

Why has the pattern of class voting in Western countries changed in recent decades?

In this essay, I argue that class voting has decreased in Western countries in recent decades and that this decrease is largely the result of party changes. Especially social-democratic parties, in response to a growing middle class and a declining working class, have moved towards the centre. As a result, the working class is no longer voting for social-democratic parties as much as it used to, and the class vote has weakened. First, I will show that class voting has decreased by looking at the voting behaviour of different classes, after discussing the methodological challenges involved in measuring class. Then, I argue that this is not the result of bottom-up changes within the working class: they have not become more individualistic, and the way people subjectively view their class has not meaningfully changed. Rather, the data show a continuation of class and class identification. I argue that the decline of the class vote and the reduction of working-class turnout are the results of top-down changes in the party system. The convergence of political parties has left the working class unrepresented and excluded. However, far-right parties have recaptured some of the lost class vote, which indicates that the class vote can return.

Demise of the class vote

In the United Kingdom, class voting stayed largely static from the 1950s to the 1990s. After that point, class voting rapidly declined. According to BES (British Election Survey) data, the proportion of working-class people who supported the Labour Party in 1990 was around 45%; by 2010, this number had declined to around 20%. At the same time, the middle classes increasingly started supporting the Labour Party (Evans and Tilley 2017, ch. 7). This trend can be observed in many advanced Western democracies. Jansen et al. (2013) pooled data for 15 Western democracies and found that, after controlling for factors such as age, gender, and education, the class vote had declined from 1960 to 2005. In fact, the class vote has even somewhat reversed in the United States. Historically, the working class voted for the Democrats and the business class voted Republican. However, since the 1990s, affluent, highly educated voters increasingly vote Democratic, while lower-income, white voters (such as in the Rust Belt and other rural areas) increasingly vote Republican (Zacher 2024).

However, there are some methodological challenges in measuring class. One cannot simply distinguish between the working and middle class but must differentiate further. Evans and Tilley use the EGP (Erikson Goldthorpe Portocarero) class schema, which

Met opmerkingen [OB1]: Good essay: maybe a bit too focussed on british politics. Can mention more nordic countries/continental europe (oesh & rennwald)

maybe you could talk more about further arguments like green/left-liberal or horizontal cleavages such as public/private (big government vs small government + teachers get socialized, age (socialization), renter/homeowner etc. but it is more risky.

Met opmerkingen [OB2]: Marx: who owns the means of production

- Recently no longer popular: working class do start owning the means of the production (like stock ownership through pensions) and the professional and managerial class does not really fit into this
- Normative aspect is still useful: the relationship of exploitation and the economic inequality -> leading to class consciousness etc.

Weber: occupational classes and employment relationships

- Market position determines life chances
- Security
- How easy a job can be monitored
- Critique: classes are still these macrocategories, so how valid is it to just look at occupation

Bourdieu:

- Distinguish economic and cultural capital which determines your class
- Maybe no longer useful because everything gets incorporated into classes, sometimes even age

Met opmerkingen [OB3]: Not every country had a big class vote before. Competition of the cleavage, other cleavages might have been more important like in the US or in postcommunist countries.

So maybe its more of a convergence of countries with a high class vote to countries with a traditionally lower class vote with the jansen et al.

Met opmerkingen [OB4]: It is not always fully used as there are data challenges

divides both the working and middle classes into more detailed categories by looking at employment relations, as shown in Figure 1. Smallenbroek et al. (2024) show that this both achieves criterion and construct validity: the classes correspond to the

employment relationships and to other external indicators of social advantage that they are supposed to measure. Though EGP does simplify the upper class somewhat.

Secondly, voting is not solely based on objective class. Subjective class identification does not always equal the objective occupational class. This complicates the research, as voting is probably more influenced by subjective than objective class, which is harder to measure.

Has class disappeared?

Many authors have argued that as we become a post-industrial society, class identities should disappear. Beck, for instance, argued for the individualisation of society. He suggested that although differences between people have remained, risks are more evenly spread across classes. Especially *subjective* class identities should become more insignificant. This is important because, as Evans and Tilley (2017, ch. 2) argue, inequality has remained roughly the same: class differences in life chances, income, health, and security have persisted or even widened. Beck argues that subjective rather than objective classes have become more relevant (Heath, Curtice, and Elgenius 2009).

