

Social Blocs, Political Cleavages and Institutional Change in Switzerland

A Neorealist Approach

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Abstract

What are the relationships between political cleavages, the formation of social blocs and socio-economic characteristics such as income and education? The present master thesis analyzes the links between socio-economic factors, the formation of socio-political groups and social blocs in Switzerland. After assessing the country's political stability in the last decades, a long-run analysis of the socio-economic determinants of voting outcomes for the main Swiss social blocs are conducted. Finally, two latent class analysis are conducted to identify socio-political groups and to what extent the latter conflate with socio-economic groups. This master thesis is the first work to conduct such an analysis for Switzerland, and the aim of this work is to provide a first step into a overall analysis of the political economy of institutional change in Switzerland, from a neorealist perspective.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Swiss model under pressure

Switzerland represents an interesting case study for the analysis of institutional change. Despite some widespread stereotypes, such as the supposed slowness and rigidity of the Swiss political system due to the multiple veto points allowed through direct democracy, the country underwent important institutional, economic, as well as political change in the last decades. The Swiss model of capitalism is also difficult to classify in the varieties of capitalism (VoC) framework. Hall and Soskice (2001) famously ranked Switzerland among the coordinated market economies (CMEs). Despite the structural weakness of the Swiss federal state, the weakness of labor unions and the predominance of business interests, Switzerland's economy developed various non-market and non-competitive coordination mechanisms throughout the 20th century. One can think of, for instance, the cartelization of major Swiss industries which was actively supported by the state through public subsidies in the interwar period (see Boillat 2011 for the case of the Swiss watch industry) or the late creation and expansion of the Swiss welfare state after the Second World war, even though the latter remains small compared to other welfare state regimes (Obinger 1998). Swiss corporate governance also displayed strong differences from a market-based, shareholder-oriented system which typically prevails in Anglo-Saxon countries. Until the mid-1980s, Swiss corporate governance was an “insider-oriented” type of system characterized by self-regulation by private actors with minimal legal framework, “selective protectionism” (*Vinkulierung*) in favor of Swiss shareholders and blockholders and strong cooperation between business actors, associations and networks (Andre Mach et al. 2007).

According to Katzenstein (1985), small European states like Switzerland were likely to develop such coordinated and corporatist institutions. In fact, small domestic markets, international competitive pressure and the structural weakness of small states make the latter likely to develop some forms of “democratic corporatism”. But among democratic corporatism systems, Katzenstein still stressed that Switzerland could be classified as a “liberal variant” due to weak labor unions and the dominance of employer's associations.

Therefore, Swiss capitalism represents a peculiar case with both liberal and non-liberal institutions: weak labor union density and strong business side; labor market flexibility and weak state intervention are all features that could sort the Swiss case into the “liberal market economy” type of capitalism (LMEs). The uniqueness of the Swiss model, which combined

both strong liberal and coordinated elements, led Trampusch and Mach (2011) to talk about the “Swiss hybrid model” (SHM).

However, since the global neoliberal turn of the late 20th, the SHM is under pressure and is gradually mutating into a neoliberal type of capitalism (Trampusch and Mach 2011). The so-called “structural reforms” advocated by international organizations such as the OECD, but also promoted internally by various Swiss actors, led to subsequent waves of neoliberal reforms in almost all institutional areas. In the early 90s, the Swiss government launched the so-called economic revitalization program, largely influenced by publications from neoliberal Swiss economists such as David de Pury and representatives from the large internationalized public sectors. The revitalization program’s objectives were to improve the competitiveness of the Swiss economy by increasing competition in the domestic market and by liberalizing and privatizing the public sector. One of the main reforms was the Cartel Law of 1995, which created a competition commission (ComCo), reduced anti-competitive practices and the power of Swiss cartels. Some public sectors such as the telecom sector were liberalized and privatized: *Postes, téléphones, télégraphes* was partially privatized after the creation of Swisscom in 1998 (André Mach, Häusermann, and Papadopoulos 2003).

Regarding the liberalization of corporate governance, the *Stock Corporation law* of 1991 and the *Federal Act on Stock Exchange and Securities Trading* (SESTA) of 1995, by strengthening minority and foreign shareholder rights, strongly liberalized the so-called “*Forteresse des Alpes*” (“Alps Fortress”), a metaphor used by the international finance community to illustrate the protectionist Swiss financial system (David, Mach, and Schnyder 2015). The trade unions crisis of the 1990s facilitated further the reconsideration of collective labor agreements such as wage indexation schemes.

The neoliberal transformation of the Swiss socio-economic model is thus underway, but nonetheless far from complete and was met with some resistance. Trade unions and the Swiss left were partially successful in blocking some of the reforms through referendum. As such, the privatization of the energy sector met some resistance since the *law on the electricity market* was rejected through popular vote in 2002. The future of the Swiss energy sector, which remains partly public, is subject to heated debates given the deterioration of international context since the Covid crisis and the war in Ukraine¹. Other reforms directed towards labor market flexibility (1996), reducing pension rights (1996) and unemployment benefits (1997) also were blocked through referendum. Unions were particularly successful to compromise through the bilateral negotiations with the European Union (EU) and various “flanking measures” were adopted in exchange of unions’ support for Bilateral treaties (Oesch 2011).

As a result, the Swiss advocates of neoliberalism are still unsatisfied with the progress of the reforms and are keen on underlying the remaining rigidities of the Swiss Hybrid Model. In that respect, Gerhard Schwarz, director of the neoliberal think tank *Avenir Suisse* between

¹See for example the “seven good reasons” to privatize the electricity sector by *Avenir Suisse* (Grünenfelder 2022).

2011 and 2015, and one of the authors, with David de Pury, of the so-called “white books”, which were the first manifesto promoting a neoliberal transformation of the Swiss model in the 1990s (Leutwiler et al. 1991; Hauser et al. 1996), declared in 2015:

“It is absurd to believe that we live in a liberal society. The Swiss politico-economic system is mixed, as evidenced by the share of the state, compulsory levy, of 40%. The production of norms and reglementations grows exponentially. I am always surprised by the amount of people who still believe that we are in a neoliberal world. This is a *fake news*. The size of the state grows and the autonomy of the individual declines.” (“Gerhard Schwarz: «Une Suisse néolibérale? C’est une «fake news» - Le Temps” 2019, my translation)

On the other hand, the OECD still underlines the “barriers to free trade and competition in the domestic market” and the overdue of the pension reforms (OECD 2022, 12).

