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Preprint · April 2021

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How Social Class Influences Political Choices

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Forthcoming in the Cambridge Handbook of Political Psychology

Edited by Danny Osborne & Chris G. Sibley

Abstract

This chapter examines research from political science, sociology and psychology to understand how and why class position is associated with differences in political attitudes and choices. After reviewing influential definitions of social class, we examine research on explanations of class differences in political behavior. These include class differences in identity, values and self-interest, authoritarianism and control. We then review explanations for changes in political choices between classes over time, focusing on supply-side versus demand-side interpretations of declining levels of class voting in Western democracies, and emphasizing the effects of party programmatic convergence on the political relevance of class-based values. Finally, we assess recent interpretations of the rise of working class support for the radical right political support, pointing to the limitations of status threat accounts, and noting that such political choices are more powerfully associated with educational attainment than with class position. We consider whether this suggests a reconfiguration of electoral behavior from a class-based to an educational divide.

Keywords: class, status, self-interest, authoritarianism, identity, supply-side politics, radical right.

Introduction

Social class can impart a sense of identity and grievance that provides a basis for the expression of dramatically different political preferences. It helps explain why some people are more opposed to immigration, more nationalist and supportive of punitive law-and-order policies, and more likely to oppose economic redistribution. In this chapter, we examine how and why someone's class position impacts on their perceptions, values and attitudes in ways that influence their political choices. Answers to these questions require us to examine different interpretations of what class position is, the class-related vulnerabilities, motivations and concerns that influence voters' political preferences, and the impact of the signals sent by political actors seeking their votes.

We first identify what class is, then briefly review explanations of class differences in political behaviour. Some studies have focused on demand-side explanations, on how class position influences values, attitudes and identities, and the consequences of changes in the situations faced by, in particular, working class voters in an age of globalization. Others focus on the supply-side, on the choices offered to voters by political parties. Both are required to understand how class position translates into differences in political behaviour.

1. What is class?

Class has been variously defined and operationalised in terms of ‘objective’ work-related characteristics including income identification (e.g. Bartels, 2016; Leighley and Nagler, 1992, 2007), education, occupational prestige, a composite measure of these attributes, or subjective class identification (e.g. Jackman and Jackman, 1983). Occupational definitions of class position have been most influential, however, as they identify a range of advantages and disadvantages associated with labour market positions that go far beyond differences in income. They also allow researchers to examine the implications of changes in the occupational structure, such as those occurring with the transition from industrialism to post-industrialism.

Goldthorpe and colleagues (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019; Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006) developed the most influential definition of class position focusing on types of occupations and the rewards accruing to them – namely, income security, earnings stability and long-term prospects. The schema (e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) firstly distinguishes between employers and employed, and then differentiates the latter according to their conditions of employment resulting from employers’ responses to the requirements of work monitoring and human asset specificity associated with different job tasks (Goldthorpe, 2007). In practice, class position is proxied through occupational aggregations which closely map onto the schema’s class categories, and have been used in the British National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification (NS-SEC; Rose *et al.*, 2005) and the European Socio-Economic Classification (Rose and Harrison, 2010).

The main classes identified in the Goldthorpe schema are the higher and lower professional and managerial classes (classes I & II), the "routine nonmanual class" (typically lower-grade clerical "white-collar workers", class III), the "petty bourgeoisie" (small employers and self-employed, class IV), and the "working class" (foremen and technicians, skilled, semi-, and unskilled manual workers, classes V, VI & VII). Validation studies have shown that these classes differ significantly in terms of wages, job security, flexible working hours, pension provision, sickness benefits, autonomy, future career prospects and life-time expected income (e.g. Evans, 1992; Evans and Mills, 1998). In recent years, however, the growing size of the middle class has led to attempts to differentiate it more extensively. This has primarily involved separating managerial and technical occupations from professionals and ‘socio-cultural specialists’ (Güveli *et al.*, 2007; Oesch, 2006).¹ Oesch’s (2006) schema distinguishes ‘technocrats’ from socio-cultural specialists. Like business owners, managers and technocrats are involved in running organizations and making profits, whereas socio-cultural professionals are focused on the needs of clients, patients, and students.²

¹ Though the recent growth and diversification of self-employment (Jansen, 2019) may serve to undermine the shared interests of members of that class, leading to more fragmented political preferences.

