

# Class and social policy representation

Macarena Ares, Autonomous University of Barcelona and University of Zurich  
Silja Häusermann, University of Zurich

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## Abstract

Class-biases in the representation of political preferences in advanced democratic systems have been documented in many studies. Most of them focus on social policy and redistribution as key areas of unequal representation. However, the recent literature has emphasized that class preference profiles towards social policies diverge between different logics and fields of social policy. Hence, we leverage newly collected data on voters' social policy priorities, as well as their perception of parties' priorities on these same policies to empirically study social policy representation across these different fields. We show that class-biases in perceived social policy representation persist in all areas of social policy: in particular, citizens in lower social classes perceive political parties to deviate from their preferences by not supporting pension and unemployment spending enough, as well as by putting more emphasis than they do on the expansion of education and of benefits supporting immigrants. In a second step, we test whether the presence of strong radical left and/or radical right challenger parties improves perceived social policy representation for citizens in lower social classes. We find some evidence for a mitigating effect of challenger – especially radical left - parties, but basic patterns of class-biased representation persist throughout.

## 1. Introduction

Class- and income-biases in political representation in advanced democratic systems have been documented in many studies. The interests and the preferences of citizens in lower income categories or lower social classes are on average less well represented in democratic politics than the interests and preferences of middle- and upper- (income) class citizens. This finding holds both for representation in terms of political attitudes (Giger et al. 2012; Rosset et al. 2013; Rosset and Stecker 2019), as well as in terms of policy responsiveness, in particular social policies and redistribution (e.g. Elsässer, Hense and Schäfer 2020; Schakel, Burgoon and Hakverdian's 2019). In terms of implications and consequences, research on class-biased unequal representation has not only documented representation deficits, but also demonstrated detrimental effects of non-representation, e.g. in terms of political participation and alienation (Mathisen and Peters 2021; Offe 2009).

Most of these studies assume that voters are aware of “objective” misrepresentation on these issues. However, given data constraints, this is oftentimes hard to study empirically, and we still have rather limited knowledge about the structure and extent of perceived representation. Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) thus advocate a “subjectivist turn” in the study of unequal representation, in order to better understand the extent, determinants and consequences of grievances caused by misrepresentation. We share their argument that voter perceptions of representation cannot simply be assumed, but rather need to be studied empirically. Moreover, we know little about voters' perception of representation across different sub-fields of social and distributive policies. Hence, we need to know both: a) whether citizens feel badly represented by “politicians” and the political system overall, and b) whether perceptions of misrepresentation are also manifest when inquiring about specific and tangible welfare policy areas on which parties and elites can intervene. Moreover, placing the focus on how voters perceive representation on specific policy logics and fields sheds light on the complexity of these perceptions. There are reasons to believe that different dimensions of representation (on different principles and areas of social policy) are not identical, and that class differences in perceptions of misrepresentation may vary across them, with potentially relevant implications. If citizens in lower social classes or income groups, e.g. perceive a lack of representation when it comes to pensions and unemployment (typical social consumption

policies), and citizens of higher social and income classes perceive a lack of representation in the areas of education and childcare infrastructure, both groups of voters may be similarly dissatisfied with representation.

In this paper, we leverage newly collected data from the ERC project “welfarepriorities” on voters’ social policy priorities, their perception of parties’ social policy priorities, as well as their evaluation of overall social policy representation to study these questions. We focus on social policy as a field that is key to the literature on unequal representation. Indeed, this strand of research has always had a tendency to focus - implicitly or explicitly - on fiscal and social policies when assessing representation and congruence; a focus that is reasonable given that the direct distributive outcomes of these policies could redistribute power relations and reinforce or mitigate patterns of unequal representation.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, we explain why studying perceptions of misrepresentation matters, particularly in what concerns specific welfare policies. We develop hypotheses on the class-biases in both party and systemic representation along different social policy dimensions. We also put forward different expectations as to how the presence of strong challenger parties on the radical left and/or the radical right can mitigate some of these perceptions of unequal responsiveness across different systems. The subsequent section presents our data and measures. The analysis section studies class as a determinant of perceived representation by voters’ preferred party and the system overall on different policy dimensions and across different party-political contexts.

## **2. Theory**

Distributive policies, and social policies in particular, have always occupied a special place in the study of unequal representation. Not only is social policy one of the key areas of state expenditures and material redistribution, it is also an area that affects social stratification and thus very directly links to those material inequalities that structure and exacerbate unequal representation. At the same time, however, social policy and redistribution have always been fields for which representation has been difficult to study, because despite extensive

divergences in material “objective” class interests in this field, actual attitudinal differences are not very large (Ares 2017; Rosset and Stecker 2019). Indeed, a wide range of public opinion surveys show that lower-, middle- and even upper-class citizens on average tend to support expansive, generous social policies (Elsässer 2018; Garritzmann et al. 2018; Häusermann et al. 2021), especially when they are asked for their unconstrained preferences. Hence, even though there is evidence of class-bias in policy responsiveness, it remains hard to assess unequal representation in this field because of attitudinal convergence on social policy support in mature welfare states.

