parties, politicians, and candidates" in Latin America. The growth of far-right parties and movements could therefore to some extent be seen as an indication of the increasing salience of the gender cleavage today.

Finally, we take issue with the claim that the gender cleavage is nonexistent as long as its effect on voting or the party system is limited (Aardal and Valen 1989, 250–75; Brooks, Nieuwebeerta, and Manza 2006, 106), as it is based on a misguided conception of cleavages. Certainly, other cleavages may have been more salient and influential for party formation and elections. With some exceptions, women have not organized in separate parties or election lists, but "only" in women's organizations outside of or within parties (but see Cowell-Meyers, Evans and Shin 2020). To understand why parties have not been the primary channel for women's initial mobilization, we should consider that the formation of the party system occurred at a time when women had no political rights. Until at least the 1970s, party politics remained dominated by men. How women's initial exclusion from mass democracy has shaped their ways of organizing and political self-conceptions in the long term and to what extent political parties today remain more attuned to the interests and identities of men, or increasingly represent women's interests, is another topic worthy of further investigation.

Conclusion

This article has advanced two main arguments. First, it suggested the continued relevance of Rokkanian cleavage theory. To understand the character of welfare regimes, one must consider the coalitions that were crafted when policies came into being (Esping-Andersen 1990, 30; Manow and van Kersbergen 2009, 14–23). Rokkanian cleavage theory is a useful tool for this purpose, because it widens the view beyond *cross-class* coalitions to include

other types of *cross-interest* coalitions based on, for example, religion, geography, or, as argued here, gender. In contrast, theories pertaining exclusively to material interests or class are not entirely capable of explaining how large hegemonic alliances, such as the social democratic alliances in Scandinavia or the Christian democratic alliance in Germany, have been forged and upheld. These alliances have always included other organizations in addition to parties, which is why Rokkanian theory should not be reduced to the realm of electoral research.

Second, gender should be recognized as a cleavage of its own. There would be much to gain for welfare state research from more comparative-historical work, which considers gender as a relevant cleavage. The role of women activists in the shaping of welfare states has received too little attention (Berven and Selle 2001). Many women's organizations have given voice to women's interests and have been involved in the development of welfare and education regimes (Bock and Thane 1991; Hobson and Lindholm 1997; Koven and Michel 1993; Skocpol 1992). Hernes (2013, 378) concludes, for example, that Norwegian women's organizations created the "institutional foundations for the Norwegian welfare state" by shaping childcare, nursing homes, and other welfare services (see also Wærness 1998). Women's civil society organizations, labor unions and professional organizations of women, women's organizations within parties, the radical women's associations of the second wave and feminist organizations founded during the current wave are all examples for how women activists have attempted to shape political development (Halsaa, RoseNeil, and Sümer 2012). Today, the women's movements' most obstinate opponents belong to the far right, for whom the struggle against so-called gender ideology has become a cornerstone of political orientation (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Rawłuszko 2021). Arguably, as women are trying to complete their "incomplete revolution" (Esping-Andersen 2009), the gender cleavage is only becoming more salient. Future research on the roots, recent development, and interrelationships of cleavages should therefore take the gender cleavage into consideration.

Notes

1. We use the term "women's movement" instead of "feminist movement," implying that we refer to organizations composed mainly of and led by women, based on their shared identity as women. This term includes, but is not limited to explicitly feminist organizations, and recognizes that women's identities are context dependent (Beckwith 2013). It is a more historically correct term, as the term "feminism" originated much later.

2. In Sweden and Norway, women in prostitution were decriminalized in 1918 and 1899, and buyers were criminalized in 1998 and 2008, respectively (Sass 2017).

3. Important exceptions to this are the literature on maternalist politics and other contributions focusing on the impact of women on welfare state development (see [Berven and Selle 2001](#); [Bock and Thane 1991](#); [Hobson and Lindholm 1997](#); [Koven and Michel 1993](#); [Misra 2003](#); [Sainsbury 2001](#); [Skocpol 1992](#); among others).

4. We are not the first to suggest this. [Berven and Selle \(2001\)](#) argue much in the same way and provide useful insights into the case of Norway. Other good examples for studies of this kind are [Koven and Michel \(1993\)](#), [Misra \(2003\)](#), [Sainsbury \(2001\)](#), or [Skocpol \(1992\)](#). We merely mean to say that there remains much to be explored here.

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