² These horizontal distinctions have also been applied in the working class, but the distinction between production and service workers does not translate into political divisions (Ares, 2020).

Their political orientations differ in various ways as a consequence of these differing roles (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015).

2. Understanding class differences in political behaviour

2.1. Social identity

Early work on class politics emphasized the role of class identity, derived in part from Marxist-influenced assumptions about the emergence of class consciousness. Studies of class awareness in the US nonetheless challenged the *Marxist* assertion that class identification necessarily resulted from individuals' position in the means of production (Jackman and Jackman, 1973, 1983). Instead, it was suggested that the association between objective class position and subjective identity was mediated through 'interest-group processes', including general socioeconomic prestige and income as well as patterns of social contact, that 'in turn lead to psychological identification with the relevant (socioeconomic) group' (Jackman and Jackman, 1973, p. 571). This argument mirrored earlier work in political science and social psychology that contended that interaction with class-based networks fostered class identity (e.g. Eulau, 1956a, 1956b) and hostility towards class 'outgroups' (Tajfel, 1969).

This intergroup theory of class awareness formed the basis of early empirical investigations of class-based political behaviour. Voting, so the narrative went, was simply the expression of class identification and an enduring sense of partisanship moulded by socialising institutions such as the family, trade unions and local communities, which served as a 'perceptual screen' through which individuals adjudicated between political parties and formed party preferences (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Converse, 1964). These conclusions were reinforced by studies showing that individuals identifying as working class were more likely to vote for the political left than right (Prybyl, 1977).

Nevertheless, more recent work into class identification has challenged a deterministic mapping of individuals' class identification onto their material circumstances, finding that the two do not necessarily coincide. In particular, Evans and Kelley (2004) discovered a strong tendency for individuals from all class groups to identify as being in the middle of the class hierarchy (Sosnaud *et al.*, 2013). These authors attribute this to reference group processes whereby individuals have a tendency to locate themselves in a middling position within their immediate social milieu. This distorts individuals' perceptions of their objective class position (Kelley and Evans, 1995), although this could equally result from individuals' desire to distance themselves from both the working and upper classes (Lamont, 2000; Stuber, 2006).

There also appears to be significant cross-national variation in levels of class awareness. As early as the 1970s, Robinson and Kelley (1979) found that class identification was stronger in Britain than in the US; subsequently, scholars have increasingly directed their analyses towards explaining variation in class identification across a greater number of countries (e.g. Evans and Kelley, 2004; Kikkawa, 2000; Wright, 1997). Most recently, Curtis and Andersen (2015) find the association between household income and class identity is strongest in countries with higher levels of income inequality – a finding they attribute to the fact that greater inequality between social classes makes class differences more visible and individuals more aware of their relative (dis)advantage.

The majority of work on class awareness has focused on examining its determinants. But beyond a set of studies in the UK and US in the 1960s and 70s (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Campbell *et al.*,

1960; Converse, 1964), research has only begun to explore its connection to political attitudes and behaviours. Rather than treating class identification as a mediator of objective class position, this line of research has examined the independent and conditional effects of subjective class position on political preferences. For instance, in Britain, identifying as working-class net of one's occupational class position is generally predictive of authoritarian and anti-immigration, but *not* pro-redistribution, attitudes amongst occupationally middle-class respondents (Evans and Mellon, 2016). Conversely, class identity in the US has an independent effect on individuals' left-right values and 'participatory orientations' such as interest in politics and perceived political efficacy net of objective position, though not choice of political party (Sosnaud *et al.*, 2013).