There is reason to think, however, that this seeming attitudinal convergence masks underlying differences in social policy preferences: a lot of the recent literature has shown that rather than in the level of support, citizens today differ more strongly in the type or field of social policy they prioritize: middle class support is stronger for policies securing life cycle risks than for policies addressing labor market risks (Rehm 2016; Jensen 2012); furthermore, while middle class voters prioritize social investment, such as education and childcare much more strongly than voters in lower occupational and income classes, working class voters prioritize income protection and social compensation policies, such as pensions or unemployment benefits (Garritzmann et al. 2018; Häusermann et al. 2021). While insiders prioritize employment protection, outsiders prioritize redistribution and employment support (Rueda 2005; Häusermann et al. 2014). And while working class and national-conservative voters emphasize the protection of national welfare states from open borders, voters in the upper middle classes and left-libertarian voters prioritize the integration of immigrants and their inclusion in universal social protection schemes (Lefkofridi and Michel 2014; Enggist and Pinggera 2021). All these conflicts and divergences certainly do occur in a context of overall strong support for welfare states (Pinggera 2020), however, social policy conflict today revolves as much around prioritizing particular social policy fields than around contesting levels of benefits, redistribution and taxation in general.

This is why in this contribution, we focus on (unequal) representation in terms of social policy *priorities*: do parties (and politicians more generally) attribute similar or different levels of importance to reforms in different social policy fields as their voters? Do

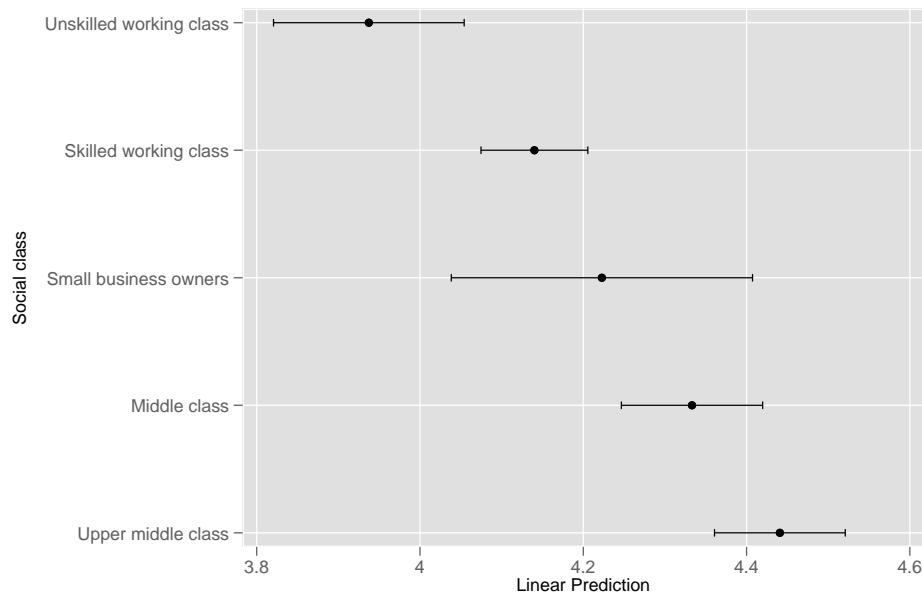
parties/elites set other priorities than voters in general, and than voters from lower social classes in particular? Recent research has emphasized the importance of extending studies of congruence and responsiveness beyond positional measures to also include accounts of the issues and policies that voters prioritize (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014; Traber et al., 2021). More, importantly, we study these questions through the “subjectivist lens” of voter perceptions. Do voters feel generally unrepresented by “politicians” in terms of social policy? How do voters’ own priorities compare to the priorities they perceive all parties and their preferred party to have?

Answering these questions is relevant to evaluate the extent of the problem of unequal representation, as well as the expected effectiveness of potential remedies to misrepresentation in terms of policies or parties adapting their positions to voters.

### **2.1. Class and unequal social policy representation**

How would we expect perceived representation to differ from more objective measures of policy responsiveness? In line with previous research on class-biased representation (Rennwald and Pontusson 2021), we generally expect middle and upper-middle class voters to feel more congruent with the policy positions of parties and politicians than working class voters, whenever the preferences of these classes diverge. Rennwald and Pontusson (2021) identify a clear class hierarchy in voters’ perceptions of generally being represented by politicians in their countries. Overall, working-class citizens have a lower probability of perceiving themselves as having political influence. Figure 1 below indicates that, very much in line with the results from this previous study, we also observe relevant class differences in perceptions of systemic congruence when voters are inquired specifically about social policies.

