

Reviews

Oddbjørn Knutsen: Social Structure, Value Orientations and Party Choice in Western Europe

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Social structure, social classes, stratification and values are undoubtedly frequent topics in the social sciences. Many scholars have tried to describe how social structure and value orientations are related to political preferences and voting behavior. Pioneering research focusing on the explanation of electoral/voting behavior analyzing the U.S. and Western European countries was typically based on official electoral statistics. Experiencing a rising interest since the 1950s, these analyses have gradually expanded to other European countries. This expansion, accompanied by new levels of methodological rigor and analytical sophistication, continues up to this day. Within this research, the connection between class position and voting preferences has been a central topic. In the last decades, however, some argue that class voting has become less significant and dichotomous left-right party preferences have been declining in the advanced post-industrial era. Moreover, there have been considerable changes in value orientation, which have significant impact on party choice as well.

This book is one of the latest monographs dealing with these issues. Its Norwegian author, Oddbjørn Knutsenn, has been long engaged in research on politics, political cleavages, voting behavior and value changes, especially in Western Europe. Knutsenn's newest study is a lengthy empirical analysis using a comparative perspective of 18 Western European countries, based on European Value Survey (2008 – 2010) data. The ambition of the book is to provide answers to three key questions: *1. How do social structure and value orientation influence party choice in advanced industrial societies? 2. To what extent is the impact of social structure transmitted via value orientation? 3. To what extent is the impact of value orientation on party choice a causal effect when controlling for socio-structural variables?*

The book consists of seven very clearly focused chapters. The author familiarizes the reader with the research problems, the theoretical conceptualizations and the methodological basis of his empirical analysis in the introduction and in the first chapter. One of the main aims of the study is to reveal what kind of impact social structure has on party choice when compared to the industrial society era. Notions of stable alignment, dealignment and realignment in respect to change in electoral behavior are discussed. Stable alignment is characterized by a persisting significant impact of social structure on party preferences. Dealignment represents the declining impact of social structure on party choice and a decline of the voter's party identification according to their location within the social structure, while realignment stands for a gradual replacement of old structural cleavages by new social cleavages in post-industrial societies.

According to the author, transformation from industrial to advanced, post-industrial societies brought a shift in value orientations and political preferences which served as a new base for political preferences. According to Knutsen, value orientation shifts are supported by Ingelhart's well-known concept of a Silent Revolution, focusing on the

dichotomy of post-materialist and materialist values. The rise of post-materialist value orientations is considered the major determinant for new political attitudes and party choices. Therefore, e.g. post-materialist value orientations are seen as the explanation for the preference of higher-educated people from the new middle-class for New Left parties. In a similar example of value dichotomy, Knutsen refers to Kitschelt's libertarian-authoritarian dimension, where the economic left-right conflict plays the main role.

Knutsen further focuses on the introduction of the EVS dataset and describes party systems – concentrated into party families in accordance to their regional affiliation in Western Europe. He aggregates the analyzed countries into the following clusters: *Nordic countries* (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden), *Central Western region* (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland), *The Islands* (Britain, Ireland), *Southern region* (France, Greece, Spain, Italy, Portugal). Political parties are grouped into party families based on criteria such as name, historical tradition and, partly, according to their membership in transnational organizations. This grouping serves as a tool which enables Knutsen to organize and compare the results and position of the parties in 18 countries as well as a way to examine the relationship between socio-structural variables and party preferences. He identifies the following party groups: Communist, Left socialist, Social democrats, Green, Ethnic/regional, Agrarian, Christian, Conservative, Radical right, and other parties.

The third chapter demonstrates the author's choice and operationalization of socio-structural variables and value orientations. The empirical analysis based on socio-structural variables (social class, religious denomination, urban-rural residence and region) employs the Lipset-Rokkan party cleavage model, containing Old Politics value orientations, which is considered a traditional explanation of political party preferences in industrial societies. Analyzing New Politics value preferences, Knutsen relies on Inglehart's research on materialist and post-materialist value orientations. Based on the chosen theoretical approaches, Knutsen identifies two main dimensions of value orientations – economic and cultural. He further identifies five value dimensions, representing the Old and New Politics value orientations, which are examined in connection with social structure and party choice. The relationships between value orientations, social structure and party choice are then examined using the following dimensions: Old Politics orientations (religious vs. secular values, economic left-right values) and New Politics orientations (libertarian vs. authoritarian values, environmental orientations, immigration orientations). Based on previous studies, Knutsen empirically verifies socio-structural predictors of different value preferences. The religious – secular dichotomy is primarily associated with the religious denomination variable as well as with gender and age. Social class and household income are the strongest predictors of economic left-right values, while there is a very low correlation between environmental values and social structural variables. In relation to libertarian-authoritarian values, most variance is explained by the education and social class variables. Less educated people with lower income, living in rural areas have much more negative attitudes towards immigration.

In the next chapters of the book, Knutsen (in the chapter “Party Choice and Social Structure” with Peter E. Langsaether) verifies several hypotheses about the relationship

between social structure/value orientations and party choice. The author's research questions are first and foremost focused on the strength of the correlation between socio-structural variables and party choice in a comparative perspective for all party families. In connection with the location of the party families, Knutsen reveals how the impact of social structure differs and how socio-structural variables contribute to the structural polarization of voting preferences within the examined regions. The impact of New and Old Politics orientations is examined as well. Finally, a comparison of the importance of social structure and value orientations is provided.

The results of the study confirm a significant impact of social structure on party preferences and a persistent connection between social position and voting preferences – i.e. a stable alignment. The most important socio-structural variables explaining party choice are social class and religion. Despite the fact that women tend to support leftist parties more, gender seems to have the smallest explanation power compared to other socio-structural variables. With regard to value orientation in a comparative perspective, the impact of Old Politics on party choice seems to be marginally stronger than the impact on New Politics. Knutsen's results confirm that both Old and New Politics value orientations have a significant connection with party choice, first and foremost in the most advanced Western societies with a multiparty system, where individuals' values and political issues are the key drivers of political preferences.

The clearly structured organization of Knutsen's book serves the reader well in guiding him through the conducted analyses. The theoretical base corresponds well with the study's intentions and the choice of methodological approaches is justified and supported by a relevant literature overview. Many important and relevant findings are presented which may contribute to the current research of political behavior. In the empirical portion of the study, a relatively extensive, multivariate analysis is employed in the analysis of the 18 Western European countries. On the other hand, Knutsen's analysis is limited to modeling each country separately, and does not employ more advanced hierarchical modeling, which could test for the impact of country-level variables. In addition, the plentitude of empirical findings in the book is sometimes overwhelming. Particularly when they are concentrated in a descriptive way without an explanatory background provided for the findings presented. However, one could say that the explanatory function might not have been the author's intention. Furthermore, when it comes to the book structure, some readers may find it too thesis-like.

While the book is one of the newest publications in the area, using the 2008 EVS Study, the author relies on relatively old data. The survey was conducted in 2008 after the great global recession, which probably had a profound impact on values and party preferences, but these may not be consistent with the present conditions 10 years later. Despite these critical notes, the monograph can serve as an inspiration for further research on value orientation/party preferences. The book also proves valuable for young researchers entering the field who want to become more familiar not only with the theory, but first and foremost, with the methodological framework of this topic.

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