2.2. Self-interest and redistributive values

Appeals to identity as a primary mechanism underlying the class-vote association increasingly gave way to explanations predicated on the assumption that individuals have meaningful positions on political issues, selecting the party that best aligns with their political preferences, rather than being driven by unfettered loyalty to class-related institutions (Argyle, 1994). This position was increasingly taken by political scientists in the 1980s and 1990s, who advocated that voting is largely an expression of values or ideologies within a political space comprised of two orthogonal dimensions – a left-right economic axis concerned with issues of economic inequality and redistribution, and a libertarianism-authoritarianism dimension concerned with cultural issues such as morality, immigration and law and order – which are themselves shaped by class positions (Heath *et al.*, 1985; Robertson, 1984; see also Chapter 14). Indeed, recognising that class moulds more proximate values is more consistent with research showing that party ideological convergence impacts on voting (e.g. Evans and De Graaf, 2013; Evans and Tilley, 2012b) – if party choice were purely the expression of identity, we would not expect shifts in party platforms to affect voting behaviour. Yet economic and non-economic values mostly, if not entirely, mediate the class-vote association, and these values are themselves a strong predictor of party preference (e.g. Evans and Neundorf, 2018; Langsæther, 2019; Weakliem and Heath, 1994).

Conflict over economic issues has formed the basis of party distinction in the Western party system, and class voting has been understood to be predominantly the expression of such left-right orientations (Evans and De Graaf, 2013; Himmelweit *et al.*, 1985). The strong association between individuals' class positions and economic preferences replicates across Western democracies, with the managerial middle class and self-employed most opposed to redistribution and supportive of the free market, whereas the lower service and working classes are the least supportive (Knutsen, 2017, ch. 3; Langsæther and Evans, 2020; Werfhorst and Graaf, 2004). It has often been assumed that left-right values are simply expressions of '[s]elf-interest of a relatively direct kind' (Berelson *et al.*, 1954, p. 184) – the result of individuals discriminating between party options best matched to their material circumstances (see also Chapter 4). More recently, however, studies have paid explicit attention to the mechanisms linking class position to redistributive preferences.

Such work has largely found that, across a range of contexts, class differences in redistributive preferences are mediated only in small part by current material circumstances such as income and unemployment experience (e.g. Bengtsson *et al.*, 2013; Brooks and Svallfors, 2010). Most recently, Langsaether and Evans (2020) show that class-based differences in economic and material interests in 18 West European countries explain only a small fraction of the differences in redistributive attitudes between routine manual workers and the service class, and near to none of the difference in right-wing orientation amongst the self-employed. These findings are consistent with panel

studies which show that the effect of upward intragenerational class mobility on increased economic conservatism cannot be explained by the immediate resulting changes in income (Langsæther *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Evans (1993) finds that promotion prospects, not differences in income, account for a substantial portion of the effects of class on party preference. This rational expectation model only applies to younger respondents, for whom the prospective (rather than present) element of self-interest carries most salience for political choice; such future expected returns lose their relevance among older voters who are more likely to have attained their ultimate occupational position.

Such rational choice arguments are in general distinguished from social psychological explanations for understanding the association between class position and political behaviour (see especially Argyle, 1994). The latter are instead most often evoked to explain class differences in the cultural dimension of attitudes, where the class-liberalism correlation is reversed: white-collar employees are more likely to hold socially liberal attitudes than the working class on issues such as individual liberties, civil rights for minorities, and immigration legislation (Achterberg and Houtman, 2006; Evans *et al.*, 1996). However, it is important to note that education level, rather than class, is most predictive of these cultural dimensions of value orientations (e.g. Heath *et al.*, 1994; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) – a caveat that will be particularly important when we later consider the growing primacy of these values for the rise in popular support for far-right candidates and causes (see also Chapter 31).

