

Maarit Felicitas Ströbele

What Does Suburbia Vote for?

Changed Settlement Patterns and Political Preferences
in Three European Countries



Politik und Demokratie in den kleineren Ländern Europas

Politics and Governance in the Smaller European Democracies

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Volume 14

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Nomos

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Zurich, Spring 2017

Abstract

Nowadays, a significant share of the European population lives in places that could be defined as suburbs. However, when it comes to questions concerning the built environment and the political sphere, a large part of political research only distinguishes between urban and rural, even though metropolitan regions now include a multitude of different places with their own characteristics and associated political beliefs and interests.

This study seeks to answer the question of whether there is such a thing as suburban political preference in Western Europe, and if so, how such a phenomenon is related to political cleavages associated with geographically bound interests. What is the role of the classic urban-rural cleavage today? To answer these questions, the study combines approaches from urban geography and political science to explain how the political preferences between core city and suburban voters differ from a cross-national comparative perspective.

Urban-suburban divergences in political preference are examined considering the close relationship between the built environment and patterns of daily life. The study demonstrates that urban-suburban divergences are substantially based on diverging patterns of daily use of spaces, as well as different lifestyles within the middle class. Two key aspects are relevant: the family pattern and the use of public services. First, family patterns are clearly related to the building density of the place of residence. It is postulated that in less densely constructed and populated municipalities, the organisation of daily life is easier in a breadwinner-housekeeper pattern, which is in turn linked to conservative political preferences. Second, urban inhabitants tend to rely more on public services than suburbanites, whereas right-wing conservative parties tend to favour the limitation of public services.

The hypotheses are examined in three country case studies (Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) combining historical overviews of the national histories of suburbanisation with statistical analyses of individual political preference. The findings prove that political preferences are indeed related to daily life and place of residence. The analyses mostly show a suburban tendency towards the conservative side of the political spectrum, as compared to inner city inhabitants, and show that suburban political preference patterns are closer to rural than to core city patterns. In a wider context, the study aims to broaden the understanding of political

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cleavages in European democracies, particularly the urban-rural cleavage, highlighting the relationship between one of the largest changes in the European landscape over the 20th century and the inhabitants' political preferences.

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List of Abbreviations

BBR	Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung (German Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning)
BBSR	Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development, Germany)
BDP	Bürgerlich-demokratische Partei, Parti bourgeois-démocratique (PBD), Partito borghese democratico (PBD) (Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland)
BFS	Bundesamt für Statistik (Swiss Federal Statistical Office)
CATI	Computer assisted telephone interviewing
CBS	Centraal Bureau van Statistiek (Dutch National Statistical Office)
CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democrat Party, Netherlands)
CDU/CSU	German Christian Democrats: Christlich-demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union, Germany) and Christlich-Soziale Union (Christian Social Union, Bavaria, Germany)
CU	ChristenUnie (Dutch Christian Democratic Party)
CVP	Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei, Parti démocrate-chrétien (PDC), Partito popolare democratico svizzero (PPD) (Christian Democrat People's Party, Switzerland)
D66	Politieke Partij Democraten 66 (Democrats 66, Dutch Social-Liberal Party)
Die Linke	German Left Party
e.g.	For example (exempli gratia)
ESS	European Social Survey
f.	And the following page (folio)
FDP	Freisinnig-demokratische Partei FDP.Die Liberalen, Parti Radical-démocratique (PRD), Partito Libero Radicale (PLR) (Liberal Democrat Party, Switzerland) <i>or</i> Freie Demokratische Partei (Liberal Democrat Party, Germany)
ff.	And the following pages

List of Abbreviations

GLP	Grünliberale Partei, Parti vert'libéral (PVL), Partito verde-liberale (PVL) (Green Liberal Party, Switzerland)
GPS	Grüne Partei der Schweiz, Parti écologiste suisse/Les Verts (PES), Partito Ecologista Svizzero/I Verdi (PES) (Swiss Green Party)
GroenLinks	Dutch Green Party
Grüne	Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen (Green Party, Germany)
i.e.	That is (id est)
LISS	Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (A Dutch social survey)
MNL	Multinomial Logistic Regression
NS	National Socialist or National Socialism
OLS	Ordinary least square regression
p.	Page
pp.	Pages
PvdA	Partij van de Arbeid (Social Democrat Party, Netherlands)
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, right-wing populist party, Netherlands)
SHP	Swiss Household Panel
SOEP	German Socio-Economic Panel
SP	Sozialdemokratische Partei, Parti Socialiste (PS), Partito Socialista (PS) (Social Democrat Party, Switzerland)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (German Social Democrat Party)
SVP	Schweizerische Volkspartei, Union Démocratique du Centre (UDC), Unione Democratica del Centro (UDC) (Swiss People's Party)
Vinex	Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening Extra (Fourth Memorandum Spatial Planning Extra, policy briefing note by the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment)
VROM	Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer (Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment)
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Liberal Democrat Party, Netherlands)

