

“E pur si muove!”: Russell Dalton and political realignment**By Julian Borba¹**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0149-6533>**Gregório Unbehaun Leal da Silva¹**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4603-9803>

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Florianópolis/SC, Brazil

(DALTON, Russell J.. *Political realignment: economics, culture, and electoral change*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

The 1960 publication of ‘The American Voter’, which revealed that voters have stable affective ties to political parties, transformed political alignment into one of the central objects of contemporary political analysis. It was in Lipset and Rokkan (1967), however, that the social bases of such links were investigated and found to be formed by means of the concept of ‘cleavages’. Stability, then, comes from the links that party systems maintain with social structures in such a way that different models of society produce different types of party system. Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) well-known diagnosis was that in the context of advanced democracies there exists a tendency to ‘freeze’ party systems in place so that a stable alignment between voters and parties can flourish under their umbrella.

Since the late 1970s, however, researchers began to explore the idea that ties between voters and parties were not as robust as the Michigan studies would have it. Likewise, party systems turned out to less ‘frozen’ than cleavage theory had predicted. The empirical parameters for this assessment were decline in voter turnout, party identification rates and activism, as well as increased electoral volatility in various democracies worldwide. This phenomenon was given the name ‘party dealignment’.

<http://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202000020002>

Correspondence: Julian Borba. E-mail: borbajulian@yahoo.com.br

This publication is registered under a CC-BY Licence.

One of the first works to point out such changes in the relationship between voters and parties was 'Electoral change in advanced industrial democracies', published in 1984, among which of the editors was Russell Dalton (DALTON et al., 1984)¹. Subsequently, the theme of dealignment came to occupy a prominent place in Dalton's voluminous work, which, in general terms, stayed in line with the analytical (and normative) parameters of the debate on changing values initially developed by Ronald Inglehart (1977). The argument is that party dealignment is linked to the modernization process experienced by countries in the advanced stage of capitalism and is particularly linked to increased education levels and the concomitant development of the media. From this perspective, citizens are increasingly cognitively 'well-equipped' to establish their own preferences and have the means to achieve them, for which reason that they are less dependent on political parties (DALTON, 2013; DALTON, McALLISTER and WATTENBERG, 2003). As a consequence, we see an expanded universe of independent voters who are well informed, interested in politics and committed to democracy.

The book that is the subject of this review is part of this author's attempt to understand what he calls 'electoral change' and which marks an important inflection point in relation to his previous works. What Dalton tries to characterize in 'Political Realignment' (2018) is the reorganization of the links between voters and parties, which within central countries occurs along two central cleavages: 'economic and cultural'.

The aforementioned inflection, it must be emphasized, does not mean a repudiation of his previous 'framework'. For Dalton (2018), the same forces that caused dealignment are those that shape realignment. They are 'socio-economic modernization and the reaction to it'². What has changed, according to Dalton (2018), is empiricism: globalization and the restructuring of capitalism, the deep global economic crisis post 2008, the diminishing importance of the working class in the dynamics of capitalism, the emergence of a new middle class, and so on and so forth.

¹In the same year, the dealignment thesis gained systematic treatment in a book published by Martin Wattenberg (1984), "The Decline of American Political Parties, 1952-1980".

²Not by chance, Dalton quotes Newton's third law of motion in several passages in the work: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" (2018, p. 27).

It is an extremely innovative approach and brings new perspectives to an important debate in contemporary political science, such as polarization, representation and, especially, the so-called crisis of democracies.

Describing and explaining this process of electoral change in advanced democracies is the central objective of the book. To this end, it follows the evolution of the opinions of voters and elites on economic and cultural issues from 1972 to 2016 - and the impact of these opinions on electoral politics. The lion's share of the book covers 15 European Union member countries; there is also a chapter dedicated to the United States.

It begins with the conceptualization of the multidimensional cleavage structure mentioned above. For Dalton (2018), the issues that make up the economic divide persist as a lever of public opinion, but by way of 'novelty' he adds the cultural divide to the central axis of the process.

The economic cleavage is defined with reference to such themes as tax policy and social services. With reference to this cleavage, Dalton (2018) classifies actors favorable to market-oriented economic management as 'conservative'. Those with pro-State views he classifies as 'liberals'. Cultural cleavage-related topics cover a range of topics, such as the environment, abortion policy and limitations of immigration limitation, inter alia. Proponents of traditional positions on these issues are called 'cultural conservatives'. Those who oppose them are described as 'cultural liberals'.

Having established a theoretical and conceptual framework, Dalton (2018) takes on his empirical data, first analyzing the opinions of voters and their distribution along this double divide (the demand side). He then verifies how the party systems reorganize themselves in order to respond to such transformations (the supply side).

The most prominent social characteristics in cultural issues are occupation, education, age and religiosity. With regard to occupation, students and professionals with higher education levels are among the most liberal. Farmers and retirees are the most conservative. In education, a higher degree of study corresponds to a liberal outlook. Frequent church attendance increases the likelihood of being conservative.