2.3. Class, authoritarianism and control

A large number of studies have focused on the moulding influence of occupational task structures (such as work autonomy) on issue orientations and political values that, in turn, influence party choice. From the 1960s onwards, this body of work examined ‘working-class authoritarianism’ as a consequence of the workplace situations of people in the working class (Lipset, 1959; see also Chapter 19). The claim that individuals generalise experience from their work to other (political) arenas of life was most influentially developed by Kohn and colleagues (e.g. Kohn, 1989; Kohn and Schooler, 1983), who demonstrated that self-direction in work mediates the effect of class on authoritarian-liberalism attitudes. The basic premise is that workplaces facilitating independent thought, enabling autonomy and involving a low degree of supervision lead to individualistic or liberal attitudes; by contrast, close workplace supervision and high task routinization lead to low control and predispose individuals to authoritarian values (Kohn, 1989; Kohn and Schooler, 1983). While this pattern was argued to most readily account for the high levels of authoritarianism among the working-class (Kohn *et al.*, 1990), it has more recently been used to explain variation within the middle class on the liberalism-authoritarianism value axis, distinguishing ‘socio-cultural professionals from their managers who hold ‘organisational authority’ (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014).

Does authoritarianism explain the association between social class and certain political attitudes such as intolerance and prejudice? Feldman and Stenner found that low income and education are associated with an increased prioritisation of child rearing values indicative of authoritarianism and that authoritarianism is predictive of moral and ethnic forms of intolerance (Feldman, 2003; Feldman and Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005). More recently, and treating authoritarianism as multidimensional set of psychological tendencies, Napier and Jost (2008) find that lower socioeconomic status is strongly negatively associated with moral and ethnic intolerance, and mediated by only two aspects of authoritarianism – obedience to authority and cynicism. One important implication of this and similar research is that working-class authoritarianism appears to

be more an authoritarianism of the less highly educated rather than of individuals in 'lower' class positions (Dekker and Ester, 1987; Grabb, 1979; Napier and Jost, 2008). The observed relationship between lower socioeconomic position and authoritarianism seems more likely to stem from a lack of higher education and its liberalising consequences than from the structure of workplaces *per se* (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2013; Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012; Stubager, 2008).

While Kohn and his associates focused on authoritarian tendencies driven by workplace organisation, it is also plausible that occupational experiences of autonomy and monitoring moulds a broader range of politically salient attitudes than authoritarianism alone, including those related to redistributive preferences. In particular, individuals who experience discretion at work may 'have a more acute sense of the relationship between decisions and outcomes than employees with low levels of autonomy' (Kitschelt and Rehm, 2014, p. 1674-5). In generalising these experiences, these individuals then express a belief that individuals are responsible for their own outcomes that is conducive to right-wing economic preferences (Bengtsson *et al.*, 2013; Jansen, 2019).

Autonomy has also proven useful for explaining the voting patterns of the self-employed and the widely documented finding that these so-called 'petty bourgeois' groups are among the most economically right-wing citizens and have a high propensity to vote for right-wing parties (Knutsen, 2017; Werfhorst and Graaf, 2004; see also Chapter 31) despite their incomes and job security being similar to those of the working class (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019). In this respect, Langsaether and Evans (2020) highlight the role of job autonomy as a source of difference between the self-employed and the working class in their political orientations: enhanced job autonomy is far more strongly associated with the right-wing orientation of the self-employed, compared with the working class, than income.

3. Explaining change

Although the research described above has provided insights into attitudinal differences between classes, its utilization of primarily cross-sectional analyses leaves unexplained temporal variation in the nature and extent of class voting. It is well-established, however, that traditional 'left versus right-wing' class voting has declined (Evans, 1999; Nieuwbeerta, 1995), although this is not universal (Brooks *et al.*, 2006; Evans and De Graaf, 2013). And in the post-communist democracies of Eastern Europe, there is evidence of growing levels of class voting during the post-socialist transition (Evans, 2006). There are also two particularly important recent developments. The first is the tendency for the working-class across Western democracies to vote for new radical right parties (Rydgren, 2012). The second is that, in some countries, the largest class division in politics is now between voting and *not* voting: compared with the similar participation levels observed historically, a far greater proportion of those in the working-class than in the middle classes currently do not vote (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Heath, 2018).

