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Return with a Vengeance

Working Class Anger and the Rise of Populism

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Across Western democracies, we are witnessing the rise of populism. And with its ascendance, anger returns to politics. Right-wing parties mobilize “angry white men” who believe the elite do not care about them and who deeply mistrust establishment parties.¹ It has been frequently noted that supporters of these parties are disproportionately drawn from the working class. Donald Trump’s staunchest supporters are white males, with low to medium levels of education and working class occupations. In Europe, the same holds true for the voters of the French *Front National*, the German *AfD*, the Norwegian Progress Party, the Dutch Freedom Party, the True Finns, and the Sweden Democrats. The working class no longer votes automatically for the Left but either abstains or votes for populist parties, if these exist.² This pattern is oftentimes explained by structural factors like globalization and postindustrialism, value change, and female emancipation. Both economically and culturally, working class males feel threatened because their jobs are either sent abroad or taken up by low-paid immigrants. At the same time, postmaterialism and feminism devalue their traditional way of life.

However, these insights fail to explain how broad societal changes translate into policies. There is little talk of agency and, in fact, politics. At the same time, mounting empirical evidence shows that political representation is biased against the lower social classes. A growing body of studies shows that the widespread feeling among populist voters that decision-makers care little about their interests is actually justified. Their anger is neither misinformed nor irrational and corresponds to a growing body of

¹ Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, “Angry White Men: Individual and Contextual Predictors of Support for the British National Party,” *Political Studies* 58 (2010): 1-25.

² Daniel Oesch, “The Class Basis of the Cleavage between the New Left and the Radical Right: An Analysis for Austria, Denmark, Norway and Switzerland,” in *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (London: Routledge, 2013), 31-51; Simon Bornschieer and Hanspeter Kriesi, “The Populist Right, the Working Class, and the Changing Face of Class Politics,” in *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (London: Routledge, 2013), 10-30.

political science research, which documents how democracy is biased in favor of the better-off or even the wealthiest. “Unequal democracy”³ is the breeding ground for democratic discontent and the path to success for populist parties.

Realignment of class voting

Not too long ago, social scientists thought social class had lost its explanatory value. Due to individualization and the fading of old cleavages, social class no longer seemed to offer much analytical leverage. In the first edition of *Political Man*, Seymour Martin Lipset⁴ thought that parties mainly represent the “interest of different classes.” However, in the later 1983 edition, he emphasized the decline of class voting, only to ask a few years later whether social classes were “dying”⁵ and to finally assert the “declining significance of social class.”⁶ Many others followed suit. The “Alford index,” an often used empirical measure that documents the irrelevance of class, subtracts “the percentage of persons in nonmanual occupations voting for ‘Left’ parties from the percentage of manual workers voting for such parties.”⁷ Measured in this way, class voting clearly has declined in many Western democracies, which to many proves that social classes are evaporating.⁸

However, the requiem might have been sung prematurely as class voting is staging a comeback—albeit in an unexpected way. First, across developed democracies, lower class voters disproportionately abstain from voting. Voter turnout is heavily biased in

³ Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), 230.

⁵ Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Are Social Classes Dying?” *International Sociology* 6 (1991): 397-410.

⁶ Terry Nichols Clark, Seymour Martin Lipset and Michael Rempel, “The Declining Political Significance of Social Class,” in *The Breakdown of Class Politics: A Debate on Post-Industrial Stratification*, eds. Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 77-104.

⁷ Robert R. Alford, “Class Voting in the Anglo-American Political Systems,” in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives*, eds. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 80.

⁸ Ronald Inglehart and Jacques-René Rabier, “Political Realignment in Advanced Industrial Society: From Class-Based Politics to Quality-of-Life Politics,” *Government and Opposition* 21 (1986): 463; Paul W. Kingston, *The Classless Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 105-110; Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics. Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 3rd ed. (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 152.

favor of higher social classes, in particular, if average turnout rates are low (see Figure 1). Second, if they vote, members of the working class disproportionately vote for right-wing populist parties. In contrast, the New Left does not appeal to members of the working class but mainly draws in white-collar professionals.⁹ Although a majority of workers does not vote for right-wing populist parties, the share is higher amongst them than among other groups, as the examples of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, and France show (see Figure 2). Across European countries, populist parties are gaining support in former strongholds of the Left.

