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Does Class Shape Legislators' Approach to Inequality and Economic Policy? A Comparative View

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Abstract

Do the class backgrounds of legislators shape their views and actions relating to inequality and economic policy? Building on findings about 'white-collar government' in the US, this article examines the relationship between legislators' class and their attitudes and self-reported behaviour in advanced democracies, drawing on survey data from 15 countries including 73 national and subnational parliaments in Europe and Israel. I find that legislators from business backgrounds are more likely to support income inequality and small government, as well as less likely to consult with labour groups, than those from working-class and other backgrounds. These results are buttressed by analysis of an additional cross-national survey of European legislative candidates' attitudes, which replicates key findings. Given the skewed class makeup of legislatures in advanced democracies, these findings may be relevant to our understanding of widespread economic and political inequalities that are increasingly salient in many countries.

Keywords: class; representation; political economy; public policy

Legislatures across the developed world have long failed to reflect the class makeup of the societies they represent (Best 2007; Best and Cotta 2000; Norris 1997). The affluent tend to be overrepresented in office, and the descriptive representation of class has also seen shifts over time, including a decline in blue-collar workers and a rise in the professionalization of electoral politics (Best and Cotta 2000; Best 2007; Evans and Tilley 2017; Gaxie 2017; Norris 1997). Could unequal class representation help account for widening income and wealth gaps, and moves in the political agenda away from redistributive issues and towards cultural ones?

This article examines whether the class backgrounds of legislators shape their views and self-reported behaviour relating to inequality and economic policy while in office, examining a range of developed countries. While the skewed descriptive representation of class has been acknowledged in the literature for decades, the substantive consequences have received much less research attention

until recently. There is growing evidence that legislators from different class backgrounds display distinct attitudes and behaviour in office.

Nicholas Carnes (2013) shows stark evidence that legislators' class backgrounds are of importance in American politics. US politicians from working-class occupations have significantly more left-wing economic attitudes and legislative voting records than their counterparts from business and professional occupations (see also Grumbach 2015).¹ This work has sparked a new wave of research on the topic. Tom O'Grady (2018) demonstrates a relationship between class and the policy positions of members of parliament in the UK Labour Party. Jan Rosset (2016) shows that among Swiss legislative candidates, higher incomes are associated with lower support for redistribution. In the context of the developing world, Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu (2014) show a similar link between legislators' class and their attitudes and behaviour in a study of 18 Latin American countries. These recent findings run contrary to an earlier wave of research that rejected or downplayed the substantive importance of legislators' class (Matthews 1984; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Research on whether the class effect is a phenomenon that extends broadly across the developed world is still needed. As O'Grady (2018) notes, we still know little about class-based differences in the attitudes and behaviours of European legislators in particular.²

In this article, I use unique survey data covering 73 national and subnational parliaments in Europe and Israel to examine how the class backgrounds of legislators relate to their representation of redistributive and economic issues. This adds to the emerging literature a rare quantitative study of multiple developed countries examining the substantive implications of legislators' class. The results show that business sector legislators are substantially more favourable to income inequality and small government than legislators from working-class and other backgrounds, even after controlling for their party's ideology. These conclusions are buttressed by analysis of an additional cross-national survey of European legislative candidates' attitudes, which replicates the pattern.

In addition, the results show that legislators from different classes report behaving differently in office, with business sector legislators less likely to be in contact with workers' organizations and trade unions than legislators from working-class backgrounds (specifically, contact in their roles as MPs). In short, the results show that class representation matters across a wide range of advanced democracies, reinforcing and extending the new wave of literature on this topic.

This article contributes to the literature on descriptive representation, which is concerned with how the personal identities of legislators reflect the broader society being represented (Carnes 2013; Lore 2016; Mansbridge 1999; O'Grady 2018; Pitkin 1967). The findings help confirm that, across a range of developed countries, class is an important identity among legislators that predicts their attitudes and behaviour in office. The findings also speak to the broader literature on economic inequality, suggesting that shifts in class representation should be considered among the possible causes of rising income and wealth gaps.

In the remainder of the article, the following section introduces the literature on class and descriptive representation and theorizes how legislators' class would be expected to affect their attitudes and behaviours. I then go on to describe the data and methods, followed by a presentation of the main empirical results and

a consideration of the possible institutional moderators. The next section examines and tests alternative explanations, replicates core findings using a second data set and outlines additional robustness checks. The final part concludes and outlines priorities for future research.

Descriptive and substantive representation of class

In a time of widespread economic and political inequality (Bartels 2017; Bernauer et al. 2015; Donnelly and Lefkofridi 2014; Giger et al. 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Piketty 2014), important questions arise about not only who pressures and influences politicians, but also who the politicians are – that is, ‘who governs?’ (Carnes 2013; Dahl 1961). The unequal descriptive representation of class among legislators has long been recognized as a widespread phenomenon, with legislators tending to come from privileged backgrounds compared with the broader populations in their polities (Best 2007; Best and Cotta 2000; Matthews 1984; Norris 1997). Power elite theorists (Lindblom 1977; Mills 1956) once highlighted the social background and networks of politicians, with the implication that these factors would affect policy outcomes. But, as Carnes notes, they ‘never tested this possibility systematically, and in the absence of any hard evidence, political scientists tended to side with the pluralists’ (2013: 11). To the extent that politicians are office-seeking actors pursuing the median voter within the constraints of disciplined political parties, it was plausible to conclude that legislators’ personal backgrounds should be irrelevant to their policy positions.

Among the relatively few to address class representation in the intervening period, Donald Matthews (1984) reviewed the comparative literature and concluded there was no convincing effect of legislators’ class on representation. Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (1995) also found no effect of class representation in the UK context, and Bernhard Wessels (1997) and Peter Essaiasson and Sören Holmberg (1996) found only very weak links between legislators’ class and attitudes in Germany and Sweden. This literature was characterized by some shortcomings, typically looking for effects on broad left–right orientation rather than focusing on the most class-relevant dimensions of economic and redistributive policy.

Recently, there has been a resurgence of research on the issue, showing that the class backgrounds of legislators do, in fact, have important effects on their policy attitudes and behaviour in the cases of the US and Latin America (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2014; Grumbach 2015). We also have evidence that legislators’ occupations affect their attitudes and behaviour in the British Labour Party (O’Grady 2018), and Swiss legislative candidates with lower incomes have more favourable attitudes to redistribution than their higher-income counterparts (Rosset 2016).