Figure 1: Social classes’ average predicted perceptions of systemic congruence on social policy



*Note: Class as a determinant of perceived systemic congruence. Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, trade union membership and country-FE. The coefficients for all variables are presented in Table 2 in the Appendix.*

Figure 1 plots social classes’ average agreement with the statement that “*politicians share respondents’ views about the most important reforms in social policy*” (as measured on a 10-point scale). This figure corroborates one of the central tenets of unequal representation studies: the upper classes are indeed more likely to perceive politicians’ (social policy) priorities as congruent with their own. The 0.5-point difference between the upper and unskilled class on this attitude amounts to approximately a fourth of the standard deviation of this variable. This class gradient in perceptions of feeling represented on welfare reform policies is comparable to the findings from Rennwald and Pontusson (2021).

This initial evidence of unequal systemic congruence substantiates the importance of addressing these perceptions in what concerns social policy. However, this general measure could be masking some substantial heterogeneity in perceptions of unequal welfare policy representation for two reasons. First, while this item captures voters’ perceptions of congruence on social policy generally (without referring to a specific logic or field) it could

be conflating perceived policy misrepresentation with some general systemic dissatisfaction (Easton, 1975), which is usually more widespread among lower class citizens (Oesch, 2008; Rydgren, 2007). Second, there are reasons to expect that perceptions of welfare policy congruence are likely to differ across different social policy dimensions. In current welfare politics, the literature distinguishes in particular three areas of social policy reform where such class preferences and class-perceptions of representation may diverge consistently and substantively: *social consumption policies*, *social investment policies* and *welfare chauvinism*. In these policy fields, voter preferences and party responses may well diverge in different ways.

Social consumption policies refer to those social policies that substitute income in the event of a disruption of employment (e.g. in the case of sickness, accident, unemployment or old age). They denote the “traditional” passive income transfer-policies of the welfare states that were strongly developed in continental Western Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Esping-Andersen 1999). They may be more or less redistributive in their institutional design (depending on the extent to which they are universal, targeted or insurance-based) but they in general tend to equalize income streams between risk groups that relate to social class. For this reason, and because of the immediacy of redistributive effects, social consumption policies are most strongly prioritized and emphasized by working class voters (as opposed to middle- and upper-class voters) (Garritzmman et al. 2018; Häusermann et al 2021). At the same time, the hands of political parties and elites to expand these social consumption policies significantly are rather severely tied by fiscal and political constraints. If anything, elites and governments have generally tried to consolidate (or in some instances even retrench) social spending in the main areas of social consumption (e.g. Hemerijck 2012). Hence, we would assume class-specific representation to be particularly biased against working class interests in the area of social consumption.

By contrast, middle- and upper-class voters tend to attribute a decidedly higher importance to social investment policies than working class voters (Beramendi et al. 2015, Bremer 2021). Rather than replacing income, social investment policies invest in human capital formation, mobilization and preservation (Garritzmman et al. 2021), e.g. via education policies, early

childhood education and care policies, or labor market reintegration policies. The stronger emphasis of middle and upper class voters - as compared to working class voters - on social investment has been explained by different mechanisms, in particular the oftentimes regressive distributive effects of these policies (Bonoli and Liechti 2018, Pavolini and van Lancker 2018), differences in institutional trust (Jacobs and Matthews 2017, Garritzmann *et al.* 2018b), and higher levels of universalistic values among the middle class (Beramendi *et al.* 2015). However, the efforts of parties and governments to actually expand social investment policies across Western Europe have remained rather limited (Garritzmann *et al.* 2022 forthcoming), because of institutional legacies, fiscal and political constraints. Hence, when it comes to social investment, one might expect class-specific perceived representation to be less biased overall, or even biased more strongly against the preferences of the middle and upper middle class voters.

Finally, middle and working class voters clearly differ in the extent to which they emphasize the importance of excluding migrants from welfare benefits and prioritizing the needs of natives. Policies that either lower benefit levels for migrants, or which extend existing benefits only for natives generally enjoy stronger support among the lower classes across all countries of Western Europe (Degen *et al.* 2018). The mechanism driving this class divergence is supposed to be either economic (welfare competition, e.g. Manow 2018) or value-based (communitarian as opposed to universalistic values, e.g. Enggist 2019). Given the saliency, electoral importance and much lower fiscal significance of social policies addressing the needs of immigrants, we would expect parties and elites to be more responsive to the on average more immigration-skeptical preferences of the lower middle and working classes. Indeed, related studies have found the class-bias in representation to be much weaker when it comes to immigration policies than when it comes to distributive policies (Elsässer 2018). Hence, similar to social investment, one may expect weaker class-bias or even reversed class-bias in perceived representation of welfare chauvinism preferences.

Overall, we would thus expect the class-bias in perceived party representation to be strongest when it comes to social consumption, because this is the area where strongly expansionist demands among citizens clash with an agenda of fiscal consolidation or even retrenchment



among elites. By contrast, we would expect this bias to be weaker when it comes to social investment and welfare benefits for immigrants.

