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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

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[1] Lipset and Rokkan 1967.
[2] Gould 1999.
[3] Gould 1999, 3.

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*,[4] 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: Policymaking and Governing Coalitions in Europe and Israel*, where he acknowledges his "great intellectual debt" to Lipset and Rokkan.[5] 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.[6] 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."[7] 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."[8]

In using such formulations, Luebbert understated the roles of specific people. Indeed, though Luebbert did hint that choices were involved,[9] 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.[10]

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 coalitional outcome."[11] 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 Interwar Europe*,[12] 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.[13] The transition from elite to mass politics was the critical juncture *par excellence*; choices made as the franchise expanded would shape party systems,[14] coalition formation,[15] and even political regimes.[16]

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 religious

[4] Collier and Collier 1991.

[5] Luebbert 1986, xiii.

[6] Luebbert 1986, 53-60.

[7] Luebbert 1986, 53.

[8] Luebbert 1986, 54.

[9] For instance, he stated that not all societal cleavages became lines of party opposition in every society. Which cleavages became politically relevant, he argued, "has depended on their relative intensity in the society at large, the historical sequences of mass mobilization, and considerations of organizational and electoral strategies, especially the payoffs of alliances and mergers and the costs of splits and lost support" (Luebbert 1986, 55). In this passage, 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 deterministically as depending centrally on the skills of party leaders and/or somewhat idiosyncratic characteristics of specific countries.

[10] Luebbert 1986, 55.

[11] Luebbert 1986, 246.

[12] Luebbert 1991.

[13] Collier and Lipset 1991, v.

[14] Lipset and Rokkan 1967.

[15] Luebbert 1986.

[16] Luebbert 1991.

cleavage."[17] He gave this advice just weeks before his death—a shock to everyone, as he was just 32 years old when he drowned in a white-water canoeing accident. His colleague Giuseppe Di Palma shepherded Luebbert's nearly completed manuscript to publication; he also became my advisor. Collier and Lipset wrote the preface to the resulting book.

In following the advice that Luebbert had given me, it became my task to develop a systematic account of how conflicts over religion yielded different political dynamics, once mass-based political competition had emerged. The proposed study opened the possibility of reinforcing the conclusions of Lipset and Rokkan, as well as of Luebbert, that liberal movements could gain or lose supporters depending on the configuration of religious cleavages. At the same time, it might offer a rival perspective—for example, potentially challenging the argument that liberals took religious cleavages as political givens that they themselves could not influence.

My efforts to frame a research project on religion in European political history coincided with new uncertainties in the discipline of political science. Long-standing accounts of liberalism as a movement of rising middle classes seemed wedded to modernization theory. Such an approach came under strong attack in the 1970s and 1980s due to several shortcomings, among them failing to explain dictatorships in advanced societies such as Germany, Italy, Argentina, and Brazil. What could explain the evolution of liberalism in Europe? The literature no longer offered a convincing answer.

In the realm of real-world politics, moreover, religion had in fact not faded away, as naïve secularization theory predicted. By the 1990s, for example, Islamic clergy commanded a revolutionary regime in Iran; the Catholic Church helped to open paths to democracy in Iberia, Latin America, Poland, and the Philippines; and Christian leaders in the United States crafted a new alliance with a resurgent Republican party. The political relevance of religion had thus been recast in many ways, including the reality that religious movements made alliances with both democrats and dictators.

In this context, my new project on early episodes of liberalization promised novel insights into how religion shaped modern politics. The critical junctures approach changed the question from "which factor is most important?" to "what happened first?", and "with what consequences?" Lipset and Rokkan's emphasis on the sequencing of formative moments opened the way to trace the impact of religion on politics over time.

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 parties in the 1870s and after, the middle-classes and peasants weighed in as voters or potential voters. Liberal reform now challenged not just the role of a church in the highest offices of the state, but also clerical authority over other institutions, such as the education of young people and property ownership.

The key was identifying who supported expanding (or reducing) the scope of clerical authority over non-religious institutions. My research supported a fine-grained analysis of how particular political leaders and institutions shaped overall outcomes. Nonetheless, the overall style of the analysis shared the determinism of Luebbert's work.

In selecting cases for my project, like many scholars in the critical juncture tradition, I set forth scope conditions that extended beyond a single country case, yet restricted the analysis to a small number of cases that were sufficiently similar. The analysis focused on liberal reform movements in nineteenth-century Europe, and especially on countries at the middle of a spectrum, where liberal reform was neither a foregone conclusion nor completely implausible. Thus, I examined Switzerland, Belgium, France, and Germany as "cases at the center of the distribution of liberal success and failure."[18]

Though restricted to these four cases, I was convinced that the study was also relevant to understanding the more prominent cases of success, notably the United Kingdom, as well as yielding insight into countries where the prospects for liberal reform in the nineteenth century were dim, as in Southern and Eastern Europe. The case selection departed from the tendency in the literature on liberalism to focus on just one country at a time, or, when comparisons were made, to emphasize 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 understood 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 governing institutions of some states, but not others. Would-be

[17] Luebbert 1991, 6.

[18] Gould 1999, 9.

Figure 1: Institutions, Reform Dynamics, and Outcomes: The Cases of Germany, France, Belgium, and Switzerland

	Cases			
	Germany	France	Belgium	Switzerland
Elite Phase				
State and Church Institutions at Onset of Liberal Reform	Non-liberal, incorporated churches	Non-liberal, incorporated church	Non-liberal, church not incorporated	Non-liberal, churches not incorporated
Liberal Policy toward Religious Authority	Attack Protestant & Catholic	Attack Catholic	Promote Catholic	Preserve Protestant & attack Catholic
Clergy Response	Protestant & Catholic opposition	Catholic opposition	Catholic support	Protestant support & Catholic opposition
Liberal Reform Outcome	*Failed reform*	*Failed reform*	*Successful reform*	*Successful reform*
Mass Phase				
Institutions at Onset of Second Liberal Reform	Monarchs sovereign	Emperor sovereign	Parliament sovereign	Parliament sovereign
Liberal Policy toward Religious Authority	Preserve Protestant & attack Catholic	Attack Catholic	Attack Catholic	Preserve Protestant & attack Catholic
Clergy Response	Protestant toleration & Catholic opposition	Catholic opposition	Catholic opposition	Protestant support & Catholic opposition
Provincial Middle-Class and Peasant Response	Protestants tolerate liberals & Catholics oppose liberals	Catholics support liberals	Catholics oppose liberals	Protestants support liberals & Catholics oppose liberals
Party Outcome	*Weak liberal parties: co-opted defeat of liberals*	*Strong liberal parties: victory of liberals (contested)*	*Weak liberal parties: conditional defeat of liberals*	*Strong liberal parties: supremacy of liberals*
Regime Outcome	*Authoritarian regime*	*Constitutional democracy (contested)*	*Constitutional democracy*	*Constitutional democracy*

Source: Gould 1999, 20.

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 reformers.

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-

gium 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 authoritarians 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, but their significance had been ignored in assessments of German liberalism. From the point of view of my book, these ill-fated efforts showed that liberals knew that religion could be their ally only once it was differentiated from the state.

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.

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