There are good theoretical reasons to expect legislators’ class to matter. A person’s occupational class corresponds to a distinct set of material conditions and interests, including levels of income and employment security (Evans and Tilley 2017; Meltzer and Richard 1981; Rehm 2011). These differences in material conditions can be seen in objective measures like income inequality and employment histories, and, importantly, inequalities are also perceived and observed subjectively by people from different classes (although they often underestimate the magnitude of

material inequality compared with the reality; Evans and Tilley 2017). Some literature has suggested a decline in the importance of class relative to other political cleavages and social identities (Eidlin 2014; Inglehart 1997; Savage et al. 2001), but other analyses show that people across a wide range of countries continue to identify themselves and others in class terms (Andersen and Curtis 2012; Curtis 2016; Evans and Tilley 2017; Hout 2008).

Beyond reflecting their material interests and identities, occupation can influence people's views by helping to shape their social circles. An individual's own experiences and views can be reinforced by 'repeated interaction with people that share similar backgrounds and material interests' in the workplace (O'Grady 2018: 7). In turn, the workplace can be a bridge to involvement in other organizations with further socializing effects, such as trade unions and professional associations (Manza and Brooks 2008). There is an extensive literature showing that people from different economic classes do, in fact, have distinct views and preferences, especially on economic policy issues (Campbell et al. 1960; Evans and Tilley 2017; Gilens 2012; Hout 2008; Iversen and Soskice 2001; Manza et al. 1995; Page et al. 2013; Rosset 2013).

Should we expect class-based differences among the general population to carry over to differences in the views and behaviour of legislators? On the one hand, legislators face a unique set of homogenizing pressures in their roles as politicians, including the authority of party leaders, socialization from co-partisans and the need to court and respond to an electoral base. However, while partly constrained by voters and parties, legislators do have room to manoeuvre in office (Bawn et al. 2012; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), and they often act based on their own personal views (Burden 2007; Levitt 1996). As described, some recent research shows the importance of class carrying over to legislators (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2014; O'Grady 2018), notwithstanding the scepticism of an earlier wave of work (Matthews 1984; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Furthermore, while one might expect the influence of a legislator's prior occupation to fade over long political careers, Carnes (2013) found little evidence for this in the US.

In empirically studying class-based differences in the attitudes and behaviour of legislators, one important distinction to draw is between intrinsic effects of class (as a lived experience and identity) and the consequences of partisan sorting. For those individuals who become involved in electoral politics, their pre-existing beliefs, in part shaped by occupational class, will help sort them into left- or right-wing parties. Their social networks, which as discussed above are influenced by their class, will also likely help sort them into parties. For example, given the historical links between many left-wing parties and organized labour, we expect working-class legislators to be more likely to be recruited into parties of the left. Conversely, a businessperson is more likely to be recruited into a right-wing party. Once sorted into a party, participating in it would constitute an additional stage of personal socialization for a legislator, further shaping their political beliefs (as a result of spending time with co-partisans and adapting oneself to the demands of party leaders, gatekeepers and the electoral base).

In its theoretical aims, this article is primarily interested in the effects of class that originate in legislators' class identity and lived experiences, as opposed to socializing effects that take place after joining a political party. Therefore, the

central hypothesis is whether legislators' attitudes and behaviour on redistributive and economic issues will depend on their class, *after* controlling for factors like their party's ideological orientation. Specifically, I expect business sector legislators will exhibit attitudes and behaviour less favourable to solidaristic policies than working-class MPs and those from other occupations. However, insofar as legislators have sorted into parties *because* of their class-driven pre-existing beliefs, controlling for party type means the party control variable will capture some of the 'real' class effect. As a result, the main estimates of the class coefficient presented below, which do control for party type, can be taken as conservative (i.e. as a possible lower bound estimate).

Research design

The main data used in this article are from the PARTIREP research project's Comparative MP Survey (Deschouwer et al. 2014) conducted in 2009 and 2010. The survey includes over 2,000 MPs across 15 countries and 73 different national and subnational parliaments within them. The countries surveyed are Switzerland, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, UK, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Hungary, Poland and Israel. Legislators responded to a range of questions about their roles as MPs, as well as ideology and issue attitudes, among other items. Approximately one in four legislators responded to the survey, ranging between a high of 43% in the Netherlands and a low of 12% in Poland. Kris Deschouwer and colleagues (2014) find that the respondents are reasonably representative of the population of legislators surveyed in terms of measures such as gender and whether they are in opposition or government parties. Case selection for this article is driven by the aim to investigate the impact of class representation in multiple developed countries, where evidence remains relatively limited to date. Practically, it is shaped by the countries covered in the available Comparative MP Survey data. Fortunately, the survey covers a wide range of European countries and Israel, and the data set also includes detailed information about the varying features of electoral institutions across the national and subnational jurisdictions. In the exploratory analysis described below, these varying institutional features are considered as potential moderators of the relationship examined in the main models.

Dependent variables

In this analysis, the main dependent variables are attitudinal and self-reported behavioural measures. The three dependent variables used are the only measures directly relating to economic and redistributive issues in the survey. They are:

- (1) *Inequality attitude*: MPs rate agreement (on a 1–5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree) with the statement: 'Larger income differences are needed as incentives for individual effort.'
- (2) *Role of government in the economy attitude*: MPs rate agreement (on the same scale) with the statement: 'Government should play a smaller role in the management of the economy.'

- (3) *Contact with workers' organizations*: MPs answer the question, 'In your role as a Member of Parliament, how often in the last year have you had contact with ... workers' organizations and trade unions' (on a 1–5 scale ranging from '(almost) no contact' to 'at least once a week'). Note that the question specifies that it is about contact *in their role as MPs* and so should exclude contact in social or other capacities, if legislators observe this caveat in their responses.

Both legislators' attitudes and their behaviour merit attention. Previous research indicates that legislators' attitudes may be a key link in the causal chain connecting class and policy outcomes. For example, when US legislators' opinions were added as a control variable in Carnes's (2013) regression models, the substantial class-based differences in Congressional voting records disappeared. Furthermore, the practical importance of the attitude measures is reinforced by legislators' responses to two relevant questions in the Comparative MP Survey data. First, nearly 70% of legislators in the sample say that if an MP's personal opinions conflict with those of voters, that MP should follow his or her personal opinion. Similarly, 47% say an MP's own opinion should also take precedence over their party's position. Thus, a large share of the surveyed legislators apparently believe that their own opinions are important in their role as MPs, even trumping those of their voters and parties. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the variables on attitudes described above each rely on responses to a single question, using a simple five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, which cannot fully capture the nuance of respondents' attitudes on these questions.³ In turn, an important limitation of the behaviour measure is that it is self-reported rather than directly observed. However, respondents remain anonymous in the survey, meaning there is little incentive to misreport intentionally. The findings on this self-reported behaviour measure complement more direct measures in the literature.