Early studies of declining class voting took a 'bottom up', or 'demand side', perspective. The common narrative cited a number of socio-economic transformations as driving a gradual 'blurring' of class positions, which in turn eroded the importance of these positions as determinants of economic (dis)advantage and life chances and as a basis for political preference formation (Dalton, 2008, p. 156-7; see also Evans, 2000). These included: a general improvement in living standards of the working-class in the post-war period (Abrams and Rose, 1960), increased upward class mobility following the growth in professional and managerial employment and the expansion of higher education (Manza *et al.*, 1995, p. 143-4), and the growth of within-class heterogeneity in

political interests deriving from cross-cutting social and attitudinal bases of political choice (Franklin, 1992; Rose and McAllister, 1986), especially those resulting from a shift from materialist to post-materialist values (Inglehart and Rabier, 1986). However, evidence for these explanations has been largely unconvincing. As Evans and Tilley (2012a) note, in many cases these interpretations were usually ‘inferred retrospectively from an observed decline in class voting, rather than measured independently and then used to account for such declines’ (p. 964).

The obvious problem here is that aggregate correlations cannot say whether the changing class-vote association is accounted for by a decline in the preference-choice association, or a declining effect of class on preference orientations. This is shown in Figure 1, which represents the relationship between class, mediators of the class-vote association (ideology, values and attitudes), and vote, over time. On the one hand, social transformations might weaken the relationship between class and values and ideologies (arrow a). This was essentially the position implicitly taken by the ‘bottom up’ approaches described above, appealing to the waning distinctiveness of class-based life chances and resources. On the other hand, a weakening of the attitude-vote relationship may have driven the decline of class politics (arrow b), while the association between class position and these orientations has remained intact.

FIGURE_1 HERE

Figure 1: differing ways of understanding how the class-vote association may change over time.

Indeed, an increasing body of research has argued party policy convergence has attenuated this second arrow – the effect of class-based value orientations on political behaviour. This ‘supply-side approach’ challenges the claim that class positions simply have less salience today for individuals’ political values and ideologies, instead arguing that the changing nature of class voting is best understood in response to party signals and that the ‘agent of change [is] political rather than social’ (Evans and Tilley, 2012b, p. 139). This is so even if shifts in party platforms are themselves seen as strategic party decisions in response to social structural transformations, such as the shrinking size of left parties’ traditionally core electoral base of the manual working-class.

The basic premise of this approach is that since voters actively respond to parties’ signals in their political decision-making, the extent of differentiation in the signals that parties send to the electorate determines the salience of class in determining how an individual votes (Evans and Tilley, 2012b). Where parties adopt distinct positions on class-based issues, the association between class and voting is likely to be strongest since classes’ distinct preferences can find political expression; by contrast, party programmatic convergence weakens the motivation for party choice on the basis of class-based interests, and instead amplifies motivations based on other considerations such as valence criteria (Converse, 1958; Evans, 2000).

The impact of party convergence on class voting has strong empirical support in Britain. An extensive documentation of left- and right-wing party manifestos over time has shown a distinctive shift of the political left towards centre-ground positions on economic and social issues since the 1960s, and the extent of left-right polarisation in parties’ manifestos has been shown to correlate strongly with the predictive strength of class, and values, on voting behaviour in Britain (Evans and Tilley, 2012a, 2012b). A similar pattern of convergence in the economic platforms of the political left and right and a weakening strength of class voting finds support elsewhere across a range of European countries (Arndt, 2013; Elff, 2009; Oskarson, 2005), and is found even after controlling for other aspects of social change (Jansen *et al.*, 2013).