Within the paradigms of social consumption and investment, we can further differentiate different policy fields, such as pensions and unemployment benefits within social consumption, as well as (higher) education, active labor market policies and childcare services when it comes to social investment. Regarding these fields, we would overall expect subjectively perceived representation biases to be strongest in those policies that are most salient and important to voters. Based on both the risk-distribution and political importance (e.g. Rehm 2016, Jensen 2012, Enggist 2019), this would suggest that we expect stronger biases in the areas of pensions, education and immigrants' benefits than when it comes to unemployment support and childcare services.

## **2.2. Social policy congruence by party configuration**

The observation of unequal, class-biased representation entails the question of context conditions that might mitigate or exacerbate the class-bias in perceived (in)congruence. Indeed, an expanded political supply on the side of political parties would seem as one potential factor affecting the extent to which citizens perceive their preferences to be adequately represented or not.

The role of non-mainstream parties in providing this supply in terms of representation seems particularly relevant, not only because these parties tend to mobilize voters explicitly with reference to their opposition to the dominant mainstream or government parties (Mair 2013), but also because the electorate of non-mainstream parties tends to concentrate among less well-represented social groups. In particular, right challenger parties tend to mobilize disproportionately among voters from the working and lower middle classes (Oesch and Rennwald 2018). The electorate of left challenger parties is more heterogeneous in terms of social class, but at the same time, these parties tend to emphasize issues of social justice, egalitarianism and distribution and should thus be particularly sensitive to representing the social policy preferences of their electorate.

We can thus theorize four context configurations in terms of party supply and derive expectations regarding the class-bias in representation.

	Presence of strong right-wing challenger	Absence of strong right-wing challenger
Presence of strong left-wing challenger	<i>Weak (moderate) class bias</i>	<i>Moderate class bias</i>
Absence of strong left-wing challenger	<i>Moderate class bias</i>	<i>Strong class bias</i>

*Figure 2: Strength of expected class-bias in representation of social policy preferences, depending on challenger parties*

We expect the strongest class-bias in perceived representation in systems where challenger parties are weak, such as majoritarian electoral systems that tend to entail obstacles for challenger party mobilization. In these systems, we would expect in particular working class voters to perceive elite congruence among mainstream parties and hence a larger distance between their priorities and the ones of their preferred party or the party system in general. The absence of niche parties could deteriorate perceptions of unequal priority representation, since these parties tend to improve salience-based congruence (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). While we expect challenger parties on the left and right to mitigate some of the class-biased perceptions of representation, this could differ across social policy logics, because of the issues these parties emphasize towards voters. Challenger right parties mobilize strongly in lower social classes, and they tend to do so, largely, in terms of policies related to immigration and welfare chauvinism (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2012, Hutter and Kriesi 2016), or of consumptive policies (Enggist & Pinggera, 2021). Hence, challenger right parties could particularly mitigate class biases on the logics of social consumption and benefits for migrants. Challenger parties on the left, in contrast, have typically mobilized lower-class electorates on an economic platform, have abstained from anti-immigration stances, and have also attempted to mobilize higher-grade classes on investment-oriented policies. Hence, these parties could mitigate class biases on the social consumption and investment dimensions, but

not on welfare chauvinism. We expect class biases in representation to be most strongly mitigated in contexts of diversified supply, with strong challengers on both the left and right.

While these expectations are based on the types of social policy priorities typically taken by different party families (and the social groups they mobilize electorally), deviations from these expectations could be due to how the logic of party competition might affect the salience of these topics. While having a diversified supply can increase the range of policy priorities present in the party system (e.g. with a party explicitly advocating for welfare chauvinism), rising contestation and politicization of issues could also fuel perceptions of lack of representation, if not by voters' preferred party by the system overall. Following the same example, having strong contestation on the issue of welfare chauvinism both from challenger parties on the left and right, might bring further attention to welfare chauvinistic voters about the many parties that do not share their position. An expansion in the scope of conflict (Schattschneider, 1960) can diversify the policy priorities taken by parties, but also highlight the different opinions held by other parties and voters. This is why we also propose that in highly diversified landscape, with challengers on both the left and right, the mitigation of class biases might be lower than initially expected and still be moderate. We purposely leave this expectation rather open and up for empirical investigation.

### **3. Data and operationalization**

We use original data from a survey conducted in the context of the ERC project "welfarepriorities". Data were collected in eight Western European countries with 1500 respondents each in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. The questionnaire and sample design were in our hands, while the actual fieldwork was done in cooperation with a professional survey institute (Bilendi) using their online panels. The target population was a country's adult population (>18 years). The total sample counts 12'129 completed interviews that were conducted between October 2018 and January 2019. Different measures were taken in order to increase the survey's representativeness and to ensure high quality answers. First, we based our sampling strategy on quota for age, gender, and educational attainment, drawn from national census figures. Age and gender were introduced as crossed quotas, with six age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36-

45, 46-55, 56-65, 66 or older) for both female and male respondents. Second, we account for remaining bias from survey response by including poststratification weights adjusting for age, gender, and educational attainment. The full dataset together with some validation tests are presented extensively in a specific working paper (Häusermann et al. 2020).