Since more experienced and powerful MPs are more likely to influence party positions and policy outcomes (and therefore their attitudes and behaviour may be of more practical significance), I also run additional versions of my main regression models on relevant subsamples of such legislators (e.g. those who have previously held elected office, sponsored at least one bill or held at least one parliamentary leadership position).

Explanatory variables

Legislators' occupations prior to taking office are used as the operationalization of class, which is the key independent variable. Sociological literature supports defining class in terms of occupation (Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2007; Manza et al. 1995; Weeden and Grusky 2005), which marks distinct perspectives and lived experiences, and this is consistent with recent research on the substantive representation of class (Carnes 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2014; O'Grady 2018). Empirical work on the US finds that occupational class predicts legislators' voting behaviour, but family background, education and income do so more poorly, or not at all (Carnes 2013).

The data set includes an open-ended text field describing the legislator's occupation, which Deschouwer and colleagues (2014: 8) explain they have 'collected from official sources such as the parliamentary websites and "who's who" guides' and refers to their occupation prior to election as an MP. I have coded these descriptions into a set of 10 occupational categories, adapting the categorization scheme used by Carnes (2013) and Carnes and Lupu (2014).⁴ For example, the 'business' category includes occupations such as business owners, managers, bankers and consultants and serves as the omitted base category in the regression models described below. The 'worker' category includes manual, service industry, clerical and union staff jobs. The 'service-based professional' category includes teachers, nurses, social workers and community organizers. Notably, the findings are robust to multiple checks on the coding scheme, including replication in a second data set with differently structured occupation data, described in a later section of the article.⁵

There is a correlation between class and party type, but one that is far from perfect. Workers tend to be found in left parties, but they also have a substantial presence in right parties. Conversely, businesspeople are found in left parties, though they are predominantly in right parties.⁶ This variation of class within party types provides an opportunity to separate empirically the influence of class from that of party.

Using a similar categorization scheme, Carnes (2013) and Carnes and Lupu (2014) found that business sector legislators had among the most right-wing attitudes and behaviours on redistributive issues, while those from working-class occupations were the most left-wing, followed by service-based professionals.

In terms of controls, a key control variable indicates whether the legislator is a member of a left-leaning political party. This is based on an expert classification of parties in the PARTIREP data set, which includes 12 categories that I have collapsed into a single 'left party' dummy.⁷ As a robustness check, I also used an alternative left party control (based on MPs' self-reports about their party's ideological left-right position) both in dummy and continuous form, and the results are substantively similar. Other legislator-level control variables available in the data set include age, gender and education. Education is not included as a control variable in the main model specifications but is included in later robustness checks.⁸ Age and gender are included as the available personal-level controls in the data set and because of their plausible correlation with the outcome variables. Other control variables used include dummies for each country and parliament.

Model specification

To assess the main relationship between the descriptive and substantive representation of class, I estimate linear regression models of the form:

$$\begin{aligned} OutcomeVariable_{ij} = & \beta_{1-10} Occupation_{ij} + \beta_{11}(LeftParty_{ij}) + \beta_{12}(Female_{ij}) \\ & + \beta_{13}(Age_{ij}) + \gamma_k + \epsilon_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

where *Occupation* refers to the occupation category of the legislator *i* in parliament *j* (which includes both national and subnational parliaments). *LeftParty* indicates

membership of an identifiably left-leaning political party. *Female* and *Age* refer to the gender and age of the politician, respectively. Country fixed effects are represented by γ and ϵ is the error term. Standard errors account for potential correlations within parliaments (clustered at the parliament level). The vector of individual-level outcome variables includes: attitude on inequality, attitude on government role in the economy, and self-reported contact with workers' organizations.

For each outcome variable, results are shown for three specifications: (1) a simple regression of occupation on the outcome variables without controls (but with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered by parliament); (2) a model with control variables (the baseline specification); and (3) a model with controls and that also weights observations to equalize the influence of countries and regional/national parliaments.⁹ In each model, the business occupation category is the omitted reference category for the independent variable.¹⁰ Note again that controlling for party type means that the coefficient for legislators' class should be taken as a lower bound estimate, since politicians with different occupations already tend to sort into different types of parties.

Because the dependent variable is strictly speaking ordered rather than continuous, ordered logistic regression models have also been run as a robustness check. Additional specifications, including a multilevel model with legislators nested within parliaments, were run and give substantively similar results.¹¹

Empirical analysis

How do legislators' economic classes relate to their attitudes and self-reported behaviour in the surveyed parliaments? The results show that legislators' classes empirically predict (at statistically significant levels) their attitudes on inequality and the role of government in the economy, as well as their levels of contact with workers' organizations. Moreover, the coefficient sizes are substantively important. For example, the coefficient for being a legislator from a business background compared with a worker or service-based professional is in some cases up to 50% that of being in a right- versus left-wing party. The coefficient sizes are remarkable, given that interparty competition is where class conflict is typically thought to play out.

Working-class legislators and service-based professionals (which includes occupations such as teachers, nurses, social workers) are the categories with the largest coefficients and are distinct from business-class legislators at statistically significant levels across both attitude measures. Only working-class legislators are distinctive from their business counterparts on both the attitude and behavioural measures.

Legislators' attitudes

Table 1 shows the results for each model seeking to examine the relationship between occupational class and legislators' attitudes (separately for inequality and government intervention in the economy). As described above, these attitude variables are on a 1–5 scale, with higher values corresponding to more right-wing attitudes.

