

The Politics of Social Cleavages

- *Most societies are split along one or more lines. Often these splits, or “cleavages,” become the society’s fault lines along which political attitudes form. Here are some of the more politically relevant social cleavages.*
- **Social Class:** *Karl Marx thought social class determined everything, that it was the only important social cleavage. Whether one was **bourgeois** or **proletarian** determined most political orientations. Experience however, makes it hard to accept such a black-and-white view. Still, class does matter. Class by itself though is seldom a sufficient explanation for political orientation. Other ingredients are usually present. The question really is, “class plus what?”*
- **Geographic Region:** *Most countries have regional differences, and often they are politically important. Once a region gets set in its politics, it can stay that way for generations. Often the attitude is a remembrance of past conquests and injustices. We should inquire about the regions of the US, what their politics are, and how they got to be that way.*
- **Religion:** *As a predictor of political behavior, this factor has been central in US history but only during certain periods and generally in certain regions. In general though, religion accounts for the formation of and identification with more political parties around the world than does social class.*
- **Urban-Rural:** *City people are usually different politically from country people in terms of living conditions, education, and social and economic priorities.*

- ***Other relevant social cleavages:*** *In some situations gender matters, as in the US where women vote more Democrat than men. Occupation as distinct from social class and age can be important factors. Almost any social cleavage or category can become politically relevant. You can become sensitive to these cleavages and categories by asking yourself from where you got the political views you hold: Is it your age? Did you get them from your family? And why does your family hold these views? Is it their religion? Their ethnic group? Their regional tradition?*