### **3.1. Measures of social policy representation**

The survey includes a wide range of items capturing social policy positions and priorities, as well as a question on systemic congruence, and on the respondents' evaluation of party priorities.

The survey includes several different items that enable us to measure social policy priorities. For this paper, we use *point distribution questions*, in which respondents were asked to allocate 100 points to six policy fields, reflecting the relative importance they attribute to different strategies of welfare state expansion<sup>1</sup>. The six items were presented in randomised order, so as not to prime the importance given to them. Through this type of question, we can account for the multidimensionality of welfare preferences, while at the same time we pay respect to the constraint that is inherent in the concept of priorities. At the same time, we do not force respondents to prioritize: the point-distribution question does allow for respondents attributing an equal number of points across all fields or reforms (as opposed to a mere *ranking* question of the different fields/reforms). Respondents were asked to allocate points to the 6 following social policy fields, covering social consumption, social investment and welfare chauvinism: Old age pensions, Childcare, University education, Unemployment benefits, Labor market reintegration services, and Services for social and labor market integration of immigrants.

This point distribution question was asked to respondents in the first 5 minutes of the (roughly) 25-minute survey. Most importantly, in the last third of the survey, the respondents were then again confronted with the same type of point-distribution question. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> Question wording: "Now imagine that the government had the means to improve benefits in some social policy fields, but not in all of them. You can allocate 100 points. Give more points to those fields in which you consider benefit improvement more important, and fewer points to those areas in which you consider benefit improvement less important."

question was then asked with regard to their perception of party priorities. Respondents were asked in which of the above areas they think a particular party would prioritize improvements of social benefits<sup>2</sup>. Answer fields were identical as above and again randomized. Each respondent had to complete this task twice, once for his/her own preferred party (i.e. the party they indicated they had voted for in the last national election) and once for an additional, randomly chosen party (among the main parties in the country).<sup>3</sup> Since in this paper, we focus, among other aspects, on “party representation” by the respondents’ preferred party, our sample is restricted to respondents who did indicate they had chosen a party in the last national election.

Overall, and across countries and parties, respondents clearly tended to attribute most importance to the expansion of old age pensions, followed by tertiary education and childcare, followed by unemployment benefits and reintegration measures, and – lastly – integration services for immigrants. However, despite roughly similar patterns across countries, there are significant divergences from the country averages cross-sectionally across party electorates and classes (see Häusermann et al. 2021).

We present measures of voters’ representation by their preferred party, by aggregating the rating of these six specific fields into three different dimensions: social consumption policies (aggregating expansions in the area of pensions and unemployment benefits), social investment policies (childcare, university education and labor-market reintegration services) and benefits for migrants (services for social and labor market integration of immigrants). Voters’ priorities on each of these dimensions take the average value of the points attributed across the corresponding fields of welfare expansion. We follow the same aggregation strategy to compute the priorities of the different parties on these three policy logics. Measures of parties’ priorities on each of these logics are based on the average of points

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<sup>2</sup> Question wording: “In which of the following areas do you think the (party X1) would prioritize improvements of social benefits? You can allocate 100 points. Give more points to those areas in which you think (the party X1) would prioritize improvements and fewer points to those areas where you think (the party X1) would deem improvements less important”.

<sup>3</sup> To have a relatively large number of observations of parties’ placement we asked respondents to place only the main parties in the party system. Table 1 in the Appendix includes the list of the parties placed by respondents in each country.

allocated to each of these parties by all the available respondents in the sample (i.e. not only their voters). We base these measures on respondents' average placement of parties and not on the individual placements provided by respondents to avoid risks of endogeneity stemming from voters projecting their own policy stances onto their preferred parties. It is important to notice, however, that parties' average placement by all respondents or by their voters only are comparable. To compute the measure of subjective representation by voters' preferred party we simply subtract the party's placement on each dimension from respondents' self-placement.

On top of measuring subjective representation by respondents' preferred party, we also compute a measure of proximity to the party system in general. This measure allows us to add further detail to the question of how distant individuals perceive the party system to be on the three specific welfare policy logics: consumption, investment and benefits for migrants. This measure captures the average proximity between a voter and all parties in the system and is calculated by first computing the distance between voters' priorities and those of each party within the system, and, second, averaging over these distance measures to arrive to a single measure of subjective system proximity. Both distances (to preferred party and to the party system) are measured on the original 0-100 scale from the point distribution task.