1.2 Research question, theoretical framework and plan

The extent to which the Swiss model will complete its mutation towards a neoliberal model represents thus a fundamental economic, political and institutional issue for the years to come. A thorough and non-normative analysis of the path taken by the Swiss model since the crisis of the 1990s is thus duly needed and is behind the motivation of the present paper. What kind of social base made this neoliberal transformation of the Swiss socio-economic model possible? Is this social base stable enough to complete this transformation? A way to answer these questions is to explore the extent to which the formation of social blocs are influenced by different factors: socio-economic characteristics, institutions or even political mediation. The scope of the present analysis will be limited to the identification of the main Swiss social blocs and the extent to which their composition and evolution are influenced by socio-economic characteristics. The first part will conduct a long-term analysis of voting outcomes for the main Swiss political parties with a special focus on income and educational levels. The objective of this part is to explore the evolution of the social basis for each Swiss party. Then, a second part will conduct two analyses of the compositions and determinants of socio-political groups in 1995 and 2019, using Swiss post-electoral survey data.

The aim of this essay is to conduct an analysis which would constitute a first step into a broader and comprehensive investigation of the political economy of institutional change in Switzerland. Far from the normative approach of mainstream economics, in which structural reforms simply constitute the sole and evident path towards its ideal model of perfect competition purged from rigidities, the methods and theory employed here are extensively based on the political economy of institutional change developed by Amable and Palombarini: the neorealist approach (2005, 2008).

1.2.1 Theoretical framework and concept definitions

The point of departure of this approach is the fundamental diversity of social expectations coming from the heterogeneity of the social structure. This diversity leads to a wide variety of social interests which are in perpetual contradiction and discord. Societies are thus characterized by permanent social conflict, which cannot be forever resolved but only temporarily regulated through the interaction between three spheres of social regulations: ideology, institutions and political mediation (Amable and Palombarini 2023).

Common socio-economic characteristics define socio-economic groups, which only partially translate into socio-political groups. The latter are groups which gather individuals sharing common social expectation regarding public policies and the desired socio-economic model. Regarding the relationships between socio-economic and socio-political groups, neorealism avoids the pitfalls of economic determinism. On the one hand, socio-demographic characteristics and thus socio-economic groups are partly captured by socio-political groups: agents with, for instance, low income level have more incentive to be in favour of pro-redistribution policies. However, they may not be in favor of redistribution if they are culturally persuaded by the dominant ideology to not follow their economic interests. Ideology thus mediates the translation of economic interests into explicit social demand. On the other hand, political mediation represents all the political strategies aimed at gathering socio-political groups into social blocs, which are thus almost never homogeneous (Amable 2021).

Finally, social blocs compete in the political arena with the objective to influence public policy towards the satisfaction of their social demands. A social bloc whose main demands are met and favored by public decision-making is the *dominant social bloc* (DSB). Social blocs whose demands are not favored by public policy are excluded from the DSB. In the neorealist framework, a political crisis corresponds to the collapse or destabilization of the DSB. Conversely, a stable existence of a DSB corresponds to a situation of *political equilibrium*. If the break-up of the DSB persists in time and no political strategy is successful in aggregating a new DSB, the crisis becomes *systemic* (Amable 2003; Amable and Palombarini 2005, 2008, 2023). The concept of political equilibrium should not let the reader think that the existence of a DSB leads to an unchanging stable situation; and, conversely, periods of systemic crises can persist in time and last several decades, as in France (Amable 2017). The contrasts between Italy and France on the one side, and Switzerland on the other makes the latter particularly interesting for the neorealist approach.

1.2.2 Switzerland: an interesting case study for the neorealist approach

For the analysis of social blocs and institutional change, Switzerland represents an interesting case study. The country is very different from France and Italy in terms of institutional and political institutions. Moreover, relative to Italy and France, which underwent deep periods of political and systemic crises in the last decades, Switzerland's political stability stands rather remarkably. This stability should, at first sight, not constitute a surprise: Switzerland ranks

consistently top among the best performing economies in a wide variety of socio-economic indicators: GDP per capita, Human Living Index (HDI), or even the Economic Complexity Index (ECI)². If one considers confidence in government as a good indicator of political stability, and if one looks at the data provided by the OECD on that matter, Switzerland indeed stands out as one of the most stable countries in the OECD.

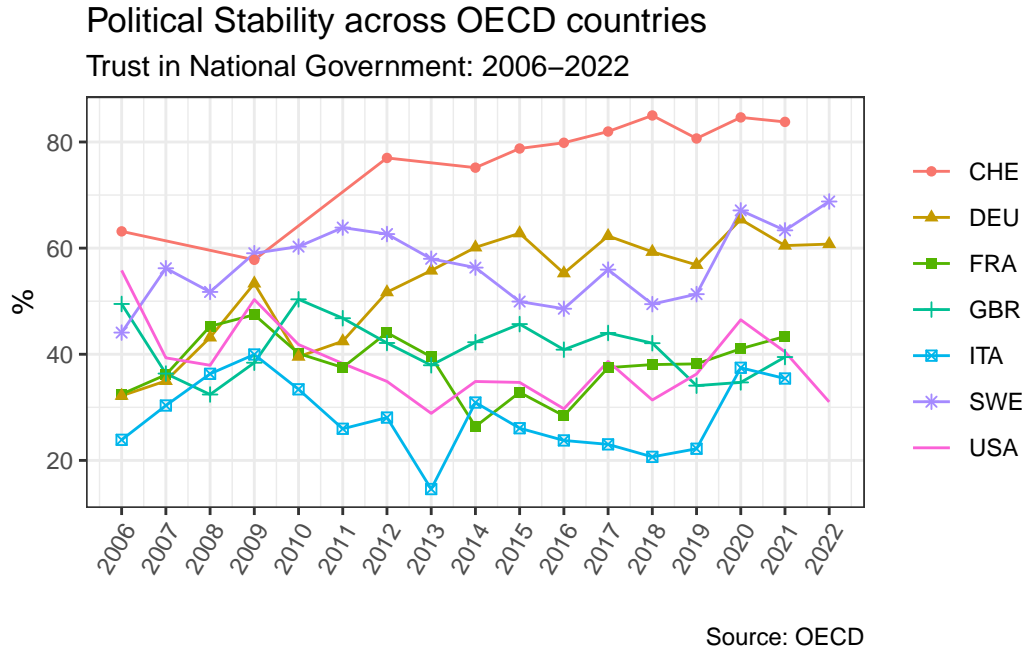


Figure 1.1: Share of people who report having confidence in the national government

Figure 1.1 shows political stability as measured by the share of respondents who declared having trust in national government in a sample of OECD countries from 2006 to 2022. Switzerland shows the highest level of trust among the countries shown in the figure. Swiss trust in government shows an upward trend since 2009 and the share of Swiss respondents declaring trust in government is consistently equal or above 80% since 2016. This stands in sharp contrast with Italy, France or the US, which show low level of trust. The latter can be interpreted as a reflection of the persistent political crisis in which France and Italy are plunged. The origins of the Italian crisis goes back to 1992 after the break-up of the DSB. The latter was constituted by large industrial firms, small firms and their employees, classes linked to rent and transfers and assisted classes whereas large firms' employees were excluded from the DSB. The existence of this DSB was made possible by public debt growth and high interest rates which satisfied the main policy demands of large industrial firms and small businesses (active

²In 2018, Switzerland ranks third in terms of GDP per capita corrected for purchasing power parity among OECD countries (OECD 2019, 14). Switzerland had also the highest HDI in 2021 (Nations 2022, 272) and the second highest ECI in 2021 ("Country Rankings | OEC. OEC - the Observatory of Economic Complexity" n.d.).

industrial policy through public debt and not taxation) as well as assisted classes and classes dependent on rent. However, as globalization and European integration put constraints on public debt growth in Italy, and as high interest rates reduced external competitiveness, this DSB collapsed due to the polarization of interests between large and small firms on the one side, and assisted classes, bureaucrats, classes linked to rent and transfers on the other side. (Palombarini 2001).