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1 Introduction

1.1 A first impression: Connecting suburbs and political ideas?

Imagine travelling around Europe – no matter whether by car or train – and looking out of the window at the landscape. Rural areas still make up a considerable proportion of many western European countries. However, the more one approaches a city, the more the landscape is dominated by scattered buildings: single family houses, larger apartment blocks, garages, office buildings, factories, shops, shopping centres, and supermarkets. The once clear boundary between the countryside with its fields, forests, gardens, and villages on the one hand, and the more densely populated and built-up cities on the other is increasingly blurred and the built-up areas are expanding. A large part of the European landscape is therefore characterised by a sprawl of buildings that includes former village centres and small towns and creates a large urban fringe.

This type of area, neither strictly urban nor rural, and bearing characteristics of both, has become perhaps the most characteristic form of settlement in many European countries since the early twentieth century. These places, the suburban areas, are the result of a development known as suburbanisation and have specific features that set them apart from the cities, small towns and villages of the past. Moreover, suburban areas are the type of built-up landscape that dominate many places where Europeans live, work, and grow up – and go to the polling stations. Hence, the question arises of whether this social and spatial development also has repercussions in the political sphere. Are suburban electoral preferences “urbanised”, i.e. similar to those of core cities, or might suburban areas show electoral preferences more closely related to those of rural regions?

This study examines whether suburbanisation has changed not only the physical, but also the political landscape of European countries. Taking up approaches from political and social geography and political science, especially the concept of political cleavages, this comparative study explores more deeply the divergences of voting behaviour in suburbs, core cities and the countryside in three European countries: the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland.

The research questions were answered with a combination of quantitative data analysis and overviews of the intertwining of urban and political

history. The analysis of the political history of suburbanisation is a crucial element in the explanation of certain similarities in the political preferences of urban, suburban, and rural inhabitants across the three countries. The countries were selected because of certain similarities in urban as well as political structures that make them suitable for comparative analyses. Urban planning and development (and, therefore, suburbanisation) are closely related to concepts of society. These concepts in turn develop out of different discourses on society promoted by different (political) interest groups and people living in different types of residential environment. The analyses show that the reasons for divergent political preferences examined in this study – the dependence on public services, transportation behaviour, family structure and a local image – are all connected to daily life experiences in different places.

1.2 Background

In Europe, the Greek *polis*, the roman *urbs*, the renaissance city states, the large cities of the early modern period and of 19th century industrialisation were not only settlement forms of their time; they were the centres of states (or city-states), and they are linked to a long tradition of political ideas, movements and forms of government. The inherently political tradition of the city thus lies at the base of the puzzle that is addressed in this study. (Large) Cities, as already lined out by Georg Simmel (1903) and later by Louis Wirth (1938) in the seminal article “Urbanism as a Way of Life”, which refers to earlier sociologists and the Chicago School of urban sociology, are places with a particular social structure and social dynamics that differ from rural areas.

Suburbanisation, the low-density urbanisation of the countryside, has been one of the main trends in European urbanisation since the end of the Second World War. It has mainly been studied in the fields of urban planning, history and geography and, as we will see, there is also a body of suburbanisation-related literature in the social and political sciences. Social science research concerned with suburbanisation can be subsumed under three different headings: 1) a public policy and institutional structure approach, which is concerned with the design of governance structures for urbanised areas; 2) a strand of literature examining local lifestyles, citizen participation and local democracy, mostly case studies; and 3), studies on voting behaviour and individual political preferences in relation to geographical space and setting. In this study, the literature con-

cerned with electoral preferences and geographical space is particularly important, as are case studies on suburban or urban lifestyles.