However, the data show the opposite. Heath et al. (2009) demonstrate class identity has persisted. Around half of BES respondents identified as middle or working class both in 1964 and 2005. The share identifying as working class actually fell less than would be expected given the decline in the, occupationally defined, working class. In other words, more middle-class people identify as working class than before. Furthermore, not only have objective differences and subjective class identification remained stable, but class-related attitudes have also stayed the same. The working class is still more economically egalitarian and more socially conservative and authoritarian than the more economically and socially liberal middle class (Evans and Tilley 2017, ch. 4). Therefore, the individualisation thesis cannot be correct. The lines between classes have not been blurred, and class remains a strong predictor of attitudes.

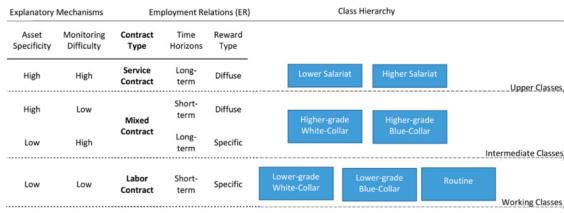


Figure 1: Goldthorpe's conceptual framework of class hierarchy. Source: Smallenbroek et al. (2024).

Met opmerkingen [OB5]: Discussion of EGP is not really connected to other parts of the essay, either leave it out or maybe connect it to the disappearance of class. If class is occupation then you could connect it to that it cannot disappear.

Met opmerkingen [OB6]: What causes this difference? And why has it been rising?

- Family, if parents were working class
- Education, university educated people get socialised into thinking that they are working class
- Misperception (rich people think they're poor or other way around), normative aspect of class

Met opmerkingen [OB7]: Too harsh, we do live in a more individualized society, but you can just still divide society into different groups.

There are multiple ways of looking at individualisation, you should only critisize one of them

Top-down changes

If voters have not changed, there must be another reason why the class vote has waned. I argue that it is mainly the result of parties moving towards the median voter. Evans and Tilley (2017, ch. 6) show this through convergence in ideological position, symbolic class appeals, and descriptive representation (the social background of MPs). Historically, Labour and the Conservatives were deeply divided over redistribution, welfare, and state ownership, but by the 1990s, Labour became more economically liberal, and the Conservatives moved towards the economic centre after Thatcherism. Evans and Tilley (2017, ch. 6) show this by using party manifesto data and surveys of perceived party ideology. Secondly, Labour once explicitly addressed “working people”, “trade unions”, and “the class struggle”. Under Tony Blair, this was replaced with appeals to “hard-working families” and the “middle class”, and there were fewer symbolic class references. Finally, Labour became increasingly dominated by people from middle class and highly educated backgrounds rather than coming heavily from manual and trade-union backgrounds. As a result, the Conservatives and Labour have become socially indistinguishable, and this is also reflected in people’s perceptions of the parties.

Met opmerkingen [OB8]: I'm missing:

- professionalization
- loss of grassroots
- catch-all parties

As a result of Labour’s shift towards the centre, the working class is no longer represented in politics. This is the main reason for the decline in the class vote. The working class is now excluded from politics because it is no longer worthwhile for political parties to cater to their needs. They have simply become a smaller group. Consequently, social-democratic parties have adopted more centrist viewpoints to capture middle-class voters and to stay electorally relevant. If a party does not represent you, Evans and Tilley argue that there are three possible reactions: change your vote, stop voting, or change your opinions to align with the party. Because there was not really another viable option for the working class in the UK, the first option was limited. Although a minority of voters adjust their values to those of the party, the most common outcome is abstention. Where working-class turnout once equalled that of the middle class, it has declined sharply as they no longer feel represented. The UK has thus become more similar to the US in its class-based turnout gap (Evans and Tilley 2017, ch. 6).