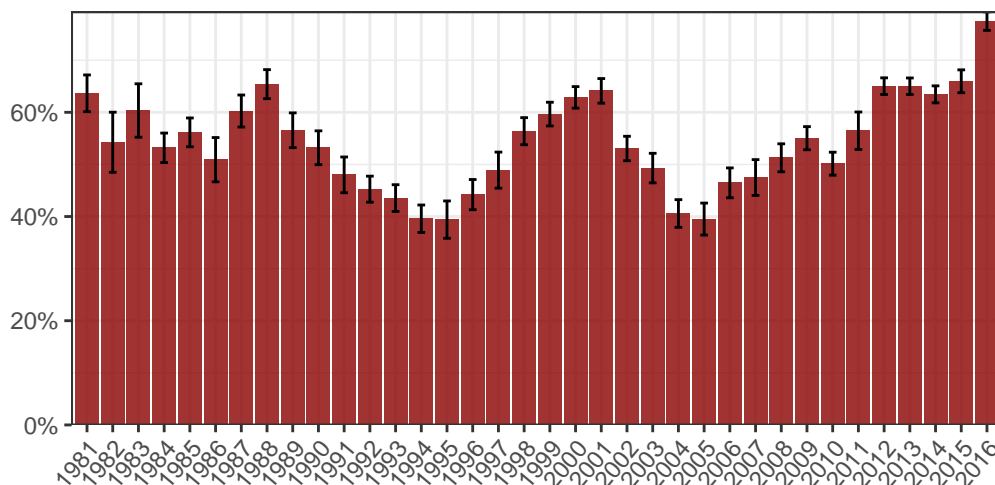
In France, the crisis started with the instability of the traditional left and right blocs, which used to govern alternately since the post-war period. The left bloc was constituted by the working class and the majority of public sector employees whereas the right bloc gathered self-employed, skilled, semi-skilled and white collars workers from the private sector, and farmers. The destabilization of the left and right blocs was the result of multiple factors such the relative decline of the working class, the economic crisis of the 1970s and European integration. The latter played a decisive role in the division of the left bloc between its neoliberal components, in favor of European integration as a tool to promote structural reforms in France, and its socialist branch still in favor of social and labor protection and state intervention (Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini 2012; Amable and Palombarini 2014).

Since the break-up of the DSB in France and Italy, both countries experienced successive attempts by political leaders to carry a neoliberal project, with mixed results. These attempts failed at first during the 2000s and 2010s. In France, Chirac and then Sarkozy presidencies were unable to implement a complete neoliberal transformation of the French socio-economic model due to the resistance of the popular components of the right bloc. In Italy, Berlusconi failed due to similar reasons. However, the political strategy carried in France by Hollande and then Macron, which aimed to explicitly disregard the social expectations of the popular groups of the left bloc and extend the coalition to the center, by adopting a clear-cut neoliberal and pro-EU agenda, was successful in aggregating a new social bloc, the *bloc bourgeois*, uniting the wealthiest and most educated groups of both the left and right blocs, which is nonetheless unstable and fragile because of its restricted size (Amable, Guillaud, and Palombarini 2012; Amable and Palombarini 2018).

However, other data sources show a more contrasted picture of Switzerland's political stability. The VOX studies, which conducted post-ballot surveys after each referendum voting session, were harmonized in a cumulative dataset which offer long-run data from 1981 to 2016. A similar figure as Figure 1.1 can thus be made to have a precise focus on Switzerland:

Figure 1.2 shows that Switzerland underwent contrasted periods of political stability and crises in the last decades. A first period ranging from 1981 to 1987 was rather stable despite some variation in trust. Figure 1.2 also depicts well the crisis of the 90s, which constitutes the most turbulent period in Switzerland's contemporary history. The crisis of the 1990s can be seen with the fall in trust from 65% in 1987 to a historical low level of 39% of Swiss respondents who declared to not have confidence in the federal government in 1995, three years after the rejection of the referendum for the adhesion to the European Economic Area (EEC). Swiss journalists, political observers, activist and scholars wrote extensively on this period which constitutes a rare case of deep political and economic crisis. Brunner and Sgier (1997) show

Confidence in Government Switzerland, 1981–2016



Source: VoxIt

Figure 1.2: Share of Swiss respondent trusting the government: 1981-2016

that Swiss citizens lost confidence in almost all political institutions and organizations during the 1990s. José Ribeaud, famous journalist who was one of the first Swiss television presenters, published the dramatically untitled book *When Switzerland will disappear* (*Quand la Suisse Disparaîtra*) in 1998. Journalists like José Ribeaud or Pietro Boschetti generally emphasize the multiple political scandals that happened during the 1990s. The first scandal was the resignation of the Radical Elisabeth Kopp from the federal council, in which she was the very first woman member, after she secretly tried to protect her husband from judiciary investigations. The “secret files scandal” happened the same year: the mass system of surveillance of the federal authorities was revealed to the Swiss public. The “secret files scandal” revealed that one twentieth of Swiss citizen and one third of foreign residents were recorded in the public authorities’ files. Last but not least, the dormant fund affair also broke out in 1995 and led to the Eizenstat report (1997) and the Bergier commission (1996), which strongly called into question the moral attitude and neutrality of Switzerland during World War II (Ribeaud 1998; Boschetti 2007).

However, the crisis of the 90s was not only political, but also economic. The stock market crash of October 1987 and the Gulf crisis of 1990-91 ended the longest post-war expansion of the Swiss economy which lasted from 1976 to 1981. The Gulf crisis provoked an inflationary shock which led the Swiss National Bank (SNB) to raise the policy rate. The Swiss economy entered into recession in 1991 and economic stagnation persisted throughout the 1990s. This crisis, along with the crisis of the 1970s, marked the return of unemployment in Switzerland, which

had disappeared during the post-war period, mainly because the country used to “export” a discriminated foreign labor force, a strategy which became impossible after crises of the 70s and 90s (OECD 1992).

Does the political and economic crisis of the 1990s constitute the sole period of instability in Switzerland? Figure 1.2 suggests that the early 2000s also represent a period of confidence crisis, as shown by the decline in trust from 2001 to 2005. The global 2001 recession which affected Switzerland surely played a role, but also various political and business events such as the bankruptcy of Swissair (2001). The results of the 2003 federal election also profoundly disturbed the Swiss political scene: the SVP became the first party of Switzerland and gained another seat in the federal council at the expense of the Christian Democratic People’s Party of Switzerland (PDC). Nonetheless, the upward trend in trust since 2005, which seems to be only slightly affected by the 2007 crisis and the following eurozone crisis, suggests that there is no notable confidence crisis since the 90s and early 2000s.