Table 1. Regression Models on Legislators' Attitudes

Dependent variable	Inequality			Smaller government role in the economy		
	(1) No controls	(2) Controls	(3) Controls, weighted	(4) No controls	(5) Controls	(6) Controls, weighted
Business	-	-	-	-	-	-
Technical professional	-0.282* (0.108)	-0.132 (0.090)	-0.068 (0.0807)	-0.321** (0.112)	-0.168 (0.105)	-0.104 (0.124)
Farmer	-0.0860 (0.178)	-0.263 (0.179)	-0.316 (0.203)	-0.191 (0.148)	-0.408** (0.149)	-0.456* (0.197)
Lawyer	-0.308* (0.121)	-0.192+ (0.107)	-0.191 (0.115)	-0.219+ (0.123)	-0.097 (0.102)	-0.137 (0.122)
Other white-collar	-0.617** (0.125)	-0.384** (0.103)	-0.303** (0.102)	-0.275+ (0.161)	-0.055 (0.132)	-0.030 (0.137)
Politics/law enforcement	-0.446** (0.108)	-0.238* (0.098)	-0.164 (0.106)	-0.419** (0.102)	-0.198* (0.084)	-0.247* (0.108)
Civil service	-0.607** (0.132)	-0.217+ (0.121)	-0.221+ (0.113)	-0.628** (0.098)	-0.197+ (0.106)	-0.170 (0.117)
Service-based professional	-0.858** (0.102)	-0.449** (0.081)	-0.337** (0.078)	-0.731** (0.113)	-0.271** (0.084)	-0.237* (0.101)
Worker	-0.695** (0.110)	-0.305** (0.089)	-0.241** (0.088)	-0.675** (0.116)	-0.251** (0.079)	-0.127 (0.081)
Left party		-1.158** (0.127)	-1.068** (0.144)		-1.284** (0.136)	-1.169** (0.145)
Observations	1891	1817	1817	1894	1820	1820

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Higher coefficient indicates more right-wing attitude. The 'no occupation information' category, country dummies and coefficients for controls (except party) are not shown here for ease of presentation. See Table A4 in the Online Appendix for full regression results. +p < 0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Each model shows substantively and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences in the attitudes of business sector legislators and at least three other occupational class backgrounds. All occupation coefficients across the models trend in the expected direction, with business sector legislators displaying attitudes on economic issues to the right of their counterparts from other backgrounds.

Results from Models 2 and 5 (with controls, unweighted) are depicted in Figure 1. These can be considered baseline specifications for the two attitudinal outcome variables. Since my interest is in detecting the impact of legislators' class at an individual level (as opposed to drawing inferences about a representative set of parliaments), the unweighted models are appropriate baselines.

First, consider the inequality attitude outcome variable. The baseline Model 2 results show negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) coefficients for four categories, meaning each of these occupation categories displays more anti-inequality attitudes compared with legislators from the business sector. The largest differences for this outcome variable are between legislators in the business sector, on the one hand, and service-based professionals, workers and 'other white-collar' on the other hand.

One way to think about the substantive importance of these differences is by comparing it to the coefficient for being in a left party. This is a natural point of comparison, since political parties function as the key political aggregators of class conflict. Left-party legislators are generally expected to display greater concern about inequality and more openness to government intervention in the economy. Indeed, such economic questions are usually considered to be the most basic characteristic of the left–right political spectrum.

The results show that occupations predict differences in legislator attitudes that are on a comparable scale to differences associated with party identity. For example, a service-based professional displays significantly more opposition to inequality compared with a business sector legislator, and the coefficient size is about 40% of being in a left party. In terms of inequality attitudes, the coefficient for being a worker versus a business sector legislator is over 25% that of being in a left party.

In Model 3 (weighted), the differences between business sector legislators and the same three occupation categories remain substantively and statistically significant. This model provides assurance that the results are robust to levelling out the influence of the different parliaments in the sample.

Next, consider the second attitude outcome variable, which relates to government intervention in the economy. In Model 5 (controls, unweighted), workers and service-based professionals (as well as farmers and those in politics and law enforcement) are substantively and significantly ($p < 0.05$) more favourable to government's role in the economy than business sector legislators.

Compared against the coefficient for party type on this attitude, the observed differences by occupational class are substantial. Left-party legislators are, as expected, more favourable to government intervention in the economy than legislators from other parties. The coefficient size of being a worker or service-based professional (as opposed to from the business sector) is about 20% that of being in a left party. For farmers, the coefficient is even larger, at over 30% that of being in a left party. In Model 6 (weighted), much the same pattern of coefficients

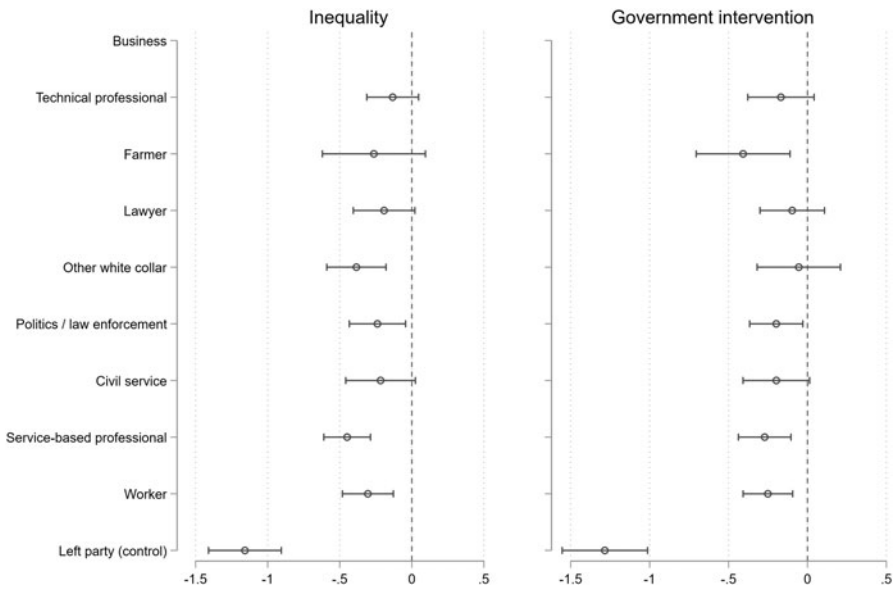


Figure 1. Estimated Class-Based Differences in Legislators' Attitudes

Note: Lower scores correspond to more economically left-wing attitudes. Dots are model coefficients and lines are 95% confidence intervals. Business is the omitted reference category for occupation.

holds, though the coefficient for the worker category is reduced and loses significance.

Overall, the observed differences by legislators' class are somewhat more pronounced regarding their attitudes on inequality than their attitudes on government's role in the economy. This makes theoretical sense, since the issue of economic inequality is arguably more intrinsically bound up with class than government's role in the economy (though both are clearly linked).

The results presented can be taken as lower bound estimates of the coefficient for class in an important sense. To the extent that prospective legislators sort into left and right parties *because* they hold beliefs shaped by their class backgrounds, the models with party controls would tend to underestimate the coefficient for class (with some of the influence of class appearing in the left party coefficient). Therefore, I also report results for Models 1 and 4, which exclude controls. These models show much larger coefficient sizes for most occupations compared with the business sector (coefficients more than double in the case of workers) and would represent an upper bound estimate of the relationship between legislators' class and their attitudes.