The changing economic foundations of advanced industrial societies have reshaped the traditional view of a dichotomous class structure. The separation of management from capital ownership and the expansion of the service sector created a new expanding social stratum. This stratum is called the 'new middle class' or 'socio-cultural professionals'. This new class is at the forefront of liberal cultural views, while leaning towards market-oriented economic positions. On the other hand, the more traditional working class continues to support greater state control of the economy. The realignment in this case, unlike the cultural division, seems to be much more associated with a change in the distribution of professions in advanced industrial societies than with the new themes presented.

The second part of the book analyzes how this two-dimensional structure of the political world takes form on the supply side, through analyses of the opinions of party elites and the performance of political parties. According to Dalton (2018), a two-dimensional cleavage structure was already visible in 1979 and has clearly crystallized in the most recent data, so that political realignment among elite social groups followed the pattern of realignment on the part of citizens.

The analysis of the positions of candidates for the European parliament demonstrates the persistence of the economic cleavage over time. In the cultural division, however, there have been radical changes from the introduction of liberal cultural parties in the 1970s and 80s, to the more recent emergence of culturally conservative parties. The book shows that the offer of party options available to voters has increased considerably over time. The cross-cultural divide has also led many parties to change their political positions, so that in most multiparty systems, parties now compete in a two-dimensional space.

Another aspect analyzed in the book is the representation gap. This concept is important to demonstrate that, even with the growth of a multiparty system, party offers are unable to cope with the countless demands of voters. Dalton (2018) describes the degree to which parties agree with their supporters, in collective and individual terms (political congruence). To this end, he focuses on researching whether voters as an aggregate collective (macro level) seek parties that do a good job of representing their positions well or whether they are satisfied with parties that partially reflect their views. The analysis considers the opinions of the average

voter and compares them with party positions. In this instance the parties come out well. When this congruence relationship is analyzed at the individual level it turns out to be less effective.

The final part of the book is dedicated to North America and seeks to demonstrate that the two-dimensional division of the political universe also applies to a two-party system context. For Dalton (2018), the cultural dimension emerged earlier in the United States than elsewhere due to mobilization of social groups against the Vietnam War. Dalton (2018) does not identify any substantial change in the median position of the public during the period 1972 to 2016. Another notable result is the size of the gaps, except in 1980 and 1984, the average citizen is closer to the Republican candidate in every election.

These data show that positions along the economic cleavage present a strong and relatively stable relationship with candidates' preferences. In early surveys, cultural positions bore almost no relation to candidates' preferences, however, they have increased constantly over time. The relevance of the cultural divide is also clear from an analysis of the 2016 primaries.

A central element in the work is the importance of the interaction between modernization and cultural change. In Dalton's model (2018), the first produces the second, which then generates its own antithesis (the cultural reaction) and this process is a source of constant tension in contemporary societies. This tension has been the starting point for interpretations of the empirical processes of party dealignment since the 1970s, when the dominant values of societies were unable to find party structures that welcomed them, and the subsequent realignment that occurred after the 1980s in particular, and which intensified in the following decades, when parties and party systems were transformed in order to incorporate new groups, new themes, new forms of persuasion and new government practices. The emergence of the 'Greens' was one of the first steps in this process, while the right-wing populist parties are the most recent.

This gives rise to a somewhat positive interpretation of the relationship between electoral change and democracy. After all, realignment in the way described in the book indicates that parties seek to be more congruent with public

opinion, more responsive to their voters and to incorporate the various demands of society into their platforms and actions when in government.

Such optimism on the part Dalton (2018), however, leaves space for a series of dilemmas between responsiveness, representativeness and democracy. The most emblematic example seems to be the recent phenomenon of populism. Populists say they directly represent the will of the people; they want to carry out this will without intermediaries. Its risks to democracy are too well known to discuss here, but the phenomenon serves to exemplify some of the potentially perverse effects of realignment.

This specific criticism notwithstanding, 'Political Realignment' is a fundamental work for anyone wishing to understand the dilemmas faced by democracies in an increasingly complex and pluralized world. Despite the author's focus on advanced democracies, the various issues addressed in the book offer an important framework for analyzing the extent to which this new two-dimensional configuration of the political world is also present in young democracies, such as that of Brazil, and, what's more, the extent to which phenomena such as the election of a far-right politician to the position of the country's top job can or cannot be seen as part of this process.

Translated by Fraser Robinson

References

- DALTON, Russell J. (2013), *The Apartisan American: dealignment and changing electoral politics*. Washington: CQ Press. 240 pp..
- DALTON, Russel J.; FLANAGAN, Scott E., and BECK, Paul Allen (1984), *Electoral change in advanced industrial democracies: realignment or dealignment?* New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 530 pp..
- DALTON, Russell J.; McALLISTER, Ian, and WATTENBERG, Martin P. (2003), Democracia e identificação partidária nas sociedades industriais avançadas. *Revista Análise Social*. Vol. XXXVIII, Nº 167, pp. 295-320.
- INGLEHART, Ronald (1977), *The silent revolution: changing values and political styles among western publics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 496 pp..
- LIPSET, Seymour Martin and ROKKAN, Stein (1967), *Party systems and voter alignments: cross-national perspectives*. New York: Free Press. 554 pp..
- WATTENBERG, Martin P. (1984), *The decline of American political parties, 1952– 1980*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 288 pp..