In view of the results shown in Figure 1.2, can the confidence crises of the 90s and early 2000s be interpreted as *political crises* in the sense given by the neorealist approach? A loss in confidence is not always synonym of political crisis if there is no break-up of the dominant social bloc. To answer this question, we thus need to explore the evolution of the Swiss social blocs since the post-war period.

Until now, neorealism has been first and foremost applied to Italy and France. The present contribution seeks to expand the scope to the Swiss case by focusing on the links between political cleavages, the formation and evolution of social blocs, and socio-economic factors such as income and education.

The next section presents regression results of long-term voting outcomes for the main Swiss parties using the VoxIt cumulative dataset. Then the results of two latent class analysis (LCA) using the Swiss Election Studies (SELECTS) data for 1999 and 2019. The research and analysis proposed here are new for the following reasons. First, the present research is, to the author’s knowledge, the first to apply neorealist methodology and conceptual framework to Switzerland. Second, a long-term analysis of voting outcomes using post-voting survey data such as VoxIt has never been done in the literature, one possible reason being researchers tend to focus more on post-electoral survey data. Last, this research is the first to conduct LCA using Swiss post-electoral survey data.

2 Social blocs, socio-economic factors and voting outcomes in Switzerland

2.1 The traditional Swiss bourgeois and left blocs: historical perspectives

A striking feature of the history of Switzerland's social blocs is the persistence and resilience of a liberal-right bloc since the creation of modern Switzerland in 1848, a bloc that the existing literature on the topic calls the *bourgeois bloc*. Tracing the history of Switzerland's social blocs is therefore essentially a matter of tracing that of the bourgeois bloc. However, we shall see that tracing this history calls into question the extent to which this bourgeois bloc can truly be described as bourgeois.

The history of the Swiss bourgeois bloc goes back to the creation of modern Switzerland. The combination of a religious and urban-rural divide between Radicals-Protestants modernizers and Catholic federalists, which was historically one of the most structuring conflicts in Switzerland, led to the Sonderbund civil war (1847) and the foundation of modern Switzerland in 1848. The federal institutions elaborated during and in the decades following the first Swiss constitution of 1848 can be interpreted as a social compromise between the losers of the Sonderbund civil war, the Catholic-Conservative coalition opposed to the centralization and modernization of the Swiss Confederation, and the victorious Radicals who were on average Protestants and bourgeois from urban areas ([Sciarini 2023](#)). However, these two blocs were highly heterogeneous and subject to internal contradictions.

From the outset of their movement, the Radicals were gathered by an unitary illusion: the pretention to transcend cleavages running through Swiss society and unite all its elements thanks to an encompassing goal: the modernization and centralization of the Swiss state. Far from homogenous, the Radical bloc was a kaleidoscopic mass-movement constituted by the working class through the Grütli Union and by an elite gathering entrepreneurs, bankers, journalists, lawyers and teachers, who were nonetheless divided over the role of the Swiss state. The Democrats were partisans of a more centralized and interventionist state while the liberal or “manchesterian” Radicals, were more federalist and in favor of laissez-faire. This divide between interventionists and liberals was made explicit as early as 1852 over the issue of the nationalization of the Swiss railway industries. Supporters of a state-run railroad network, represented by for instance Jakob Stämpfli and Johann Jakob Speiser, were opposed by liberal

Radicals such as Alfred Escher, who were industrialists and bankers close to the private railway companies, when they weren't the owners themselves ([Meuwly 2010](#)).

Regarding the Catholic-Conservative bloc, the latter was from the start a cross-class coalition, constituted by, of course, the Catholic elite, but also by peasants, farmers, artisans and the commercial middle class from rural areas. These groups were united by Catholicism, but also by anti-modernism and federalism. This conservative coalition was the first to make extensive use of the constitutional and optional referendum (respectively 1848 and 1874) to block the modernization promulgated by the Radicals. While the Radicals were convinced that the idea of the Swiss nation would transcend divisions and social conflict, the Catholic-Conservative believed that religion, rather than the Swiss state, would endorse this role ([Altermatt 1979](#)).

As industrialization, proletarianization and unionization intensified in the late 19th, the hegemony of the Radical mosaic gradually shattered. Part of the democrats and of the working class joined or even founded socialist organizations, as seen the creation of the Swiss socialist party in 1888 by a former Radical, Albert Steck. The creation of the latter and of the Radical-democratic party (PRD) in 1894 marked the beginning of the Radical shift towards liberal stances, which became clear-cut after the general strike of 1912, after which “a long-denied class conflict became evident” ([Meuwly 2010, 49](#)). Conversely, industrialization and class conflict represented an opportunity for an extension of the social basis of the Catholic-Conservatives bloc towards the working class. The global development of a Catholic social doctrine, beginning with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1881), was integrated by the Swiss Catholic-Conservatives, who then tried to attract parts of the working class ([Altermatt 1979](#)).

This polarization around class conflict between a left and right bloc became even more salient after the second general strike of 1918, which was the biggest strike and social protest in Swiss history. The latter was followed by the introduction of the proportional representation system: the Radicals lost their hegemony in the parliament and the Christian-Democrats and the Socialists became important political actors in the National Council. The Socialist Party (PS) consolidated a left bloc while the Radical-Democrats (PRD), the Christian-Democrats (PDC) and the Agrarians formed an alliance against the left. This coalition between the PRD, PDC and Agrarians and its close links with business association such as the Vorort (1870) led many observers to name this dominant coalition the “bourgeois bloc” ([André Mach 2007](#)).

However, the extent to which this dominant bloc can truly be described as bourgeois must be questioned. In the definition given by Swiss social scientists, the bourgeois bloc refers to a political coalition between the Radical-Democrats, the Christian-Democrats and the Agrarians (now UDC) and its close ties with business interest associations. This bloc is hence bourgeois only because it gathers right-wing parties and business interest associations, a definition which is rather narrow and can be misleading since it does not take into account the social basis of the bloc. Calling the right-wing coalition bourgeois ignores, for instance, the fact that this bloc gathered some popular socio-economic groups such as small-business owners and peasants, mainly through the Agrarian Party. In the sense given by Amable and Palombarini, the bloc bourgeois observed in France corresponds to the aggregation of the wealthiest and

most educated groups of the traditional left and right blocs. I argue that, from a neorealist perspective, the Radical bloc of the 19th century and the right-wing coalition of the 20th cannot be described as bourgeois and that other terms such as “liberal-conservative” or simply “right-wing” blocs are more suited.