The results of Models 1 through 6 bring to bear new evidence of an empirical link between the descriptive and substantive representation of class. They are consistent with the theory that the occupational class of legislators affects their economic policy attitudes across a broad set of developed countries.

To summarize, business sector legislators tend to be more favourable to inequality and less favourable to government intervention in the economy than other

occupational backgrounds and particularly compared with workers and service-based professionals. These coefficient sizes are comparable to, though smaller than, those of party type. These findings are consistent with the US-based research of Carnes (2013: ch. 4), which showed that legislators from business backgrounds had among the most right-wing attitudes, and workers and service-based professionals had the most left-wing attitudes.

Legislators' behaviour

The Comparative MP Survey also includes a behavioural dependent variable of interest: self-reported levels of contact with workers' organizations and trade unions. Note that, as mentioned above, the question specifies that this refers only to contact in their role as MPs (and so should exclude contact in social or other capacities). This allows us to evaluate the prediction that legislators' class will help shape their behaviour as representatives. Given the well-recognized role of unions in pressuring governments to adopt solidaristic and pro-worker policies (Hooghe and Oser 2016; Korpi 2006), contact with these organizations is of substantive importance.

In Model 8 (with controls), there is a significant relationship between legislators' class and their contact with workers' organizations (see Table 2). Specifically, business sector legislators are much less likely than workers (the only significantly different category) to report higher levels of contact with these organizations. The coefficient for party type again provides a helpful point of comparison for gauging the relative importance of class. Given the well-established links between many social democratic parties and the labour movement, we expect and observe that legislators from left parties have more contact with workers' organizations than those from other types of parties.

The magnitude of the difference between business legislators and workers is large, amounting to a little more than 50% the coefficient for being in a left party compared with another party type. In the model with the observations weighted to equalize countries and regional/national parliaments (Model 9), the coefficient is just under 50% of that for party, while in the no-controls specification (Model 7), the coefficient increases substantially relative to its size in the baseline model.

In short, the results show a significant class-based difference in legislators' contact with workers' organizations and trade unions, with working-class legislators making higher levels of contact than their business-class counterparts. When we examined attitudinal outcomes in the previous section, service-based professionals were at least as different as workers from their counterparts in business, but here it is only workers who appear to be distinct.

Thus, for this behavioural measure, the main occupational 'fault line' for contact with workers' organizations and trade unions is between workers and legislators from other occupational categories. Indeed, supplementary analysis with workers as the omitted reference category shows that workers are significantly different from five other occupational categories by this contact measure.¹² Working-class legislators are therefore the only category consistently distinct from business-class legislators across all three of the attitudinal and behavioural outcome variables.

Table 2. Regression Models on Legislators’ Contact with Workers’ Organizations

	(7) No controls	(8) Controls	(9) Controls, weighted
Business	–	–	–
Technical professional	0.127 (0.083)	0.036 (0.083)	0.065 (0.109)
Farmer	–0.059 (0.137)	0.015 (0.136)	–0.027 (0.188)
Lawyer	0.140 (0.096)	0.101 (0.091)	0.133 (0.112)
Other white-collar	0.267* (0.130)	0.156 (0.128)	0.074 (0.155)
Politics/law enforcement	0.267* (0.102)	0.159 (0.104)	0.222+ (0.112)
Civil service	0.216+ (0.110)	0.046 (0.104)	0.129 (0.094)
Service-based professional	0.310** (0.096)	0.099 (0.083)	0.102 (0.093)
Worker	0.579** (0.121)	0.383** (0.111)	0.245* (0.121)
Left party		0.610** (0.073)	0.502** (0.083)
Observations	1946	1874	1874

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Higher coefficient indicates more contact with workers’ groups. See Table A5 in the Online Appendix for full regression results. +p < 0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

Institutional moderators

As a cross-national, multi-parliament data set, the Comparative MP Survey also offers an opportunity to examine potential moderators of the influence of legislators’ class, including electoral institutions. A recent study of the link between gender and the representation of women’s issues, which focused on the moderating effects of electoral institutions, offers a useful framework for examining institutional moderators in the context of class (Lore 2016). Lore found that institutional features such as open party lists, local nominations, and division of powers systems heighten the differences between men and women in the substantive representation of women’s issues.

According to Grace Lore’s (2016) theory of ‘incentives for unincorporated representation’, each of these three institutional characteristics increases the incentives for competition between individual legislators within parties. The converse of these features – closed lists, centralized nominations, and the fusion of powers – are expected to dampen individual-level differences. Open party lists and local nomination battles straightforwardly imply greater competition between prospective legislators of the same party. Perhaps less obvious is how division of powers

systems, unlike fusion of powers systems, increase intra-party competition between legislators. As Lore (2016) outlines, division of powers systems are characterized by weaker party discipline relative to parliamentary systems with the fusion of powers, which means more opportunities for differentiation between legislators in the same party. Lore's framework is an elaboration of John Carey and Matthew Shugart's (1995) theory of personal versus party votes.

For the present article, an exploratory analysis was conducted to examine whether variation in these electoral institutions moderates the relationship between legislators' class and both their attitudes and behaviour.¹³ This analysis makes use of institutional variation across the national and subnational jurisdictions covered in the Comparative MP Survey. Specifically, interactions between institutional features and occupation are added to the main model specification used above.

In brief, the analysis suggests that variation in electoral institutions does indeed play a role in moderating the practical importance of class representation. Certain institutional features appear to magnify class-based individual differences between legislators, possibly by the theorized mechanism of increasing incentives for intra-party competition. Specifically, the results show that open lists and division of powers systems (compared with closed lists and fusion of powers systems, respectively) are associated with larger class-based differences between legislators on the attitude and behaviour outcome variables examined in this article. No such moderating relationship is observed when interacting the third institutional feature of local nominations. Further theoretical and methodological context for this analysis, as well as more detailed empirical results, are provided in the Online Appendix.

Alternative explanations and additional analysis

To what extent should we conclude that the observed relationship between legislators' economic class background and their policy attitudes and behaviour is causal? In this section I evaluate some potential alternative explanations and present additional analysis.

Political culture of a country or region

One concern we might have is that some jurisdictions have, overall, a more economically left-wing political culture than others. In such jurisdictions, voters may be more likely to elect legislators of certain class backgrounds, such as workers (and less likely to elect legislators of other backgrounds, such as the business sector). If so, workers in the sample would be more likely to 'show up' in left-wing jurisdictions. Thus, these worker legislators may exhibit more economically left-wing attitudes and behaviour simply as a reflection of their jurisdiction's political culture. This could lead to the observation of a spurious relationship between class and these measures.