Biased politics

In surveys, working class respondents regularly doubt that politicians care about their opinions and that they are able to influence decisions, whereas professionals feel capable and heard (see Figure 3). In political science parlance, the less well-off have a lower sense of internal and external efficacy. Two strands of current research also show the limits of working class influence. First, political elites have become a more and more homogenous group. Left parties have become middle-class parties whose active members and leaders are largely professionals who graduated from university. What is more, legislators are on average far wealthier than most citizens. In European countries, many parliamentarians are lawyers, civil servants, or spent their entire working life inside party organizations. Workers, in turn, are almost absent in most parliaments.¹⁰ In the most thorough analysis to date, Nicholas Carnes studies whether this descriptive underrepresentation of the working class affects political decisions.¹¹ He finds that members of the US Congress with a working-class background hold distinct values and tend to support different bills; however, they are not only few in numbers but also less successful in shaping the agenda and building coalitions to muster majorities.

⁹ Jane Gingrich and Silja Häusermann, "The Decline of the Working-class Vote, the Reconfiguration of the Welfare Support Coalition and Consequences for the Welfare State," *Journal of European Social Policy* 25 (2015): 50-75.

¹⁰ Heinrich Best, "New Challenges, New Elites? Changes in the Recruitment and Career Patterns of European Representative Elites," *Comparative Sociology* 6 (2007): 85-113.

¹¹ Nicholas Carnes, *White-Collar Government: The Hidden Role of Class in Economic Policy Making* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

A second way to look at political inequality is to match the preferences of different social groups to actual political decisions. Numerous studies on the American case document selective responsiveness on the part of political decision-makers, in favor of the better-off. Martin Gilens uses 1,800 survey questions on policy preferences, covering a wide array of policies, and compares the opinions of different income groups with political decisions four years after asking the questions¹² He finds that political decisions only reflect poor citizens' wishes if these coincide with the preferences of the rich. Low and even middle-income groups seem to have no influence once their preferences diverge from those of the top income groups. Other studies corroborate these findings. In *Unequal Democracy*, Larry M. Bartels compares senators' votes with the preferences of their constituents and concludes that their voting decisions skew in favor of the rich.¹³ Looking at US states, Patrick Flavin examines policy responsiveness measured against the self-reported ideology of respondents and against respondents' attitudes toward some highly controversial topics like the death penalty, gun control, and abortion, finding that citizens with lower incomes get less substantial representation than those with higher incomes.¹⁴

We have replicated these findings for Germany.¹⁵ Our expectation was to see a different pattern from that of the United States. Germany is a more egalitarian country than the United States and politicians do not depend on private donations to the same degree, because election campaigns are largely publicly funded. To analyze responsiveness, we looked at more than 800 detailed policy proposals and used surveys to determine the degree of support among different income and education groups. In contrast to other studies, we also used respondents' occupations to construct a measure of social class. Based on our dataset, we find a very similar pattern of unequal responsiveness to the United States, reflecting the political

¹² Martin Gilens, "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69 (2005): 778-796; Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹³ Larry M. Bartels, "The Eroding Minimum Wage" in *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 223-251.

¹⁴ Patrick Flavin, "Income Inequality and Policy Representation in the American States," *American Politics Research* 40 (2012): 29-59.

¹⁵ This is a joint project with Lea Elsässer and Svenja Hense at the University of Osnabrück.

preferences of the better-off while almost unrelated to the opinions of less privileged groups.

Whereas professionals benefit from the neat fit between their opinions and political decisions, the working class cannot but feel disenchanting. Policy change is not more likely because a large or a small share of this group supports it. Members of the working class, even if they are highly skilled and well paid, can only hope to get their way if their preferences are aligned with those of higher-grade employees, the self-employed, or civil servants. When their opinions diverge from these other groups, however, there is little chance that working-class preferences translate into policies. And these opinions are not unreasonable or in any way extreme, since we only studied policy proposals that were in line with the German constitution. Given this pattern, the perception that politics is biased against the working class is well founded.