In fact, until the post-war period, the evolution of the Swiss social blocs can thus be resumed as follows. From the middle to the late 19th century, the Radicals formed a strongly heterogeneous but dominant social bloc. This dominant social bloc was composed by the working class (mainly through the Grütli Union), and an urban elite composed by the most educated (journalists, lawyers, teachers) and the wealthy industrial bourgeoisie (entrepreneurs, bankers...). This DSB was united by their willingness to modernize the Confederation against the Catholic-Conservatives. A second period, from the late 19th to the second World War, marked the recomposition of the DSB and its transformation into a liberal-conservative political bloc. Part of the working class and of the democrats (educated elite) joined the emerging socialist-left bloc while the Christian-Democrats attracted part of the working class while being progressively incorporated into the DSB, along with the Agrarian party which represented the peasant and farmer classes.

Analyses of the first Swiss post-electoral surveys which were conducted in the 1970s show the heterogeneity of the Swiss “bourgeois bloc” and that the word bourgeois is not valid for the right bloc as a whole. The social basis of the Liberal-Radical party was constituted by large employers/liberal professions and managers. The UDC relied heavily on small business owners’ support while the PDC’s social basis was rather cross-class ([Rennwald 2014](#); [Tawfik 2019](#)). Therefore, of the three right-wing government parties, only the Liberal-Radical party’s social basis can truly be described as bourgeois. Regarding the support for the Socialist party, the latter was neither a bourgeois nor solely a popular party, but a hybrid-class party whose social basis was constituted by socio-cultural professionals and production workers ([Rennwald 2020](#)).

The coalition between the Radical-Democrats, Christian-Democrats and Agrarians against the left bloc took deeply roots into the Swiss socio-political system: it persisted during the post-war period and still shapes Swiss politics to some extent nowadays ([Mazzoleni and Meuwly 2013](#); [Meuwly 2010, 2008](#)). A striking feature of the Swiss DSB is its persistence and resilience since 1848: even though this bloc underwent important transformations, especially after the introduction of the proportional system in 1918, it was always mediated by right-wing parties, first the Radicals and then an extended coalition with the Catholic-Conservative and the Agrarians. Despite its incorporation in the parliament and government, the left bloc never truly became dominant in Switzerland.

However, since the break-up of the post-war Keynesian “historical compromise” between the traditional Swiss left and right-wing parties during the so-called “decade of all dangers” of the 90s ([Boschetti 2007](#)), this so-called bourgeois bloc is undergoing important transformations, that some authors interpreted as various forms of latent political crises. The Swiss political scene is still marked by the rise of the Swiss People Party (UDC), one of the most successful far-right populist parties in Europe. The electoral success of the UDC is often associated with

the destabilization of the traditional bourgeois bloc, which entered a phase of “cacophonic” crisis (Meuwly 2008) which still persists in the early 2020s.

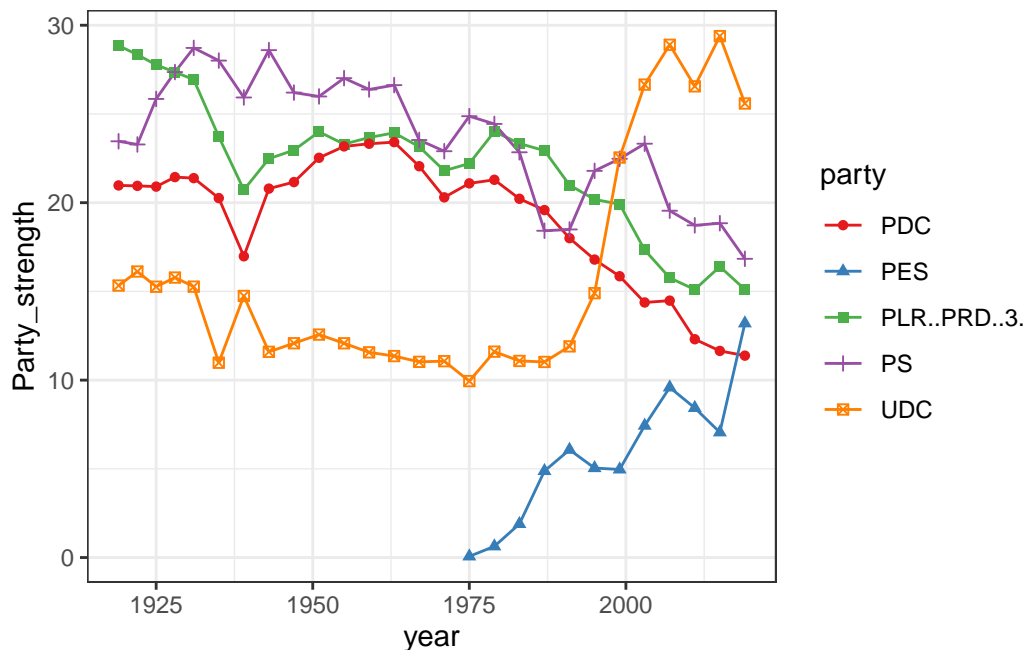


Figure 2.1: Party Strength: 1918-2019

In fact, all the Swiss traditional main parties, the Swiss Socialist Party (PS) The Radical-Liberals (PLR) and the PDC, are in decline since the post-war period (see Figure 2.1). On the right, the crisis can be seen through the fall in vote shares (apart from the SVP); and the increase in party merges and re-configurations. In 2008, the Bourgeois Democratic Party (PBD) was created after a scission from the SVP. One year later, the Radicals, who created the Swiss modern state in 1848 and dominated Swiss politics until the first half of the 20th century, merged with the liberals to create the PLR. The PBD, whose creation disturbed the composition of a reputed unchangeable federal council, then merged with the PDC to create *Le Centre* (the Center) in 2021. The federal election of 2023 led to major historical change for the Swiss right. The PLR, very far from its former hegemonic domination of Swiss politics, is now in the fourth place in terms of low chamber parliamentary seats.

2.2 Swiss social blocs and socio-economic factors: 1980-2016

How have the social bases of the Swiss left, center-right and radical-right evolved since the 70s? How are the support for the main Swiss social blocs influenced by socio-economic characteristics? The objective of this chapter is to explore the composition of the main Swiss social blocs

in terms of socio-economic characteristics and assess their evolution since the post-war period. The previous chapter asked whether the periods of political instability measured through confidence in the Swiss government in the 1990s and early 2005 can be interpreted as a political crisis. By exploring the support for the main Swiss parties since 1981, this question can be partially answered, as well as the main research question of the present paper.

Moreover, a recent trend in political economy developed a tremendous analysis of the long run transformations of political cleavages, social blocs, and voting outcomes in almost all democratic countries around the world. The popularity of inequality studies, after the contributions of renown economists such as Atkinson (2015), Milanovic (2016) and of course Piketty (Piketty 2014), economists recently became interested in the problematic of social conflict and political cleavages. One possible explanation of this sudden interest is the inequality paradox: increasing inequality and neoliberal reforms did not pave the way for growing support for redistribution, taxation of top income and wealth owners, or for left parties. The same paradox could be applied to a “climate change paradox”, that is, the fact that the growing emergency or environmental issues were not followed by increasing support for green parties. For instance, the Swiss green parties were the biggest losers in the 2023 federal elections.