The analyses reported above account for political culture in a few ways. The main models include a 'left party' variable, so there is a clear control for political ideology. The main models with controls also include dummy variables for each country that control for characteristics specific to that jurisdiction, such as a left-wing political culture. Furthermore, as an additional check, when country dummies are replaced with parliament dummies, the observed differences by class remain.¹⁴

In addition, we can control for a parliament's 'political culture' by taking the average class attitudes of all legislators within the parliament (using an index variable averaging attitudes on the inequality and government intervention in the economy questions). When this new variable is added as an additional control in the main models, the observed differences by class still hold for all three dependent variables.¹⁵ The differences by class also hold if controls are included for the parliament average of legislators' self-assessed position on the left-right spectrum, as well as the parliament average for a variable rating how important legislators believe it is to 'represent employees' in their role as parliamentarians.

Finally, in the Comparative MP Survey legislators also assess how they believe the electorate is positioned on the left-right ideological spectrum. When we take the average of this assessment of the electorate's left-right position (by all legislators in a parliament) and use it as a control in the main model, the relationship between legislators' class and their attitudes and behaviour still holds.¹⁶

Constituents' preferences at the district level

The previous subsection dealt with controlling for potential confounds due to political culture at the country and regional levels. In addition, *within electoral districts* it could be the case that legislators of a certain class tend to be elected by voters with a distinct set of policy preferences. Legislators may then reflect those voters' preferences in their attitudes and behaviour. For example, a left-wing district may be more likely both to elect a worker and to demand left-wing policies. Thus, we might be concerned that constituents' preferences may be a confounding variable, driving both our independent variable (legislators' class) and our dependent variables (legislators' attitudes and behaviour).

Since the data set does not include information on the characteristics of voters within districts (and legislators are anonymized), it is not possible to test this possibility directly. However, most of the observations are in proportional representation systems, which are characterized by weaker links between constituencies and individual legislators. When the sample is explicitly limited to legislators in proportional systems and excludes those elected in single-member districts, the relationship between legislators' class and their attitudes and behaviour persists. In addition, when I limit the sample to legislatures with higher district magnitudes (greater than 15, for example), thereby loosening the link between constituency characteristics and individual legislators, the observed differences by class persist on all three dependent variables.¹⁷

Furthermore, suppose constituents' preferences *were* acting as a confound driving both the independent variable (occupation) and outcome variables (attitudes and behaviour). We should then reflect on why, for example, left-wing voters would tend to elect more workers in the first place. If voters see legislators' class as a credible signal of the policies they will represent, then this is precisely consistent with the idea that class has a bearing on legislators' policy attitudes and behaviour.

Alternative outcome variables

We still may be concerned at the possibility of a spurious relationship between legislators' occupation and their attitudes and behaviour, due to confounds not already

addressed above. Another way of checking whether the observed relationships are spurious is to swap out the dependent variables for a set of ‘placebo’ outcome variables. These are variables that we would not theoretically expect to be as strongly driven by legislators’ class as the core economic issues addressed in the main outcome variables, which relate directly to class (though some differences would not be unexpected).

Three additional non-class-focused ‘political issues’ questions were put to legislators in the Comparative MP Survey, directly alongside the two questions that serve as the main outcome variables. They ask MPs to rate their agreement (on a 1–5 scale) with the following statements:

‘People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.’

‘Immigrants should be required to adapt to the customs of our country.’

‘Government should make sure that films and magazines uphold moral standards.’

For all three of these questions, distinctly fewer occupation categories exhibited a significant difference than they did for the main attitude dependent variables.¹⁸ For example, working-class legislators are not significantly different from those from the business sector on any of these questions. The weaker class link between legislators’ occupations and these alternative outcome variables is consistent with expectations and strengthens confidence in the main results. There was a significant difference between business sector professionals and at least one other occupation category for each of these questions. The presence of some differences is not surprising, given that classes do think differently about social issues such as these. We would also expect between one and two of the coefficients across these three alternative outcome variables to be significant by chance.

In addition, I can examine an alternative dependent variable that I *do* expect to be strongly related to class (i.e. not another placebo variable): legislators’ self-placements on the ideological left–right spectrum (on a scale from 1 to 10). Consistent with expectations, workers and service-based professionals (indeed all but one occupation category) clearly place themselves further left on the ideological spectrum than legislators from the business sector. Notably, this class-based difference in ideology is observed despite a left party dummy variable still being included in the model as a control.

Subsample of experienced and influential MPs

Another concern we might have about the reported results is that the attitudes and behaviour of many individual MPs may not be reflected in actual policy outcomes or party positions (for example, their influence may be blunted by party discipline). If so, the results may be of less practical importance. While we cannot directly test for this, we can observe whether the relationship between legislators’ class and their attitudes and behaviour holds among a subsample of relatively experienced and influential MPs, whom we may expect to exert greater influence on policy outcomes and party positions.

To examine this possibility, analyses have been run on three different subsamples of MPs: those who have previously held elected office, those who have sponsored at least one bill and those who hold at least one parliamentary leadership position (such as committee chair). Despite much smaller sample sizes, the observed differences by legislators' class persists for both the attitude dependent variables (inequality and size of government) and the behaviour variable (contact with trade unions). This holds for the three subsamples of MPs across the three dependent variables, with a loss of significance in only two cases (one of which remains significant at the $p < 0.1$ level).¹⁹

Testing class differences using a second data set

As a further test of the relationships observed in the Comparative MP Survey, a second data set of legislative *candidates* was used: the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS 2016). The CCS analysis conducted includes candidates and their occupations and attitudes for seven European countries for parliamentary elections between 2005 and 2013.²⁰

A particularly useful feature of the CCS data set is that the occupation variable comes pre-coded using a variation on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) system. In contrast, the Comparative MP Survey provided raw, open-ended descriptions of the legislators' occupations, which I had to interpret and code from scratch. To analyse the CCS data, I set rules to assign the standardized ISCO occupation codes from the CCS data to a set of categories similar to my main occupation categorization scheme (to yield an analysis as comparable as possible). Because the ISCO codes in CCS are at a relatively high level of abstraction, it was not possible to map onto exactly the same categories. But it is nonetheless possible to compare business sector candidates to a set of occupation categories similar to those in the Comparative MP Survey analysis.