Despite showing the relevance of party programmes for behaviour, these studies fail to demonstrate that the decline of the class-vote association is induced by the declining political relevance of left-right values for voting. Later work integrates supply-side correlates of voting with the individual-level mechanisms through which the ‘effects of policy convergence class vote can be understood’ (Evans and Tilley, 2012a, p. 965). Thus, in the British case, Evans and Tilley (2017) have consistently argued that dealignment cannot result from the decreasing political relevance of class-based demand because of the continued importance of class in shaping life chances, identities, and preferences for left- versus right-wing policies. Addressing the declining class-vote association in Britain across over 30 years, the authors find that while the association between class and these values appears unaffected by party convergence, supply-side dynamics simply make persisting class differences in redistributive preferences less relevant to party choice (Evans and Tilley, 2012a, 2017). Evidence that a decline in class voting is more generally attributable to the waning effect of distinct class-based values on voting rather than to a weakening in class differences in values is also found in the Netherlands and Germany (Evans and De Graaf, 2013). Most recently, Evans and Hall (2019) provide indirect support for this thesis across eight countries between 1990 and 2009, where a voter-party platform representation gap on economic issues is most pronounced for manual and low-skill service workers whose economic preferences put them in a markedly more leftist electoral space than other occupational groups.

A further implication of mainstream party convergence is its influence on the likelihood of voting *per se*, and therefore the extent to which class position is associated with participation in the democratic process. In the UK, class gaps in electoral participation grew immediately after 1997 – that is, precisely when the Labour party moved to the centre under Tony Blair (Evans and Tilley, 2017) – and that, more generally since the 1980s, ideological convergence of mainstream parties particularly depresses the probability of voting in the working class (Azzolini and Evans, 2020). US political scientists in particular have focused on bottom-up mechanisms – that is, differential civic orientations such as political interest, civic duty and political efficacy – to explain differences in political participation (e.g. Abramson and Aldrich, 1982; Verba and Nie, 1972). But it is likely that social differences in political efficacy also reflect choice and lack of it: when party appeals are less clearly differentiated along class lines, parties simply become less appealing to certain groups which then stop participating. Azzolini and Evans (2020) provide evidence in support of this position: in Britain, respondents’ value orientations are a significant mediator of the impact of party platform convergence on class differences in turnout.

Where distinct class-based economic preferences are not given political outlet, it is clear this can lead to declining class voting. Yet political choice is not based solely on left-right differentiation but also on cultural, ‘second order’ issues, such as opposition to immigration, Euroscepticism, and authoritative law and order (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Indeed, a number of studies suggest that a convergence in mainstream economic platforms, and resulting representation deficit for the working class, has led to the increased importance of cultural issues as a basis for partisan conflict, expressed by support for radical right or so-called ‘challenger’ parties across Western democracies (Rydgren, 2012). At a time when mainstream parties have converged on economic issues, new radical right parties (RRPs) across Europe have given cultural dimensions of political values, such as ethnonationalism, nativism and authoritarianism, a new salience (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Mudde, 2007; see also Chapter 17). These dual processes of mainstream party convergence and challenger party differentiation have increasingly given working-class voters a new opportunity to politically express their preferences, even if only those on noneconomic issues, by turning to these alternative political platforms (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005; Rennwald and Evans, 2014; Rydgren, 2012). Most prominently, Spies (2013) finds that across 13 West European societies in which

salience and party polarization of economic issues as has decreased, support for RRP among the working class is considerably higher than in countries without such a trend.

4. Status concerns and the decline of the working class?

Status-based explanations for radical right voting examine why the working class might find these parties particularly appealing in recent years. Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) argue that long-term economic and cultural shifts, such as the decline of low-skilled ‘decent jobs’ and increasing multiculturalism and celebration of diversity in mainstream discourse, have induced a general decline in the subjective social status of the white working class. This subjective status anxiety induces support for populist causes such as ethno-nationalism and anti-immigration and, in turn, parties.