Using such newly developed measures requires evaluations of validity, which we have conducted. First, respondent behaviour indicates that they were able and willing to engage with the task at hand: even though they could have eschewed the difficult task of indicating the relative importance for particular policies, fewer than 2% of respondents attributed equal point numbers across policy fields. Also, fewer than 6% of all respondents attributed 100 points to one field and 0 to all others. We have also conducted extensive analyses to test the internal validity of our items (Ares 2020b). Regarding the point distribution question, we used data on people's priorities regarding welfare *retrenchment* (as opposed to expansion) to test if reported preferences are consistent. Our data show that 85-90% of respondents gave consistent answers, i.e. they did *not* simultaneously prioritise retrenchment *and* expansion in the same policy field. Regarding external validity, we find roughly the same 'order of

priorities' between policy fields as Bremer and Bürgisser (2020), who also study relative importance of social policies.

### **3.2. Determinants of (non)representation**

Our analyses focus on differences in party and system proximity by social class. We implement a market-based definition of social class based on occupational categories. To operationalize class we rely on a simplified version of Oesch's scheme (2006), commonly used in current analyses of post-industrial class conflict (Ares, 2020; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). This simplified version of the scheme distinguishes five social classes along Oesch's vertical dimension, which captures marketable skills – i.e. how the labor market stratifies life chances. In descending order, the 'upper middle class' aggregates professionals (including self-employed professionals) and employers with more than 10 employees; the 'middle class' is constituted of associate professionals and technicians; the 'skilled working class' includes generally and vocationally skilled employees; the 'unskilled working class' includes routine low and unskilled workers (in manufacturing, service or clerical jobs); and a fifth category for 'small business owners' aggregates self-employed individuals without a professional title, and employers with fewer than 10 employees. All results referring to the priorities and perceptions of small business owners must be considered with certain caution since they constitute a small group in the sample, hence reducing the precision of some estimates. Following many studies of unequal policy responsiveness, we conduct additional analyses that address unequal representation by income groups instead of class, by assigning respondents to five income quintiles. While these results also report income-biases in social policy representation, they are smaller than inequalities based on social class. This is in line with a growing number of studies repeatedly showing a greater explanatory value of class on redistributive and welfare policies.

The first part of the analyses starts by addressing class differences in party representation on three types of welfare policies (social consumption, social investment and benefits for migrants) as well as by each of the policies underlying these logics, separately. As explained above, for each of these logics and policies, proximity is measured with respect to respondents' preferred party and to the system overall. In these models the outcome variables

are distances in points, hence the models are estimated as linear regression models including controls for age, sex, trade union membership, and country fixed-effects. These control variables are included consistently across all models (except for the analyses by party system type, which do not include country fixed-effects).

The second part of the analyses addresses how the configuration of the partisan supply could mitigate/accentuate class inequalities in perceived congruence. Since the number of country-level observations is limited to eight, to address this question we split the sample into four groups depending on whether challenger left- and/or right-wing alternatives had strong electoral support at the last national election. We consider electoral support as strong if either the left- or right-wing challenger block (including one or more parties) received more than 10 percent of the vote. Following this classification decision, we observe four countries in which the left- and right-wing challenger blocks are strong: Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden. There are two countries in which we do not observe neither a strong left- nor right-wing challenger: Ireland and the United Kingdom. In Spain, there is a strong challenger party on the left only, while in Italy we only find a strong challenger on the right. Given the reduced number of cases in some of these types of party configuration we must be cautious in interpreting these results. The figures always indicate the countries on which the models are estimated.

To facilitate the interpretation of the results, they are presented by means of figures displaying average adjusted predictions or average marginal effects. The full models with all control variables are included in Tables 2-5 in the Appendix.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Subjective social policy representation by preferred party and party system**

As displayed in Figure 1, there are apparent class inequalities in how voters perceive politicians' social policy priorities in relation to theirs, with working class voters perceiving politicians as less congruent. This raises the question of whether this perception of unequal representation is also manifest when we focus on more specific welfare policies. To address