Met opmerkingen [OB9]: O’Grady (2018) is good paper for this

Although in the UK the first option, changing your vote, was limited, it did occur. Other parties have emerged to represent the working class: the SNP as a direct substitute for Labour, and UKIP and Reform UK as far-right parties capturing the socially conservative views of the working class. Their successes can be disproportionately attributed to the working class (Evans and Tilley 2017, ch. 8). The Brexit referendum also gave the working class an opportunity to express their opinion. In other Western democracies, where proportional representation allows smaller parties to thrive, this pattern is even clearer (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). In the Netherlands, there has been a re-emergence of class voting. The disengaged voter has been re-engaged. As shown in Figure 2, those most opposed to immigration used to abstain from voting until 2002 with the rise of the far-right populist party LPF (List Pim Fortuyn). After LPF became irrelevant, the PVV (Party for Freedom) increasingly captured the anti-immigration vote, culminating in the 2023 election when it became the largest party. Working-class and less-educated people, who are largely anti-immigration, started voting again and are now the main supporters of the PVV (Profiel van de PVV kiezer 2023). Robinson et al. (2020) conducted a study using campaign vignettes for fictional candidates who either made no class appeal or a symbolic working-class appeal. They found that working-class respondents rated candidates who made class appeals more positively than those who did not. This supports the idea of top-down activation of class politics and shows that dormant working-class voting can be reactivated by explicit class rhetoric.

On the other side of the class divide, similar trends are evident. More educated and middle-class voters are turning towards green and left-liberal parties. Therefore, the decline of the class vote should not be overstated, especially outside of the UK and the US, as some of this is the result of a *transformation* of the class vote towards right-wing populist, and green and left-liberal parties (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021).

In conclusion, the pattern of class voting in Western countries has changed not because class itself has disappeared, but because political parties, especially social-democratic ones, have changed. Economic inequality, class structure, and class identity have all

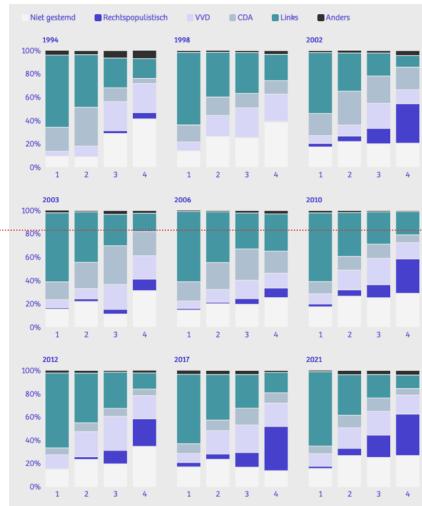


Figure 2: Who wins the anti-immigration vote? Vote-share per quartile of society based on anti-immigration sentiment: low (1), high (4). From left to right: "Did not vote", "Right-wing populist", "VVD", "CDA", "Left", "Other". Source: National Voter Study (1994-2021).

Met opmerkingen [OB10]: To what extent is this true?
 - Immigration and eu have some economic things so are probably very reliant on class
 - authoritarian/nationalism/moral questions like anti-lgbt is probably more explained by education/rural-urban etc. then economic conditions

persisted, and class attitudes remain as polarised as ever. Elite-driven change of political representation is the real reason for the fall and transformation of class voting. Labour and other social-democratic parties moved toward the centre to appeal to the growing middle class, leaving manual and low-income voters without a political voice. Many of these voters have consequently withdrawn from politics, while others have been mobilised by new populist or radical-right parties.

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Is class politics a result of self-interest or socialisation? (PPE 2020)

Read more on this

How do class, education, wealth and other economic inequalities affect voting behaviour?

Education:

- Education more important?
- Or less important because having a degree is no longer special.
- University students get socialized into thinking they are working class.
- Nurses/teachers should maybe not really be regarded as middle class but should be considered working class (or not?)

Income:

- Changes in income do not really change voting behaviour
- More used in the US because less data availability
- Income is less useful

Wealth:

- Europe is more usually home ownership
- US is more often stocks
- Ansell et al. (2021) look at relative increases in house prices translating in support for populism

How does ethnicity/gender interact with class cleavage?