How can this diminishing subjective sense of social status be linked to support for populist platforms? While populist support among groups with lower status may be broadly instrumental, such as voting for the party that promises to improve an individual’s subjective status (De Botton, 2008; Ridgeway, 2014), the mechanisms linking status decline to radical party support may be more psychological in nature. For instance, Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) suggest that status anxiety leads individuals to erect symbolic boundaries between themselves and ‘outgroups’ in a bid to maintain a sense of social standing. This is particularly true of outgroups such as immigrants, who are seen to be linked to the status threat (see Chapter 22): individuals in lower socio-economic positions who have traditionally relied on racial hierarchies as a source of social value (see e.g. Lamont, 2000; Lamont and Molnár, 2002) are likely to see the recent development of new cultural frameworks celebrating diversity and racial equality as a particularly pernicious threat (Gest, 2016).

This hypothesis is based on a long-standing observation in psychology that perceived group status anxiety can activate authoritarian predispositions on attitudes such as intolerance and prejudice towards racial minorities, increased attachment to ingroups and a corollary derogation of outgroups (Feldman and Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005; Tajfel, 1978). Given that criticism of immigrants and ethnic minorities feature prominently in radical parties’ discursive appeals, the platforms of the radical right have increasingly enabled defensive reactions to group threat to find political expression.

How convincing are status-based explanations of radical right support? Drawing on data from over 20 European countries, Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) find that lower levels of subjective social status are associated with support for right populist parties as well as various attitudinal positions associated with right populism, including negative outlooks on the economic and cultural aspects of immigration. Not only has this pattern been broadly found across Western countries, it also emerges in attempts to make sense of the shock outcome of the 2016 US presidential, where Mutz (2018) argues that the educational gap in Trump versus Clinton support is almost wholly explained away by perceived status threat. However, this work is not without criticism.

For Gidron and Hall (2017), subjective social status is ‘the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order’ (p. 61). Status thus differs from empirically related indicators of social stratification, such as power or socio-economic resources. However, this notion is measured by asking people to rank themselves on an 11-point scale: “In our society, some groups are more on top and others are more at the bottom. Thinking about yourself, where would you place yourself in this scale?” Because the scale has no substantive reference it is not clear whether it

refers to income, education, social standing, class or other attributes, and of course whether these ideas differ across the population. Smith's (1986) validation work of this instrument described it as a measure of 'class identification' without referring to Weberian notions of esteem, honour, and deference as identified by Ridgeway (2014) and adopted by Gidron and Hall (2017). Kelley and Evans (1995) likewise refer to the scale as a measure of class identity in their work in the 1990s, only referring to a rather vaguely specified notion of 'subjective social location' later (Evans and Kelley, 2004). It has also been argued that reclassifying responses to survey questions about immigration as indicators of concern about material interests rather than status threat can drastically change conclusions about the motivational basis of support for Trump (Morgan, 2018).

Moreover, an important feature of the rise in support for the radical right is that its basis of support comes not from the working-class – understood purely in occupational terms – but, rather, from among native-born, white, middle-income individuals who, crucially, lack tertiary education (Arzheimer, 2016; Kurer, 2020). This was most dramatically seen in Trump's 2016 electoral victory, where the lack of absence of a college degree, rather than an occupational gradient, was the starkest predictor of support for Trump versus Clinton (Mutz, 2018; Sides *et al.*, 2019: 178-9).