Conclusion

Democracy's great promise is that everyone counts equally—in spite of the many ways in which citizens actually differ. However, recent political science research provides ample evidence that this promise remains unfulfilled. In many ways, politics is tilted against poorer citizens whose voices are not heard. Once powerful, the working class today has become politically far less influential. Trade unions often organize privileged segments of the workforce and center left parties are increasingly the home of high-income professionals. Those who feel poorly represented either turn away from politics in resignation or turn angrily to populist parties.

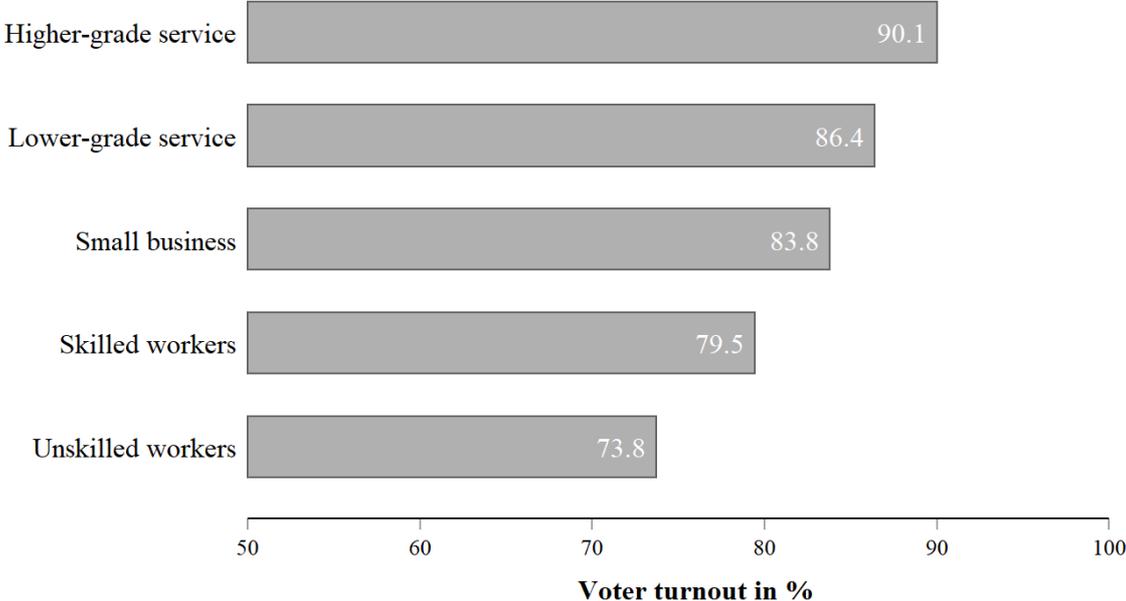
Populists rally against establishment parties and the elite, claiming to represent the true interest of the people.¹⁶ They are successful because the deck of democracy is stacked in favor of the affluent and political decisions are largely unresponsive to everyone else.¹⁷ Populist parties highlight a real democratic deficit, which is the reason why they cannot be lightheartedly dismissed. The populist answer is nonetheless dangerous because its anti-pluralism is undemocratic. If we want to fight populism, we

¹⁶ Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Frederick Solt, "Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement," *American Journal of Political Science* 52 (2008): 58.