Most of the social science literature on suburbanisation is concerned with the situation in the United States, but increasingly, European social scientists have begun to examine suburbanisation and metropolitanisation. In the United States, a majority of the population now lives in suburbs and the share of the population living in suburban locations is not much smaller in Western Europe.¹ However, there are major differences between the histories of European and American suburbanisation that are elaborated on further in this study. Put briefly, apart from the smaller scale of European urban regions, another main difference is found in the history of European suburbs. The large expansion of European suburbanisation occurred later than in the United States and was often more regulated through planning laws both due to the scarce availability of space in most countries and due to pre-existing laws of landscape protection and growth limitation. European suburbanisation more often incorporated old towns and villages with their own traditions into the suburban fabric. These older traditions still have important consequences both for the structure of the built environment and society itself in European metropolitan regions. In contrast to the United States, the cases of building from scratch are rather rare in Europe. Therefore, this study takes into account the peculiarities of European metropolitan regions.

With a majority of the European population now living in urbanised regions,² it became possible to study the political consequences of urbanisation, but a large part of the literature on this subject is still mainly concerned with the changes in the differences between urban and rural zones.³ A considerable number of European urban dwellers, however, does not live in dense cities, but in places that can rather be classified as suburban. These settings share a part of their characteristics with more classic urban settings, but they can also be regarded as something distinct. According to Eurostat, in 2001, 28.2 per cent of western Europeans lived in suburban areas with a medium density of 160 inhabitants/km², and 33 per cent of western Europeans lived in less condensed areas with a medium density of

1 On the differences between American and European cities see e.g. Strauss (1976) and Couch et al. (2007: Chapter 1).

2 According to UN data over 70% in 2005, www.esa.un.org (12/05/2008).

3 See e.g. Bagnasco and Le Galès (2000); Burchell, Downs, McCann, and Mukherji (2005); Castells (1983); Couch et al. (2007); van den Berg, Drewett, Klaassen, Rossi, and Vijverberg (1982).

127 inhabitants/km², which are still distinct from rural areas in a more traditional sense (Panebianco & Kiehl, 2003).⁴

From these figures, it becomes clear that suburbanisation encompasses a large part of the European urban population. Suburbanisation is not only a major geographical change. It could also be considered a part of the major social changes which occurred during the twentieth century and which are linked to the larger developments of modernisation, urbanisation, industrialisation and de-industrialisation. As an all-embracing development of contemporary society, suburbanisation is likely to have a social, economic, cultural and also political impact.

1.3 Research questions

This study is concerned with a part of the political effects related to suburbanisation. The research questions are centred on suburbanisation and the political choice of the population, as expressed in their voting behaviour and political preferences. Voting behaviour includes different variables, mainly voting outcomes, political preferences, or turnout. Inspired by maps that show clear geographical patterns of voting outcomes,⁵ this study aims to investigate the reasons why people tend to have political preferences that are related to their places of residence. If it is possible to reveal systematic patterns of political preference typical of suburban areas, as opposed to core city and rural areas, this may well have consequences for party strategies on the one hand, and the success of certain policies on the other hand. Moreover, this study aims to establish the suburban zone (as opposed to core cities and the rural) as a more visible and discernible category for the analysis of electoral behaviour (and perhaps also turnout) in Europe. Instead of relating electoral preferences and choice exclusively to socio-economic or cultural variables, this study aims to single out some of the links between spatially located social and political phenomena and voting. The study revolves around the following research questions:

4 There is scarce data available on suburban vs. urban population in Europe, as already pointed out by Panebianco and Kiehl (2003) and Antrop (2004).

5 There may also be significant differences in turnout between different geographical settings (Putnam 2000, Oliver 2001), but this aspect is not studied in the present study.

- Is there such a thing as suburban political preference and how is it structured?
- If the voting behaviour and political preference of inhabitants of suburban municipalities are different from those of inner city dwellers, what are the reasons for that divergence?
- What are the factors related to spatial structure that can explain a part of the differences between urban and suburban political preferences?
- How are the divergences between urban, suburban and rural voters related to the classic urban-rural cleavage?