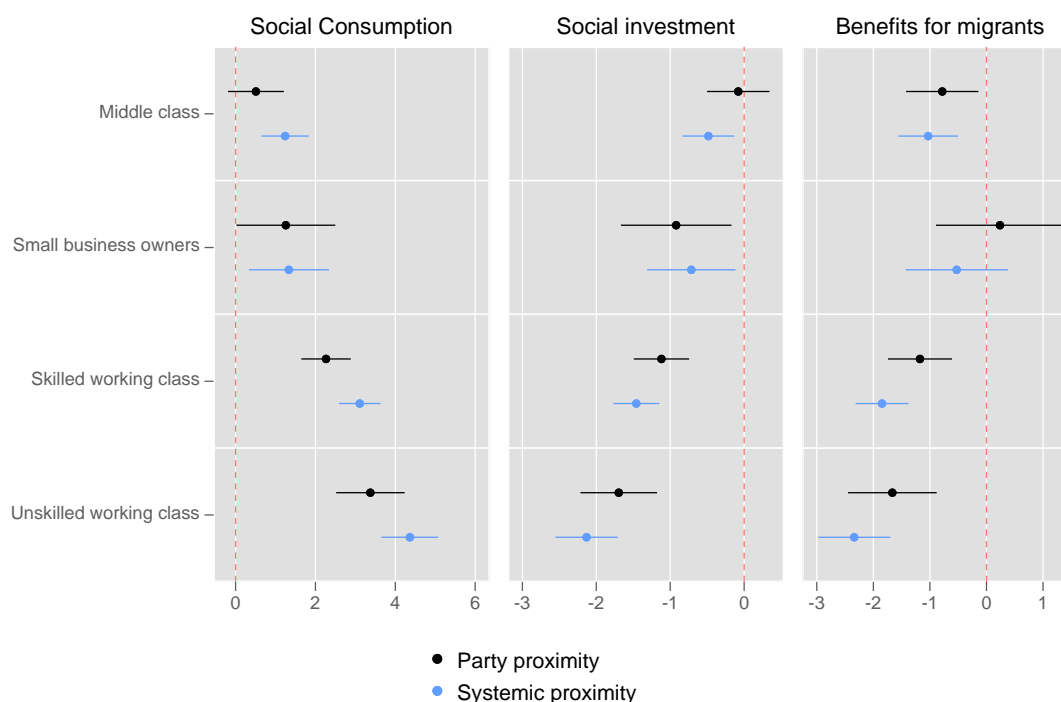


this knowledge gap, the analyses below model subjective representation by (a) voters' preferred party and by (b) the party system, on respondents' social class. Figure 3 presents class differences (with respect to the upper middle class) in how distant voters are from their preferred party and the main parties in the country in terms of their prioritization of different welfare expansion logics: social consumption, social investment and benefits for the labor-market integration of migrants. Comparing the two different measures – by preferred party and system – allows us to gain some insights about how good/bad representation by voters' preferred party is, in comparison to the system overall. We could think of a context in which most parties in the system provided poor representation to the demands of the working class, but a specific party mobilized the priorities and electoral support of the lower-grade classes. In such a context we would observe class gradient in terms of systemic representation, but not on party representation. This is not, however, what Figure 3 indicates.

Proximity to parties is measured through points distributed to the different areas of benefit expansion, with higher values indicating support for further expansion of benefits in that particular area. Hence, positive party-voter distances indicate that the voter prioritizes expansion to a greater extent than the party (system) does. Correspondingly, negative values indicate that voters prioritize expansion in that area less than parties. In light of the evidence indicating that the working classes tend to prioritize consumption over investment policies, and our expectation that political elites will be more sensitive to investment-oriented expenditure we should observe a class gradient in subjective proximity to parties. This is, in fact, what Figure 3 displays. There are two key findings to take from these analyses. First, social classes differ in how proximate they perceive their preferred party and the party system on the three dimensions of welfare expansion considered. Evaluations of party and systemic representation are better for the upper-middle and middle class than for the working class. On consumption-oriented expansion, the distance to voters' preferred party is 3.4 points greater for the working class than for the upper-middle class. This difference increases to 4.4 points if we focus on systemic proximity instead. A difference of 3-4 points might seem little, but we should assess it relative to the in-sample range. A four-point difference amounts to about 50 percent of the standard deviation of the consumption proximity measure, this effect is larger than other class differences identified on commonly studied preference variables

(like preferences on redistribution, gay rights or environmental issues)<sup>4</sup> (Häusermann et al, 2021).

**Figure 3: Social class differences in proximity to preferred party and the party system**  
(coefficients indicate differences to the upper middle class)



*Note: Class as a determinant of perceived proximity. Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, trade union membership and country-FE. The coefficients for all variables are presented in Table 3 in the Appendix.*

The class gradient is also manifest in party and systemic representation on the expansion of investment and migrant integration but, in this case, with a negative sign. Again, the priorities of the upper-middle classes appear better represented and, in these fields, the lower-grade classes prioritize expansion to a lesser extent than their preferred party (or the party system) – this is reflected in negative measures of proximity. On social investment policies, the distance to their own party is about 1.7 points larger for the unskilled working class than for

<sup>4</sup> In the eighth round of the European Social Survey, attitudinal differences between working- and middle-class voters are between 0.06 and 0.13 standard deviations for 'support for unemployed', 'gay adoption rights', and 'environment', class effects are slightly larger for 'EU integration' and 'immigration', 0.24 and 0.32 standard deviations respectively.

the upper-middle class. This difference increases to 2.1 when it is measured with respect to the party system. As we expected, unequal representation is larger on the social consumption dimension. The difference between the upper-middle class and the unskilled working class in the proximity to voters' preferred party is twice as large for social consumption than for investment policies. Hence, it appears that the class bias is lower on the topics of social investment and benefits for migrants, on which the working classes prioritize expansion to a lesser extent than the parties they vote for (and in the system) do.

