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Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Imagining class: A study into material social class position, subjective identification, and voting behavior across Europe



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social class
Voting behavior
Class voting
Left-right voting
Social identity theory
European elections study

ABSTRACT

The traditional approach to class voting has largely ignored the question whether material class positions coincide with subjective class identification. Following Sosnaud et al. (2013), this study evaluates party preferences when Europeans' material and subjective social class do not coincide. Seminal studies on voting behavior have suggested that members of lower classes are more likely to vote for the economic left and cultural right and that higher classes demonstrate the opposite pattern. Yet, these studies have on the one hand overlooked the possibility that there is a mismatch between the material class people can be classified in and the class they think they are part of, and on the other hand the consequences of this discordant class identification on voting behavior. Analyzing the 2009 wave of the European Elections Study, we find that the majority of the Europeans discordantly identify with the middle class, whereas only a minority of the lower and higher classes concordantly identify with their material social class. Further, material class only seems to predict economic voting behavior when it coincides with subjective class; for instance, individuals who have an inflated class identification are more likely to vote for the economic left, even when they materially can be classified as middle or high class. We conclude this paper with a discussion on scholarly debates concerning class and politics.

1. Introduction

In spite of a series of seminal studies on the influence of social class positions on political preferences (Barone et al., 2007; Clark et al., 1993; Evans, 2000; Houtman et al., 2009; Lipset, 1963; Oesch, 2008; Van der Waal et al., 2007; Weakliem, 1995), the empirically diagnosed diminishing influence of social classes on voting behavior has sparked much debate among social scientists (De Graaf et al., 1995; Evans, 2000; Houtman et al., 2009; Jansen et al., 2013; Manza and Brooks, 1999; Nieuwbeerta et al., 2000; Rydgren, 2012; Van der Waal et al., 2007; Weakliem and Heath, 1994).

An important, yet surprisingly rarely explored argument concerning class voting has recently been pushed forward by Sosnaud et al. (2013) demonstrating that 'material' class positions and 'subjective' class identification do not always coincide. As Jackman and Jackman (1973, 1979) already noted a few decades ago, it is not solely this *membership of* but also *identification with* a social class that has a profound structuring effect (see also Calhoun, 1982; Centers, 1949). Studies have untangled that this class membership based on material indicators and subjective identification do not always coincide: a majority subjectively identifies as being a member of the middle class while materially they are not (e.g. Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2014; Evans and Kelley, 2004; Vanneman, 1980). Following Calhoun (1982), who argues that material class positions can *only* have consequences for (political) behavior if one subjectively believes that one is in such a class position, the overall aim of our paper is to see what the consequences for voting

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behavior are when material and subjective class positions do coincide and what happens when they do not.

The idea that subjective class identification has a strong structuring impact for party preferences flows from the idea that class membership brings about a class identity with shared values and attitudes (e.g. Houtman et al., 2009; Middendorp, 1991; Savage, 2001). The underlying mechanism is *closure*: individuals who are, at least according to their occupation, materially a member of a certain social class, also subjectively identify with that specific social class. This theoretical argument is, however, far from straightforward because of two reasons. First of all, recently Sosnaud et al. (2013) found evidence for non-concordant class positions in the US: while half of the Americans have a *concordant* class position of subjectively identifying with their material social class position, an equal share of people have *discordant* class positions, as they overestimate (inflate) or underestimate (deflate) their material social class position. Secondly, the authors further showed that there was no impact of these discordant class positions on voting behavior in the US, contrary to their expectations (Sosnaud et al., 2013, p.95). The idea of being in another social class than the one sociologists classify people in, hence, does not substantially influence ones voting preferences in the United States.