Current political research indicates that, at least at the aggregate level, suburban populations tend to vote more for conservative parties than strictly urban (core city) populations. Differences between voting patterns in suburbs and core cities have been described for the United States (Gainsborough, 2001; Oliver, 2001; Oliver & Ha, 2007) and Canada (Walks, 2005a, 2008). In Europe, we find the urban-suburban divergence in many countries, as outlined by Vandermotten and Medina Lockhart (2000) in their overview of electoral geographies. A more detailed overview of European metropolitan regions and divergences in voting behaviour is provided in a 2005 edited volume (Hoffmann-Martinot & Sellers, 2005). In Britain, the tendency towards suburban conservatism has been observed since as far back as in the 1950s: Cox (1969) demonstrated that suburban dwellers display a slightly different voting behaviour than inhabitants of core cities. Considerations on the place of residence and electoral preferences also played a role in 1960s German analyses of electoral preferences (Liepelt & Mitscherlich, 1968), but the analyses did not allow for a clear distinction between different voters in different places, a fact criticised by Stein Rokkan in the same book. Another strand of literature tracks important changes in electoral preference over the last 20 years to the increasing segregation of middle class subgroups in the course of globalisation (Kriesi et al., 2006). This middle class segregation is frequently expressed in settlement structures, as evidenced by urban sociologists in many countries.⁶

Along these approaches, this study first tries to detect a suburban tendency towards conservative electoral preferences. In a second step, the divergences of electoral preferences within the urbanised areas will be explained, and in a third, conclusive phase, the findings will be related to

6 The Chicago school of urban sociology in the 1920s already studied residential segregation, which continues to be an important field of research.

theoretical considerations, mainly related to the theory of political cleavages.

From a methodological point of view, it will be interesting to see whether the problem of the ecological fallacy can be overcome with individual level data: most of the data on elections and referendums which contain information about specific localities are only available at the aggregate municipal or regional level, and not at the individual level. Moreover, many social science surveys, while providing excellent information on electoral behaviour and socio-economic background, often lack precise information about the type of respondents' places of residence, the everyday living environment and about certain habits and interests related to the structure of the built environment. Some surveys, however, do provide a sufficient selection of variables, so it was possible to use individual level survey data in this study. We could therefore draw conclusions on individual political preferences related to place of residence and socio-economic backgrounds. However, for the explanation of the outcomes of the data analysis, in-depth knowledge of the historical background is crucial: It provides a framework for the interpretation of individual behaviour, and it also explains why certain categories of localities are related to specific political discourses. As we will see, urbanisation is closely linked to political tendencies and ideas.

The study of suburban electoral preferences involves questions about the formation and modification of political cleavages. Suburbanisation dynamics may interfere with two of the main political cleavages that lie at the base of European party systems: the urban-rural and the centre-periphery cleavage (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Both of these cleavages presuppose the existence of clearly distinguishable urban or rural characteristics on the one hand, as well as central and peripheral ones on the other. With suburbanisation, however, a new form of territorial structure arose which does not necessarily fit neatly into the classical cleavage theory.

Today's internally heterogeneous urban agglomerations are not purely urban (in the sense that they are similar to core cities), nor can they be defined as rural or even peripheral. The suburban is something in-between. Besides blurring the strict separation between urban and rural, suburbanisation also has social consequences, as it is related to the rise of the middle classes over the second half of the twentieth century. Members of these social strata often prefer suburban to urban housing, even though some middle class groups still tend to prefer urban housing, as we will see. Moreover, members of the middle class are more likely to depend on employers in the service sector, mainly concentrated in and around cities.

Therefore, the middle classes are also less likely to live in rural (and peripheral) regions. For example, according to the research of Walks (2008), Hermann and Leuthold (2003) or van Gent and Musterd (2010), related to the notion of a splitting middle class (Kriesi 1998: 168 ff.), suburbanisation reveals the different values of two different groups of the middle class through territorial segregation. This study therefore also discusses the implications of the urban-suburban difference in the light of the middle class cleavages: the winners and losers from the globalisation cleavage as well as the value cleavage.

The territorial dichotomy of rural and urban electoral preferences postulated in the classic theory of political cleavages may still exist, but due to urban sprawl perhaps in a more blurred fashion. The urban-rural cleavage might even be changing towards a more complicated, “tripolar” structure between urban, suburban and rural interests that are partly overlapping. Another possible outcome of this study could be that the cleavage between urban and rural interests is just modified or adapted to the new territorial realities. This could either mean that the suburban electorate, since it is living in urban agglomerations, leans towards urban interests, but it could also result in suburban electoral preferences being closer to rural interests.