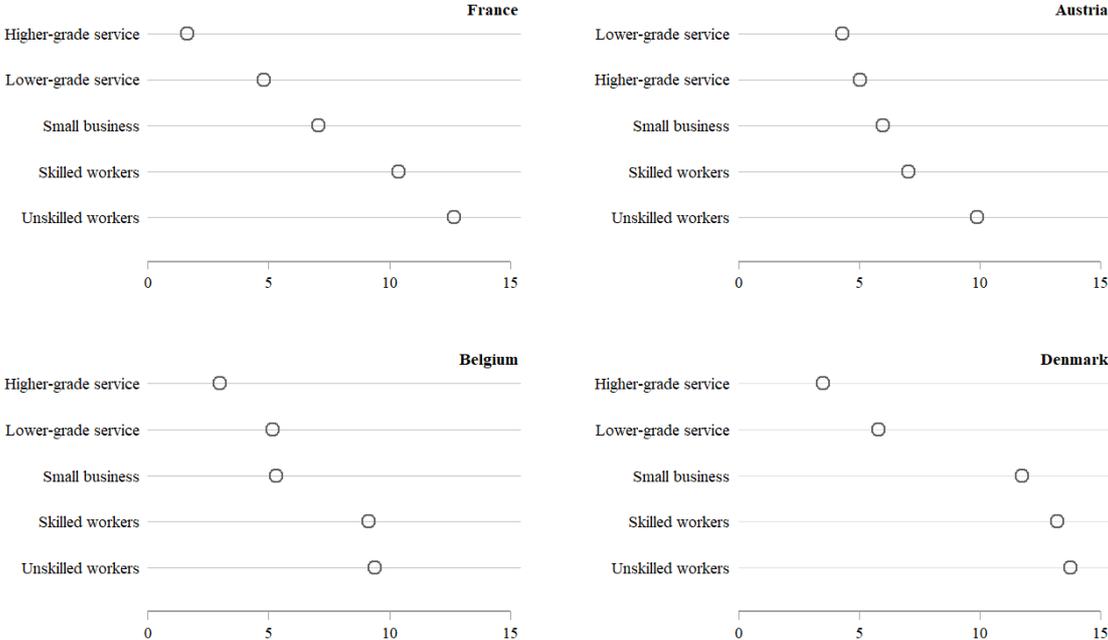
will have to take seriously those who correctly feel sidelined, while defending the norm that one can reasonably disagree about politics.

Figure 1: Social class and voter turnout



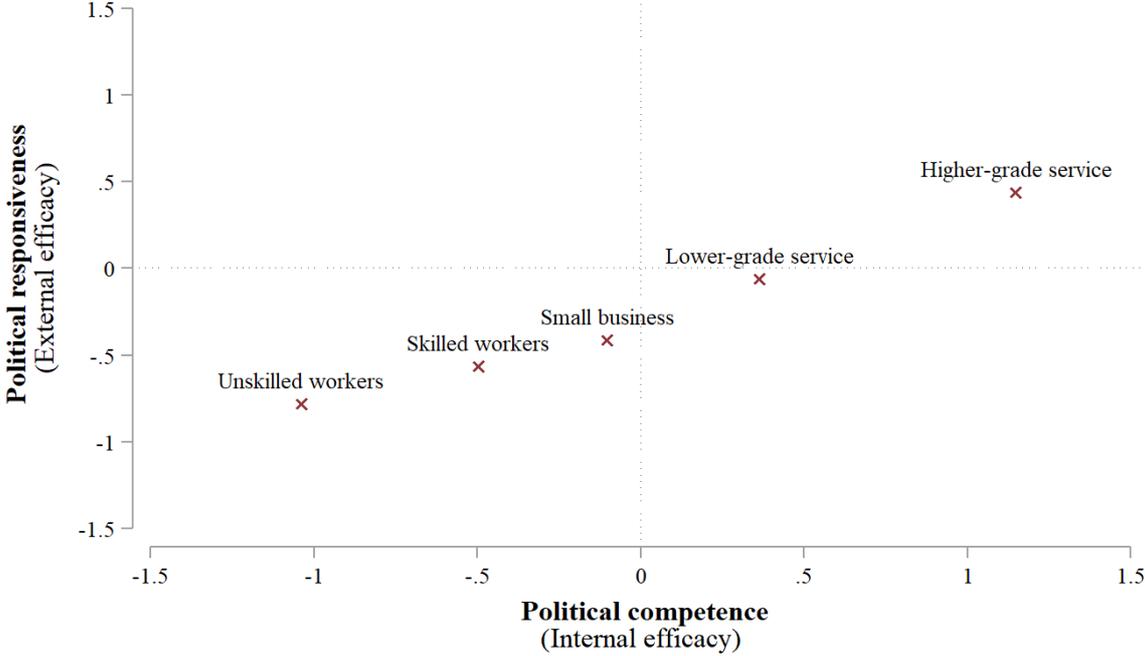
Data: European Social Survey 1-7.

Figure 2: Vote share of right-wing populist parties



Data: European Social Survey 1-7.

Figure 3: Internal and external efficacy



Data: European Social Survey 1-7.