This observation is important for at least two reasons. First, it adds indirect support to non-economic explanations of radical right voting since the cultural and economic processes evoked as the causes of, for example, status anxiety appear to be those pertaining to a lack of tertiary education – rather than to a lower occupational class and its associated material (dis)advantages. Indeed, Gidron and Hall (2017) find that it is the relative self-rated social position of white men without tertiary education that has declined most markedly in the past 30 years. By contrast, it is not clear that the self-rated social position of different classes has changed over time. For instance, Vigna and Oesch (2020) find no downward trends in workers' subjective social status or life satisfaction, nor a widening class gap over time. Neither does self-rated social position appear to explain class differences in the UK's Brexit vote (Richards *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, it is consistent with research demonstrating that individuals in the most economically disadvantaged situations do not support radical right parties. Drawing on panel surveys from several European countries, Gidron and Mijs (2019) and Kurer (2020) find that individuals who experience a decline in their economic situation such as income loss or a transition into unemployment instead gravitate towards the radical left and party platforms that promise to offer more immediate economic relief. These findings are taken to suggest that the greatest support for RRP comes from low educational groups whose 'concerns about psychological well-being and social status... produce reactions that transcend economic or welfare demands' (Kurer, 2020, p. 1805), rather than from groups who are the most impoverished *per se*.

The growing importance of cultural factors associated with lower educational attainment is also manifest in the increasing tendency for 'cross-pressured' voters with more conservative attitudes and progressive economic attitudes to resolve this conflict in favour of the radical right (Gidron, 2020). Indeed, electoral support for RRP cross-nationally typically constitutes a cross-class coalition between production workers and the 'petty bourgeoisie', such as the self-employed and small employers (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). The uniting factor here that both groups have lower levels of education, indicating that education rather than social class is most consistently predictive of RRP support, further confirming the significance of cultural over economic factors in explaining this support (e.g. Manza and Crowley, 2018).

5. Conclusion

In the study of electoral behaviour, social class, understood as an aspect of individuals' social relations in labour markets and operationalised through validated instruments, has enabled researchers to disentangle the complex and multifaceted relationships between stratification systems and political behaviour. Research undertaken by political sociologists and psychologists alike has made traction in explicating the micro-level mechanisms underpinning class effects, with particular attention put on attitudinal, ideological and issue mediators. Class-based political interests are in particular polarised along both economic and cultural axes, and both psychological and instrumental mechanisms relating these interests to class positions have received some empirical support. While an exacting adjudication between them is as yet lacking, the rise of the cultural dimensions of political orientations is arguably reconfiguring electoral behaviour from a class-based into an education-based divide, where the most proximate factor for partisan choice is not material interest, but rather a cultural-psychological disposition.

More recent research in this vein has attested to heterogeneity in mechanisms such as the salience of autonomy for the right-wing preferences of the self-employed, and this work in particular points to a burgeoning need to test whether mechanism heterogeneity is a more generalised phenomenon in mediating the class-party association. With respect to trends in class voting over time, supply-side models of political choice have revealed a great deal about how political parties shape trends in class-based political behaviour by appealing (or not) to the concerns and motives of people in different class positions. Responses on measures of psychological constructs such as political efficacy, rather than being a fixed characteristic of individuals, can instead be seen as responses to actual choices, or lack thereof.

The renewed interest in the motives and political behaviour of the working class reflects a recent tendency for them to support radical right parties rather than the parties of the left. The significance of status threat remains unclear, mainly because of measurement issues, which leave unresolved the historic debate between status conflict and realistic group conflict. One potential way to better examine a sense of relative decline could be through the use of robust indicators of social comparison to assess the degree to which a sense of relative deprivation has emerged among working class respondents during a period in which parties and other institutions have been directing more attention towards minorities' interests (Pettigrew, 2017; see also Chapter 36), which also returns us to a focus on a supply-side deficit in the representation of working class political interests.

In conclusion, we need further exploration of the conditionality of the relationships between both class-value and value-vote on supply-side choice options in order to more fully understand why class voting patterns change over time. This is particularly relevant for understanding the increasing prominence of cultural rather than purely economic aspects of political competition and their impact on class partisan choices. How do mainstream and challenger parties' choice sets interact to make cultural preferences more important for political behaviour than economic issues? Do outsider party political framings merely activate and render politically salient cultural preferences which are themselves stable over time, or do they themselves or help to shift public opinion over time? More generally, greater interrogation of the interrelation of supply-side politics and the nature of demand-side voter preferences should provide important insights into the evolving connection between class and political representation.

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