Those paradox thus gave way to a recent literature linking political cleavages and voting outcomes as function of a set of socio-economic factors, mainly income and education level. Trying to explore this inequality paradox, Piketty (2018) underlines the fact that, rather than bringing back class-based divide back to its post-war salience, the global rise in inequality since the 1970s was followed by the emergence of a new cleavage and a multi-elite party system. During the post-war period, the electoral support for the left parties in The US, UK and France was mainly constituted by popular classes with low income and education levels whereas right-wing parties were supported by high income and education voters. The popular element of the support for the left blocs then transformed in the 1970-80s: left parties became the bloc of the highly educated, thus becoming the “brahmin right”, whereas the right kept the support of the wealthy (“merchant right”) (Piketty 2018, 2019). A further project, which gave birth to the World Political Cleavage and Inequality Database (WPID), showed that these transformations affected almost all Western democracies (Armory Gethin, Martinez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021).

Underlying the rise of a new cleavage in the 70s and 80s, Piketty and the WPID tackle a topic which is well-known in political science: the emergence of a cleavage centered around cultural values, that Piketty calls the “nativists-internationalists” divide, which cuts across the traditional class conflict and is the result of the increase in average education level and of globalization. The combination of this new cultural cleavage with the traditional class-based conflict draws a bi-dimensional political space in which four social blocs are possible: an internationalist-egalitarian bloc which is on the left both culturally and economically; an internationalist-inegalitarian bloc on the left culturally but economically on the right; a nativist-inegalitarian bloc on the right culturally and economically; and a nativist-egalitarian bloc which is culturally conservative but economically on the left (Piketty 2018, 2019). This

“cultural cleavage” has been given as many labels as it has analysts among political scientists: “materialist-postmaterialist” divide for Inglehart (1971, 1990; 1987); the “libertarian-authoritarian” cleavage (Kitschelt 1994; Flanagan and Lee 2003); winners vs losers of globalization (Hanspeter Kriesi et al. 2006; H. Kriesi et al. 2008; Teney, Lacewell, and Wilde 2014); the “transnational cleavage” (Hooghe and Marks 2018) or the “universalism-particularism” cleavage (Bornschier 2010; Zollinger 2022).

Testing the relevance of the brahmin left vs merchant right divide, Amable and Darcillon (2022b) offer contrasting results. On the one hand, preference for redistribution decreases with both education and income levels. On the other hand, support for globalization (such as immigration) is not only structured by education level, but also positively associated with income. Amable and Darcillon (2022b) suggest the possibility of a rapprochement between the brahmin left and the merchant right, giving birth to a bourgeois bloc uniting the wealthiest and most educated groups from the left and the right. Amable and Darcillon (2022a) show that the brahmin left vs merchant right divide has not taken place in every country and that the classical popular left versus bourgeois right opposition is still relevant for many countries.

In this context of multi-elite party system and multidimensional political divides, Switzerland is an interesting case study. A widespread idea claims that the class-based cleavage always played a relatively minor role in Switzerland. On the one hand, class conflict was always cut across a wide variety of other divides: religious, linguistic or regional. As a result, Switzerland was a forerunner in the emergence of this “cultural” cleavage, but also in the precociousness and strength of the educational shift. Durrer de la Sota, Gethin, and Martinez-Toledano (2021) offer a detailed analysis of the links between socio-economic factors and the vote for the main Swiss social blocs. During the post-war period until the 1990s, the left bloc (mainly the PS) was supported by low income and education voters while right-wing parties showed different patterns of class support, which call into question the extent to which this bourgeois bloc can truly be characterized as “bourgeois”. Of the three parties constituting the bourgeois bloc, only one of them, the PRD-PLR party, had clearly a bourgeois composition since it is consistently supported by the most wealthy and educated groups since the post-war period. The PDC and the UDC cannot really be described as “bourgeois” since, according to Durrer de la Sota, Gethin, and Martinez-Toledano (2021), the support for the two parties was negatively associated with income and education. While this negative association tends to decline for the PDC, it became even more strong for the UDC since the 90s. After this period, the left bloc became “brahmin” in the sense that it gathered strong support among the most educated classes, while its popular support moved either into abstention or to the UDC.

The transformation of party systems into a multi-elite and tripolar political space came with important change in the structural basis of party support. Oesch and Rennwald (2010) show that, in Switzerland, the cultural cleavage is rooted in the class structure, and caused a realignment between class and party support. Before this shift took place, the traditional left bloc politically represented by the Socialist Party was a hybrid-class coalition gathering socio-cultural professionals (teachers, academics, journalists...) and production workers, but also from technicians, clerks and service workers (Rennwald 2020).

This strong class heterogeneity of the Swiss left declined: an analysis of Swiss post-election surveys for 2003 and 2007 show that the Swiss left was deserted by production workers who directed their support for the Swiss People’s party due to cultural issues (Oesch and Rennwald 2010). Using European Social Survey data for 2011 and 2015, Rennwald (2020) show that socio-cultural professionals remain the only “party preserve” of the Swiss left.

Oesch and Rennwald (2018) show that the rise of the radical-right and of the cultural cleavage transformed the patterns of class voting. The working class, or at least some of its constituencies such as production workers, are still attracted to the left due to their economic interests, but also by the far-right because of cultural issues, leaving socio-cultural professionals as the sole “stronghold” of the left. Small artisans and business owners are also divided between their support to the center-right and the far-right: their economic preferences make them closer to the center-right while their cultural preferences are closer to the far-right.

The empirical agenda of the present study is to test the validity and relevance of the literature reviewed above. More specifically, how are socio-economic factor shaping the composition of each Swiss social blocs? The objective of the empirical analysis conducted here is to test the following hypotheses derived from the contributions of the WPID project (Piketty 2018, 2019; Durrer de la Sota, Gethin, and Martínez-Toledano 2021; Armory Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021; Amory Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2022); Oesch and Rennwald (2018); and Amable and Darcillon (2022b, 2022a):

1. *Brahmin left versus merchant right hypothesis*

Over time, the association between education and support for the left should increase while a negative link between income and support for the left should be observed. A positive relationship between support for the right and income should remain rather stable, with no clear or negative association and evolution with education level.