The CCS data replicate the finding above that legislators' class predicts their attitudes about inequality and government intervention in the economy (see [Figure 2](#)). This helps provide assurance that the main findings are not a result of idiosyncratic features of my coding work on the Comparative MP Survey data.

The CCS asked respondents questions on attitudes towards both inequality and government's role in the economy (though with somewhat different wording).²¹ The results are shown in [Figure 2](#) and confirm that candidates in the business sector held significantly more right-wing attitudes on inequality than most other occupation groups.²² The largest difference, between the business sector and trades/skilled manual workers, is 28% of the coefficient size of being in a left party. Those candidates in the business sector were also significantly less favourable to government intervention in the economy than clerks and trades/skilled manual workers, and the coefficient size was 22% that of being in a left party.

The CCS also includes two additional class-relevant attitude questions. One is on globalization: 'Globalization should be promoted', and the other is on social security: 'Providing a stable network of social security should be the prime goal of government.'

There is an even more stark relationship between candidates' class and their responses on the globalization question. Business sector candidates are statistically

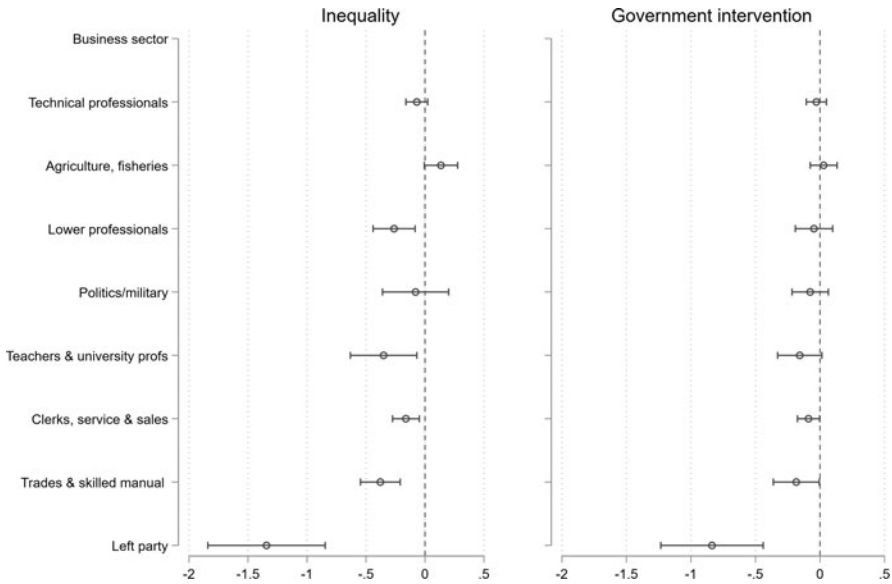


Figure 2. Estimated Class-Based Differences in Candidate Attitudes (CCS data)

Note: Lower scores correspond to more economically left-wing attitudes. Dots are model coefficients and lines are 95% confidence intervals. Business sector is the omitted reference category for occupation.

and substantively more pro-globalization than all other occupation categories (except those designated as politicians; see Figure 3). Strikingly, being in a left party seems to have no significant influence on candidates' attitudes towards globalization, which may reflect the broad pro-globalization consensus in major parties in Western countries in recent decades.

On the other additional question, candidates in the business sector are statistically and substantively less favourable to social security as a 'prime goal' of government than clerks and trades/skilled manual workers. The largest difference (between business sector and trades/skilled manual workers) amounts to about half of the coefficient size of being in a left party.

Finally, I ran a different set of models in which I categorized occupations only according to their original top-level ISCO codes (rather than mapping the codes into categories similar to my coding scheme for the main data set). Using this 'unadjusted' occupation coding scheme, the relationship between legislators' class and their attitudes also remains significant and substantial.²³

Additional robustness checks

Another concern we might have is that the results are sensitive to the estimation methods used. To address this possibility, a range of alternative specifications have been run for each of the three dependent variables. These additional specifications include using logistic regression instead of OLS, clustering standard errors by country instead of parliament, employing alternative control variables and constraining the analyses to certain subsamples. The results are substantively similar

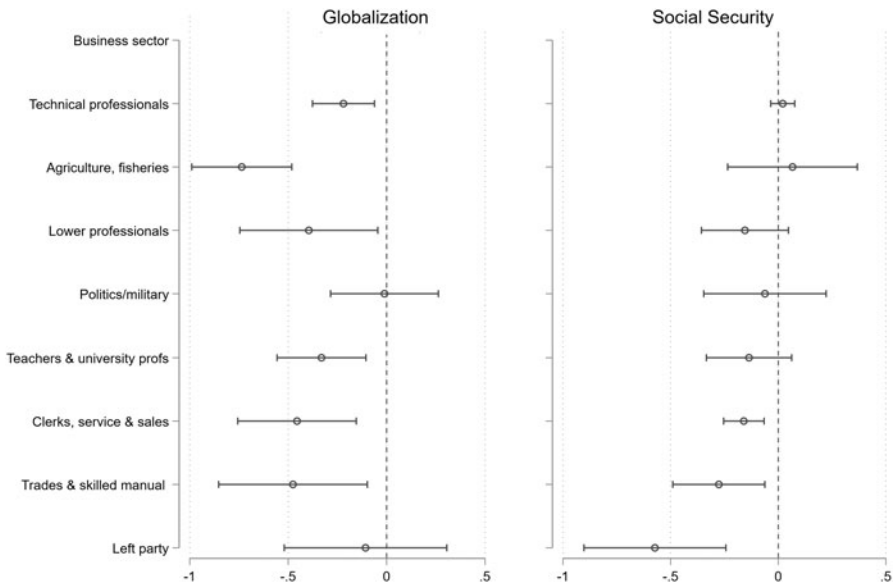


Figure 3. Estimated Class-Based Differences in Candidate Attitudes (CCS data)
Note: Lower scores correspond to more economically left-wing attitudes. Dots are model coefficients and lines are 95% confidence intervals. Business sector is the omitted reference category for occupation.

to those already presented. A more detailed description of these alternative specifications and their results is available in the Online Appendix.

Conclusion

The politics of inequality and identity are erupting across Europe and most Western democracies. No longer only a preoccupation of the political left, economic inequality is now a mainstream concern, propelled by protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and researchers such as Thomas Piketty (2014). Even institutions such as the International Monetary Fund view it as a threat to economic growth and political stability. Evidence has also mounted of class-based inequalities in political influence, and the causes and mechanisms of this phenomenon need to be more fully explained. While these emerging themes are undoubtedly interrelated, more research needs to be done to understand how they overlap and interact, and the implications for democratic institutions. As both an economic phenomenon and an element of social identity, the role of class in political representation may be a key to advancing these lines of inquiry.

