



Class voting and Left–Right party positions: A comparative study of 15 Western democracies, 1960–2005

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ABSTRACT

Studies that explain the class voting have often focused on “bottom-up” social factors, but paid little attention to ‘top-down’ political factors. We argue that party positions on left–right ideology have an effect on the strength of class voting. This argument is tested by estimating the impact of the Left–Right party positions on the class–vote association through a Two-Step Hierarchical analysis of integrated data from 15 countries in Western-Europe, the United States and Australia (1960–2005) supplemented with data from the Comparative Manifesto Project. Although there is a general trend for class voting to decline over time, partially accounted for by the impact of education, we find that most variation in class voting does not take the form of a linear decline. The ideological positions of left-wing parties alone do not have any effect, but the polarization of parties along the left–right dimension is associated with substantially higher levels of class voting.

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1. Introduction

“In all democratic nations, including the United States, there has been a correlation between socioeconomic status and political beliefs and voting. The less privileged have supported parties that stood for greater equality and welfare protection, through government intervention, against the strain of a free enterprise economy. (...) This pattern has changed in recent decades” (Lipset, 1991, p. 208).

This statement by Seymour Martin Lipset paradigmatically encapsulates the central concern of class voting research. It not only identifies socioeconomic inequality between groups as a driving force of political disagreement in societies, but also stresses interest in redistributionist policies as the rationale for the support of left-wing parties. Moreover much of the scholarly debate on the politics of class has concerned the strength of the correlation between class and vote, and in particular the alleged decline or persistence of this association (cf. Evans, 1999; Knutsen, 2007). Many scholars have deemed social class to be on the wane as a basis for voting behavior (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Franklin, 1992; Nieuwbeerta, 1995; Knutsen, 2006) while a universal decline is rejected by others (Heath et al., 1987; Manza et al., 1995; Evans, 1999; Brooks et al., 2006; Elff, 2007). What Lipset also makes clear however, and this has been less frequently observed, is that students of mass political behavior should concentrate upon parties as much as voters. The structure of political supply is not constant: Policy positions of parties as well as the range of party positions within party systems vary across countries and over time. Such differences in political supply can affect voter decision-making by providing them with choices of varying relevance to their economic interests.

This thesis has become known as the ‘top-down’ perspective on class voting (cf. Evans, 2000), or more precisely, the party choice thesis. From this perspective patterns in class voting reflect the outcomes of party behavior rather than ‘bottom-up’

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influences resulting from the weakening of social structures. As Evans (2000, p. 411) points out, ‘the adoption of class-relevant policy programs should be associated with an increase in the class basis of partisanship’ and vice versa. Thus variations in class voting are argued to derive from differences in the redistributive policy choices offered to voters. This raises a problem for comparative analyses of class voting, whether over time or space, as the extent to which leftist parties advocate redistributionist policies and non-leftist parties oppose them is assumed to be fixed. Many comparative studies on class voting use a generic categorization of parties or party families (often ‘left’ vs. ‘non-left’) regardless of the fact that parties change their positions on policies or that different parties within the same ‘party family’ are perhaps similar but often far from equal (Knutsen, 1998; Mair and Mudde, 1998; cf. Elff, 2009).

In this article we address this concern by estimating the impact of the Left–Right positions of political parties on the association between class and vote through a broad comparative analysis of integrated data from 15 countries in Western Europe, the United States and Australia between 1960 and 2005. For this purpose we construct a new large-scale dataset, the *Comparative Dataset on Cleavage Voting* (CDCV) which provides the richest source of pooled individual-level surveys on the relations between class position and political choices available for Western countries in the post-war period. Left–Right positions of parties are estimated using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). In combination this evidence allows us to examine patterns of class voting across both countries and time, and test the general claim that variations in parties’ Left–Right positions account for variations in the Left–Right, class-vote association.

2. Two approaches to the decline of class voting

2.1. Bottom-up

For many scholars the salience of social classes has declined in contemporary Western societies and class in turn has lost its ability to explain political behavior (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Franklin, 1992; Nieuwbeerta, 1995). Even studies rejecting that the class cleavage universally declined, such as Brooks et al. (2006) find evidence of clear working class de-alignment: In Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and the US, unskilled workers have become less distinctive in their partisan alignments over time. Many of the explanations offered for this decline in class voting are driven by arguments about the weakening of social structures in increasingly individualistic post-industrial societies (for elaboration see Evans, 1999; Goldthorpe, 1999).

These explanations have taken various forms: rising living standards and the spread of affluence (Clark and Lipset, 1991), the changing gender composition of class positions (Kitschelt, 1994), the decline of traditional communities which has undermined class solidarity and led to more privatized, individualistic and instrumental voters (Franklin, 1985; Rose and McAllister, 1986); growing intra- and intergenerational social mobility (Nieuwbeerta et al., 2000), with upwardly mobile voters being more right-wing than those who remain in the working class, but also more left-wing than those in their destination class (De Graaf et al., 1995).

Class conflict is also believed to be replaced by newly politicized social cleavages such as gender (Inglehart and Norris, 2003) and employment sector (Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985), or to have been cross-cut by new value cleavages relating to emergence of a set of ‘postmaterial’ concerns amongst electorates (Knutsen, 1988; Inglehart, 1997; Van der Waal et al., 2007). Typically from this latter perspective the association between class and vote is declining because cultural (conservative) issues are increasingly relevant to party choice for the working class and progressive (postmaterial) issues are increasingly relevant for the middle class thus weakening the political differences between them. Finally, it has been claimed that educational expansion, accompanied by a general increase of ‘cognitive mobilization’ has transformed voters from being driven by particularistic loyalties (such as social class) into calculative, preference- and issue-oriented citizens (Franklin, 1985; Inglehart, 1990), thus supposedly further weakening class divisions.

In sum, the bottom-up approach to class voting has assumed that the decline of rigid, monolithic class structures account for declining levels of class voting. Classes have lost their distinctiveness as social mobility, educational expansion, and compositional changes on the labor market have eroded the divisions between them. This in turn diminishes the relevance of traditional class conflict for voters’ political choices, causing a decline in class voting. The gradualist nature of these social changes and, therefore, of the political changes they imply should produce a relatively steady decline in class politics. Any observed changes in class voting should take the form of a relatively smooth and monotonic decline, which should not include reversals (i.e. increases) in the strength of association. Hence we formulate hypothesis 1:

H1. The association between class and vote for left vs. right-wing parties will have monotonically declined since the 1960s.

To infer the causes of variations in class voting from the patterning of such change is not novel. Other studies of class voting (see Evans et al., 1991; Goldthorpe, 1999; De Graaf et al., 2001) have also relied on evidence concerning the volatility and abruptness of changes in the class-vote association to indicate the likelihood that changes in association can be seen as social or political in origin. We can go further however and include in our models some indicators of social change that have been thought to contribute to the weakening of class voting. The dramatic increase in participation in further and higher education and the spreading of this participation through the class structure (Breen and Jonsson, 2005), the growing impact of gender divisions on political choices (Inglehart and Norris, 2003), and the importance of age-differences for redistributive spending in an era of massive demographic ageing (Busemeyer et al., 2009) can be expected to have weakened the effects of class position on party choice. If people are less likely to vote according to their class position because (a) classes have

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