This study aims to contribute to the explanation of contemporary political cleavage structures. It sheds light on a specific aspect of political cleavages – their spatiality –, which is related to the argued erosion or confluence of the four traditional political cleavages. It elaborates different aspects of influences on political preferences related to the place of residence, following the theoretical assumption that the reasons for diverging voting patterns are at least in part related to spatial differences. However, the study does not support a view of environmental determinism in the analysis of political preferences, nor does it trace all divergences in political preference back to geographical aspects. In fact, other explanations for political preference presented in the literature are taken into account and combined with new ideas and findings related to the consequences of suburbanisation and urban-suburban-rural differences. As we will see in the first part of the theory chapter concerning the *spatial turn* in the social sciences, daily life and the structure of the built environment are closely linked. The built environment limits the daily movements of people and, at the same time, it is also formed by many social influences. Put briefly, the aim of this study is to detect divergences in electoral preferences related to the residential environment. The causalities of these divergences are not at the centre of the study: Over time, divergences in po-

litical preference are related both to residential self-selection and the changes in political preference related to daily life habits.

In short, the aim of this comparative study is to provide an additional – geographical – perspective on electoral preferences, and eventually also on the (national) party systems of the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany. The study aims to demonstrate that the residential preferences related to a preference for conservative parties are similar in the countries examined and that these mechanisms are related to variables that describe the social geography of a residential municipality as well as daily life habits. The different values these variables assume can in turn be attributed to specific spatial settings.

1.4 Structure of the book

The study begins with a definition and explanation of the concepts and place categories that are not part of mainstream political sociological analyses: suburbanisation, urbanisation, metropolitanisation, suburbs, core cities and rural municipalities, followed by a chapter on the theoretical background. On the one hand, this chapter is centred on approaches that explain the relationship between society and (built-up) space; on the other, the theory of political cleavages provides a background for the study of politically relevant differences and divergences in modern democracies, particularly for the explanation of individual political preference. It begins with conceptualisations of space in the social and political sciences and then moves towards a literature overview on electoral studies and space. First, the consideration of space in electoral studies is discussed on a more general level, before the focus moves to more specific studies of suburbanisation and electoral preferences. As we will see, the theory of political cleavages proves to be especially useful for the analysis of divergences in electoral preference.

The explanation of the hypotheses that are used to examine the differences between suburban and urban political preference opens the way for the empirical study, which comes after an explanation of the research design and a chapter on methods and data.⁷ The three empirical chapters on

7 The detailed descriptions of the variable choices are found in the chapters on each country. These descriptions (especially regarding municipality categorisations) can be more easily understood after reading the sections that discuss the history of suburbanisation.

Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland are structured similarly: first, the relationship between suburbanisation and the political sphere is presented as a historical overview and analysis. Besides presenting the historical discourses relating urban planning and political development over the last fifty years, the history sections of the chapters on each country provide access to a broad range of literature in different fields and different languages. The second parts of the chapters on each country concentrate on an analysis of individual-level social survey data, interpreting the results in the light of the backgrounds presented in the first part. After the country analyses, the relationship between the built environment and the political sphere in the three countries is compared. Finally, the results of the study are discussed in a wider context as I refer to political science theory and methods and show their limitations and the prospects for further research.

1.5 Concept definitions

Before the chapters on theoretical reflections and hypotheses, the focus is directed to the concepts of *suburbanisation*, *urbanisation*, *metropolitanisation*, *suburb*, *core city* and *rural locality*. All of these concepts are used in different disciplines (architecture, urban geography and sociology as well as political science). For this study, these concepts are specified as follows.

1.5.1 Suburbanisation

In the context of this study, suburbanisation is defined as the extension of cities towards the former countryside surrounding it, creating new types of urbanised landscape with a particular type of particular built environment and social structure.

Considering the concept of suburbanisation with respect to the “ladder of abstraction” (Sartori, 1970: 1040), it can be positioned on a medium level. The concept is neither too all encompassing – such as e.g. modernisation or urbanisation of which it is a part – nor too specific. Thus, comparison is possible both between generalised national contexts and between single cases within one nation state or even among different countries with rather similar local structures. The concept is not restricted to a