This article offers quantitative evidence across multiple developed countries that the class backgrounds of legislators matter. Taking this analysis together with recent work on the US (Carnes 2013; Grumbach 2015), Switzerland (Rosset 2016) and the British Labour Party (O’Grady 2018), there is clear evidence showing the substantive importance of class representation in advanced democracies, as well as parts of the developing world (Carnes and Lupu 2014). These findings help put to rest the

conclusions of an earlier wave of work (Matthews 1984; Norris and Lovenduski 1995) that downplayed the substantive effects of class representation, but often used inadequate dependent variables that did not examine the most relevant economic and redistributive policy issues.

While this article focuses on the relationship between legislators' class and their individual views and self-reported actions, more comparative research is still needed to examine the link to overall redistributive and economic policy outcomes. Carnes (2013) finds such a link to social spending outcomes in his analysis of US states and municipalities, but it cannot be assumed that class-based differences observed in individual-level representation will always translate into distinct policy outcomes in this way. Research on this question of aggregate outcomes would help clarify whether shifting class representation may be among the causes of increasingly salient economic and political inequality in many developed countries (Bartels 2017; Bernauer et al. 2015; Donnelly and Lefkofridi 2014; Giger et al. 2012; Gilens and Page 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2010). To be sure, many other relevant forces are at play alongside descriptive representation, such as class-based biases in electoral participation (Brady et al. 1995), class-biased perceptions in economic voting (Bartels 2008; Hicks et al. 2016), as well as resource-intensive activities such as campaign contributions and lobbying (Ansolabehere et al. 2003; Stratman 2005) that are part of a broader 'politics of organized combat' highlighted by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2010) in their framework of 'Winner-Take-All Politics'.

Further research is needed on factors that may moderate the influence of class, including the role of electoral institutions, building on the exploratory analysis presented above. Other possible moderators include polarization and the extent to which class issues are well-incorporated into party politics. Along the same lines, O'Grady (2018) suggests that effects of legislators' class are more likely to appear when there is divergence between the preferences of working-class legislators and party leaders.

In addition, the mechanisms through which class matters require more investigation. Because legislators from different classes sort into parties based on class-driven pre-existing beliefs, the measured coefficients for 'party' will be composed of the true party effect as well as a portion of the class effect. Using a party control variable is necessary since parties are themselves sites of political socialization and party discipline, but this means the main empirical models likely underestimate the coefficients for class. Additional research is needed to clarify and better understand what is happening at the different steps in the causal chain.

Finally, another important set of questions follows from this line of inquiry: what drives the skewed descriptive representation of class in the first place, and what can be done about it (Carnes, 2018)? Work on these issues beyond the US context is particularly needed. At a time when economic and political inequalities are increasingly stark, the class characteristics of legislators deserve further attention and examination. Indeed, in light of the growing distrust of political classes, and the political upheavals that are unfolding in many advanced democracies, addressing these matters is urgent.

Supplementary material. To see the supplementary material for this article, please go to <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2020.27>

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Notes

- 1 In the US context, Grumbach (2015) also finds a relationship between the class backgrounds of legislators' parents and their roll-call votes.
- 2 Another study examining occupational background is Hyytinen et al. (2018), which finds that Finnish municipal governments with more councillors from the public sector tend to have higher levels of expenditure. The focus of that research, though, is on rent-seeking behaviour rather than class.
- 3 The distribution of responses to the outcome variables are shown in Figure A1 in the Online Appendix.
- 4 See Table A1 in the Online Appendix for a breakdown of occupation observations by country. More details on the coding procedure can be found in Tables A2 and A3.
- 5 In the secondary data set, this includes running models that use provided top-level ISCO codes. Further robustness checks are discussed in the Online Appendix, including running models that drop ambiguous or difficult-to-code cases, as well as separating union staff from the main 'workers' category.
- 6 The full breakdown of observations by occupation category and party type can be found in Online Appendix Table A2.
- 7 The left party dummy is equal to 1 for the following party types: socialist, communist, social democratic and green; it is equal to 0 for these party types: Christian democratic, conservative, liberal, far right, ethnic or regionalist, agrarian, single issue, religious, other.
- 8 This education variable has a high number of missing cases and is in any case not statistically significant in the models. The education variable included in the data set distinguishes between three levels: 'primary and/or secondary education', 'non-university higher education' and 'university'.
- 9 Since, for example, Switzerland and its many regional canton legislatures are over-represented in the data set. This issue is explored further in additional robustness checks found in the Online Appendix.
- 10 There are good theoretical reasons to shine a light on economic elites (Hacker and Pierson 2010), and more recent work (Page et al. 2013) shows that they have clearly distinct economic policy preferences.
- 11 More on robustness checks below and in the Online Appendix.
- 12 See Online Appendix Table A6. This is using the baseline unweighted specification with controls. Note that the results are also robust to dropping those cases coded as workers because of their status as staff members of unions (see Online Appendix for more on this point).
- 13 One might object that such incentives could condition legislators' behaviour in office, but that they should not affect their attitudes and preferences. However, part of adapting behaviour to a strategic context can include adapting one's privately held attitudes. Indeed, the fact that people's attitudes often *follow* from their behaviour is a robust finding in the psychological literature (Olson and Stone 2005).
- 14 Results not reported, but available on request.
- 15 Models described throughout this section are variations on the main models for the three dependent variables (Models 2, 5 and 8), unless otherwise stated. Regression results from this paragraph are in the Online Appendix Table A7.
- 16 Regression results are in the Online Appendix Table A8.
- 17 Regression results from this paragraph are in the Online Appendix Table A9.
- 18 Full regression results from this subsection can be found in Table A10 of the Online Appendix.
- 19 Full regression results are available in Table A11 of the Online Appendix.
- 20 The countries included are Switzerland, Germany, Greece, Portugal, Norway, Italy and the UK.
- 21 The inequality question was worded as follows: 'Income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people', with a five-point agreement scale. The government intervention question was worded: 'Politics should abstain from intervening in the economy'.

- 22 Full regression results for the models in this section are available in Online Appendix Table A12. In the CCS analysis, the 'left party' variable is based on the average of respondents' self-placement on the left-right spectrum for each party. Controls used are party type, education, age, gender and country dummies.
- 23 Results for CCS models with this alternative occupation scheme are available upon request.

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