

Why does class affect voting?

Patterns of class voting remain important in many Western European countries, but the drivers of class support for particular parties remains under researched. Peter Egge Langsæther finds that, beyond left-right divides on economic policies, the salience of immigration and environmental policies by class is significant. However, less than half of class allegiance can be explained by these policy congruences, and so it is a subject that requires further research.



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Back in 1989, the British sociologist Richard Hoggart wrote that ‘each decade we shiftily declare we have buried class; each decade the coffin stays empty.’ Indeed. Despite all the talk of the decline of class, scholars such as James Tilley and Geoffrey Evans have shown that the British classes – as defined by their occupation – are just as distinct in terms of economy, identity and ideology today as in the 1960s. And class voting, while less overwhelming than in the 1960s, is still an important political phenomenon in many Western European countries. Populist right parties are popular among workers and the self-employed, while the middle class shuns these parties. The opposite is true for green parties. Meanwhile, workers are also overrepresented among the electorates of various leftist parties, whereas they tend to avoid mainstream right parties. Class differences are largest for left-socialist, green, and populist right parties. The association between class and party preference is among the most well-documented in political science. Yet we know surprisingly little about why this connection comes about.

One of the reasons behind this knowledge gap is that class politics seems so obvious: the standard assumption is that people in different classes have different economic interests, which translate into different economic ideologies, which in turn affect voting behaviour. This explanation is so intuitive that it has rarely been tested empirically. Using data from twelve West European countries, I decided to do just that [in a recent article in the Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties](#).

However, your class affects not only the ‘obvious’ interests related to welfare state preferences or employment regulations, but may also affect your views on issues like immigration and environmental regulation (which could cost you your job if you are a factory worker). I therefore expand the test to see to what degree *economic ideology*, *environmentalism* and *immigration orientations* can explain the association between class and voting.

The first part of the answer is that they can: in general, between a fifth and a third of the class differences in party choice are due to differences in these three ideological orientations by social class. However, this varies between different types of parties. Workers support mainstream leftist parties because they agree with their economic ideology, while they vote for populist right parties because they share their attitude towards immigration. Ideology, then, accounts for class differences for party families for which the specific ideology is salient or relevant. As such, economic ideology accounts for substantial class differences for all the parties that focus on economic issues, such as communist parties or mainstream right-wing parties, while it does not account for class differences in green or populist right voting. Both green and populist right parties tend to focus on immigration, albeit with polar opposite views. In line with the claim above, attitudes towards immigration account for a fifth of the class differences in green voting and half of all the class differences in populist right voting, while not accounting for class differences for any other party family. Finally, environmentalism only accounts for support for green parties.

So why do these policy preferences affect class voting? Partly because people in different classes think differently about fundamental political values, including those that lie outside the traditional economic left-right values, and the parties compete over policies of relevance to these values. The latter point leads to the conclusion that this causal mechanism depends on what kind of issues the parties choose to emphasise. The increased salience of immigration in many Western European countries could for instance lead to an increase in class voting for the parties that emphasise immigration and integration issues, such as the greens and the populist right. If immigration keeps dominating the campaign before the September general elections in Sweden, we may well see an increase in working class support for the Sweden Democrats.

However, and crucially, more than half of the class differences in party choice remain after controlling for these three central ideological orientations. One possibility is of course that class works through other ideological orientations than those examined here. Another is that some people vote on the basis of other things than the congruence between their political values and the policies of the parties. This could be their (class) identity, the networks they are part of, or the socialisation they experience in their families, schools and neighbourhoods. Not least some people may vote on the basis of their perceptions of who the parties represent. Does this party represent 'my kind of people'? Such perceptions may not only be related to policy representation, but the party's personnel, rhetoric, media coverage and group appeals. These can also be long-lasting, and endure after the original political conflict that created the perception has subsided, creating frozen party alignments. Much exciting research remains before we can account for all class differences in the political arena.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on his article '[Class voting and the differential role of political values: evidence from 12 West-European countries](#)', published in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.*

About the author



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