2. *Bourgeois bloc hypothesis*

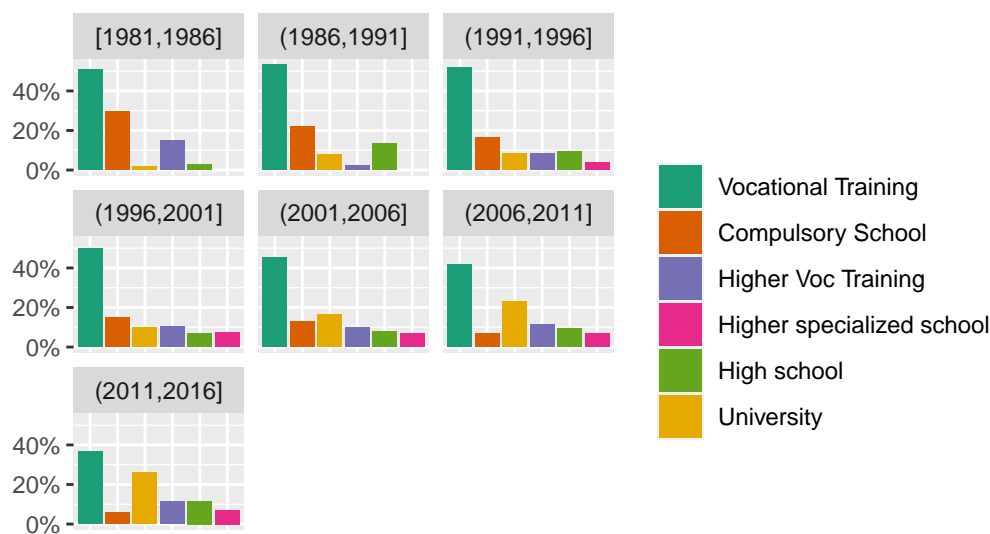
The support for the right and liberal policies (pro-market and anti-redistribution) increases with both income and education levels.

2.2.1 Data and empirical strategy

To test the hypotheses above, two types of data sources are especially relevant. The *Swiss Election Studies (SELECTS) cumulative dataset* is a harmonized dataset merging every Swiss post-election (federal assembly elections, which take place every four years) surveys from 1971 to 2019 (Tresch and Lutz 2022). Since SELECTS data are already drastically analyzed by the literature (for instance by Durrer de la Sota, Gethin, and Martínez-Toledano (2021)), I contribute to the existing research by analyzing another data source, the *VoxIt* cumulative dataset which harmonize every post-vote surveys from 1981 to 2016 (Brunner, Kriesi, and Lorétan 2017).

The main dependent variables are dummy variables for party identification and political leaning. Some variables regarding issue position on public policies such as redistribution, state intervention and equal rights between Swiss citizen and foreigners are also considered.

The main independent variables are education and income levels. The variable “educ” is a qualitative variables on the highest achieved educational formation with 6 modalities ranging from primary school to university. It is important here to stress some peculiarities of the Swiss educational system. Switzerland’s education system is strongly based on vocational training. As a result, other education categories tend to be missing for a lot of year-periods of the dataset. To solve this problem, but also to simplify the data structure, years are aggregated into several time periods to avoid separation issues.



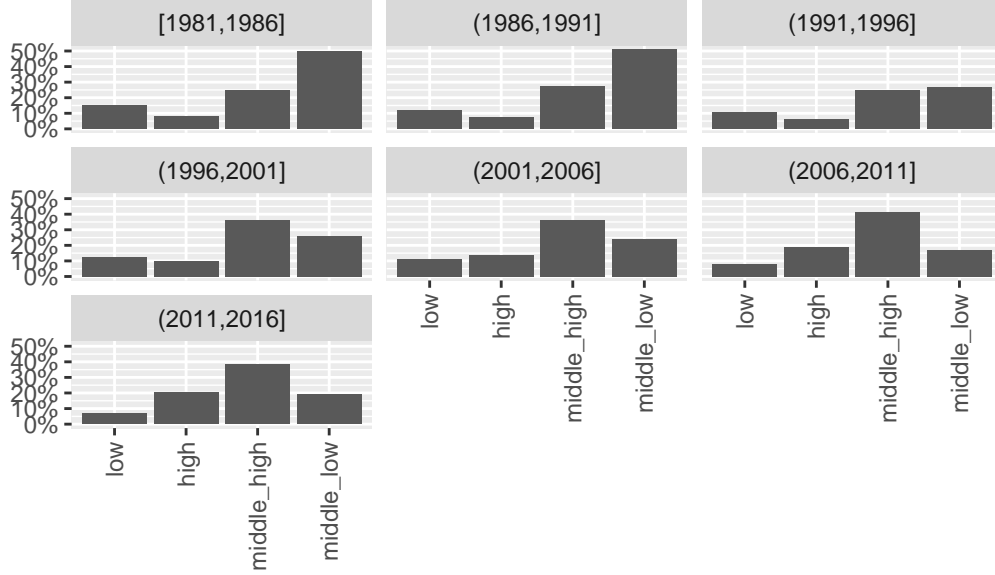
Source: VoxIt

Figure 2.2: Education Levels in Switzerland: 1981-2016

Figure 2.2 shows the proportions of each level of education and their evolution over time. In the 1980s, most of the Swiss individuals completed either vocational training or compulsory school. The share of compulsory schooling declined over time, reflecting the overall increase in average education, as seen also by the increase in the share of university graduates. The share of vocational training declined over time, but is still the most widespread education level in Switzerland. For the regression analysis, the categories “university” and “higher specialized school” are merged together since the absence of the latter in the first two time periods could cause estimation issues. This does not pose a major issue since higher specialized schooling is rather similar to university in Switzerland.

Regarding income levels, the dataset contains two variables. The variable “nivmena” repre-

sents the household's standard of living in four categories (high, middle-high, middle-low, low) available from 1981 to 1991 whereas “revenu” is an income bracket variable in five categories available from 1992 to 2016. To harmonize these two variables in order to construct one single income or standard of living variable, I recode the variable “revenu” in order to make it similar to “nivmena” by grouping the income brackets categories 3 (from 5'001 chf to 7'000 chf) and 4 (from 7'001 to 9'000) into the “middle-high” category. This harmonized variable is used only in regressions for party support because political leaning and issue position variables are not available until 1992 (thus for these variables the variable “revenu” is used as an independent variable for income).