However because of the American Exceptionalism, with an absence of a strong class consciousness in the US (Clark et al., 1993; Clark and Lipset, 2001), next to the political two-party system narrowing political preferences, this could be different in the European context with multi-party systems, where an array of studies shows the existence of a relationship between social class and voting (Devine, 1992; Domański, 2008; Houtman et al., 2009; Van der Waal et al., 2007; Weakliem, 1995). Although there is research trying to explain the reasons for class discordance (D'Hooge et al., 2017), we turn our attention to the impact of different subjective and material class positions by studying, for the first time, the European context where class consciousness is more crystallized and voting systems offer more than two political alternatives in times of election.

To study class discordance and voting patterns in Europe, we rely on the European Election Study for 2009 – the only social survey that contain information on material class positions and subjective class identification on European territory in tandem with voting preferences. Relying on the distinction between working, middle and higher class, we will first of all evaluate the extent discordance between material and subjective social classes exists, aligning with existing work by Sosnaud et al. (2013). Secondly, we study how concordant and discordant class positions affect voting behavior. We do so in order to untangle how the relationship between subjective identification and material positions influences party preferences.

2. Literature review

2.1. Material class position and subjective identification

The study of the relationship between social class positions and voting behavior – *class voting* – goes back a long time and has resulted in a rich scholarship.¹ Inspired by the theoretical notion that sees voting as a democratic translation of the class struggle (cf. Nieuwbeerta et al., 2000; Lipset, 1959), scholars have empirically verified the relationship between social class and voting behavior. From the seminal work of Robert Alford (1967) to recent scholarly work by Jansen et al. (2013), sociologists repeatedly categorize the population into well-defined schemes – often yet not exclusively based on material conditions such as occupations and work autonomy – and sought differences in voting behavior between these different social strata. Ever since Clark and Lipset published their seminal article *Are Social Classes Dying?* (1991) it has been debated whether such material social classes are relevant for explaining political behavior. De Graaf et al. (1995), for instance, has shown that levels of class voting are generally in decline in the West. Yet, also De Graaf et al. (1995) is not undisputed (Hout et al., 1995; Stonecash, 2015).

Apart from this controversy on the decline in class voting, two additional issues are apparent in studying class voting. First, class voting rests on the idea that social classes 'objectively' exist. There is no formal membership of a social class, implying that they depend on the ontological classification into distinct categories which themselves are not uncontroversial. Discussions about the viability of specific class definitions are ongoing, and far from resolved (see, e.g. Bol and Weeden, 2014; Güveli et al., 2012; Wacquant, 1991; Wright, 2005). The second issue regards the fact that students of class voting have not fully explored the interaction between material and subjective class positions. Lockwood (1969) for instance, has suggested that the common experience of shared class interests will be a vital and powerful motive for social action (cf. Bendix and Lipset 1966; see also Giddens and Held (1982) who speak about "conflict consciousness"). For instance, for the working class, class consciousness plays an important role in making the mental division between managers and employees (SurrIDGE, 2007). In this line of reasoning people do not see themselves as members of a class because they materially are in a class position, but because they imagine themselves in one.²

The observation that the classification into social classes based on material conditions is not unproblematic, and that the consequences of subjectively identifying with a specific class for party preferences is largely left untouched, leads to our assertion that the study into the relationship between social classes and vote choice can be deepened by approaching social classes as social constructs that go beyond ontological constructs. Evidently, one's material social position, the economic securities and insecurities one experiences on a daily basis play a definite role in such class identification (cf. Mann, 1973; Savage, 2001). In addition, by social comparison, individuals possess ideas about social classes and to which social class they belong to and identify with as well as which class they definitely do not belong to. By virtue of small networks, meetings with co-workers, unions or employer organizations, and

¹ To illustrate the ongoing debate on the relevance of social class, we can refer to the May 2015 special issue of the Sociological Review. In this special issue several approaches to and controversies concerning social class are addressed, often by using the Great British Class Survey.

² Although there are some studies claiming that people do not identify as being members of a social class (e.g. Savage et al., 2010) and only do so in surveys because of the limited possibilities of classification scientists provide, we opt to use it since it's been proven useful in other studies (e.g. Sosnaud et al., 2013) and since we do not have the opportunity of answering our research question with qualitative data.

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