source: VoxIt

Figure 2.3: Income levels in Switzerland: 1981-2016

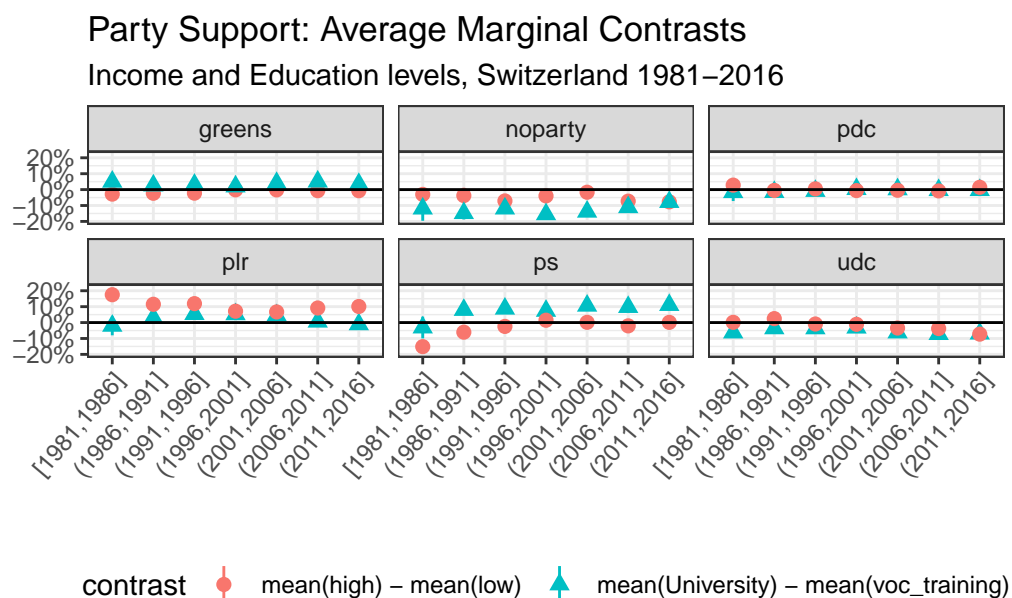
A series of binary logit regressions for party support, political leaning, opinion on redistribution, state intervention and equal rights between Swiss and foreigners are run. The results presented in this section come essentially from the following model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_I I_{it} + \beta_E E_{it} + \beta_{I_{it}E_{it}} I_{it}E_{it} + \gamma X_{it} + \eta_1 Year + \eta_2 Year I_{it} + \eta_3 Year E_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (2.1)$$

With I_{it} and E_{it} the income and education level of individual i in period t and X a vector of socio-demographic characteristics control variables which were available in the dataset for all time periods. The controls are for age (grouped into 4 categories), gender, religion, linguistic region (french, german, italian and romanche), marital status and a dummy for house ownership. $Year$ are dummy variables for the time periods and ϵ_{it} is the error term. The models

include interaction terms between education and income as well as between income, education and time period in order to assess the temporal evolution of the correlation between the dependent and main explanatory variables. Income and Education are treated as categorical variables, with vocational training and low income as reference levels.

One possible methodological issue of the VoxIt dataset is the clustering structure of the data. On the one hand, the observations (Swiss citizen) are clustered into cantons, which are an important level in Switzerland. On the other hand, the time structure and trend of the data are highly relevant for our research question. The cantons represent an important institutional and political level in Switzerland, and it is thus likely that individuals within the same canton are not independent and show some patterns and correlation. To assess this potential issue, multilevel regression with years and cantons as levels were conducted. However, the results (see appendix) of multilevel models show that the intra-class correlation coefficient are low for the cantonal level, indicating that there is not much difference between cantons. Moreover, the results of the multilevel regressions and Equation 2.1 are very similar.

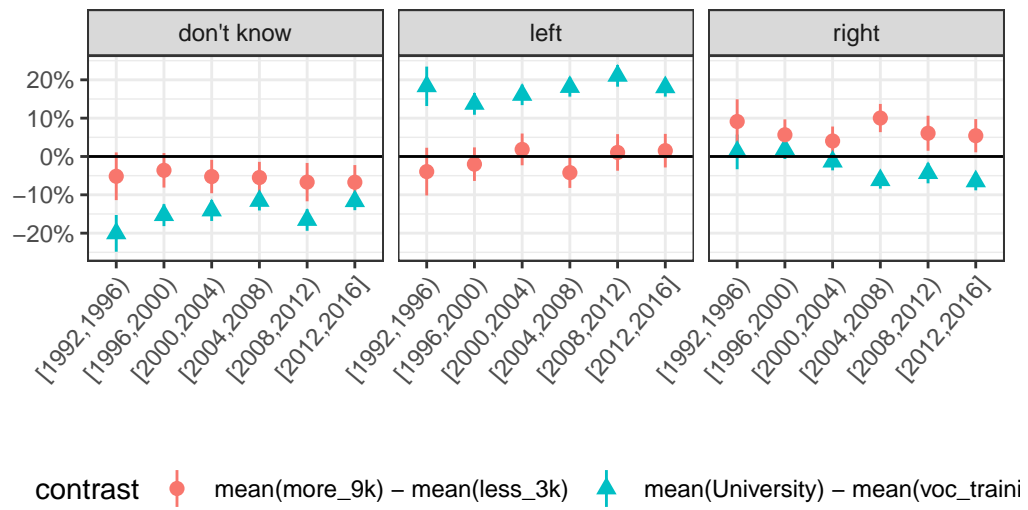


Source: VoxIt

Figure 2.4: Party support in Switzerland: 1981-2016. Average difference in probabilities between the highest and lowest income groups and between university and vocational training graduates.

Political Leaning: Average Marginal Contrasts

Income and Education levels, Switzerland 1992–2016

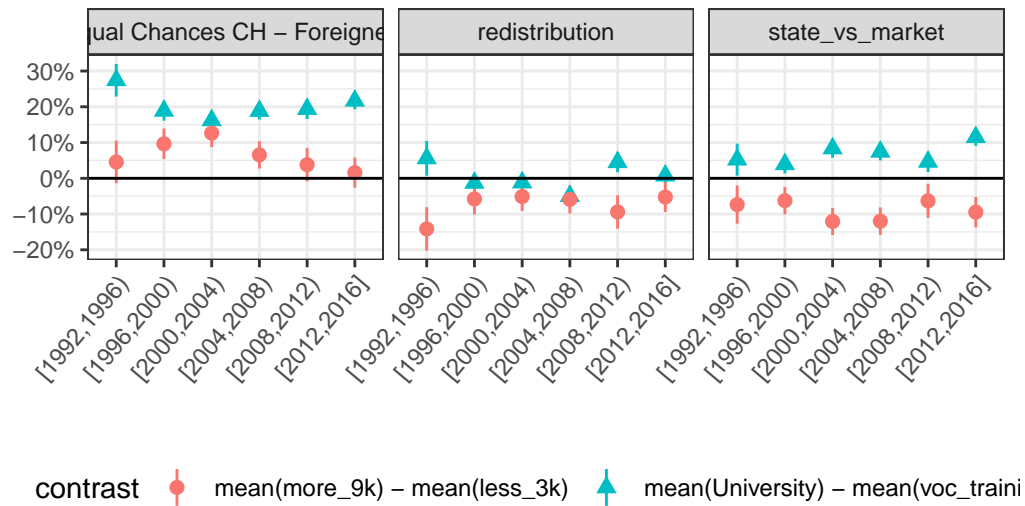


Source: VoxIt

Figure 2.5: Political leaning in Switzerland: 1981-2016. Average difference in probabilities between the highest and lowest income groups (less than 3000CHF per month vs more than 9000CHF) and between university and vocational training graduates.

Political Leaning: Average Marginal Contrasts

Income and Education levels, Switzerland 1992–2016



Source: VoxIt

Figure 2.6: Opinion on several social issues in Switzerland: 1992-2016. Average difference in probabilities between the highest and lowest income groups (less than 3000CHF per month vs more than 9000CHF) and between university and vocational training graduates.

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