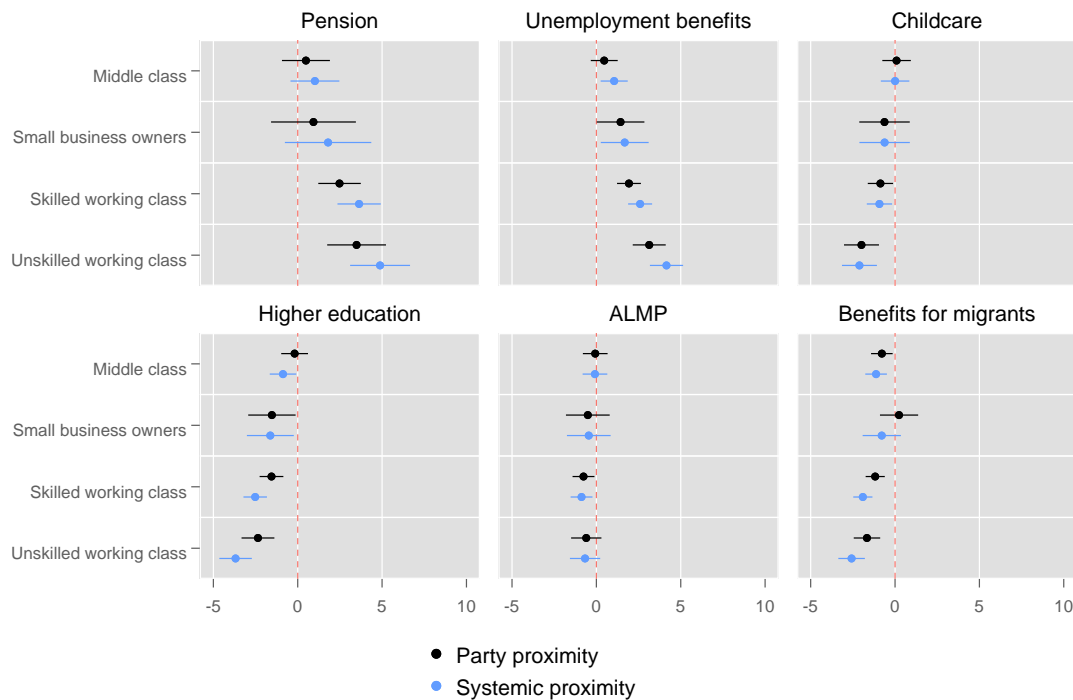
The second interesting finding stemming from these analyses is that the two measures of class inequalities in subjective representation display a greater similarity than we might have expected. Class differences in perceptions of proximity are similar, whether gauged against respondents' preferred party or the main parties in the system. While distances to own parties are usually smaller, they still display a class gradient, hence showing that class differences in congruence are manifest even when compared against voters' preferred party. We take this as a sign indicating that even voters' preferred party – in a relatively diverse party system, as in most Western European countries – do not eliminate class biases in perceptions of representation. We address to what extent the configuration of the partisan supply can compensate for some of these inequalities in further analyses below.

Additional estimations (included in Table 4 and Figure 1 in the Appendix) address inequalities based on income quintiles instead of social classes. The results portray a similar income gradient in subjective representation. Income differences are smaller than class differences – which is in line with current research highlighting the importance of class for the *type* of welfare expansion prioritized (Häusermann et al, 2021). Moreover, there are no income differences in party or systemic representation concerning the expansion of welfare benefits for migrants, which matches the finding that it is not the poorest voters who tend to support more welfare chauvinistic policies (Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013).

Addressing different logics of social policy reform separately returns some interesting divergences. We can disaggregate these analyses further by addressing perceptions of proximity by specific policies. Our initial expectation was that class inequalities should be

larger on those policies that are important and salient to a majority of voters – like pensions, education, or immigrants’ benefits. On other policy areas, voters’ attitude and priorities are less likely to be strong and well-defined. Figure 4 displays some interesting class differences across policies. The strongest class gradient appears for two social consumption policies that are largely salient across countries and strongly demanded by lower-class voters: pensions and unemployment benefits. As we could derive from the previous figure, class differences are smaller for investment policies, but, moreover, it becomes apparent that unequal distance on this dimension is mostly driven by the prioritization of the expansion of higher education by upper middle-class voters, which is more commonly shared by parties. On childcare and active labor market policies we find practically no difference between the distance perceived by upper- or lower-class voters. Hence, across different policies, class differences in perceived party proximity are greater on those policies that are generally more salient to voters.

**Figure 4: Social class differences in subjective proximity to preferred party and the party system by social policy areas (coefficients indicate differences to the upper middle class)**



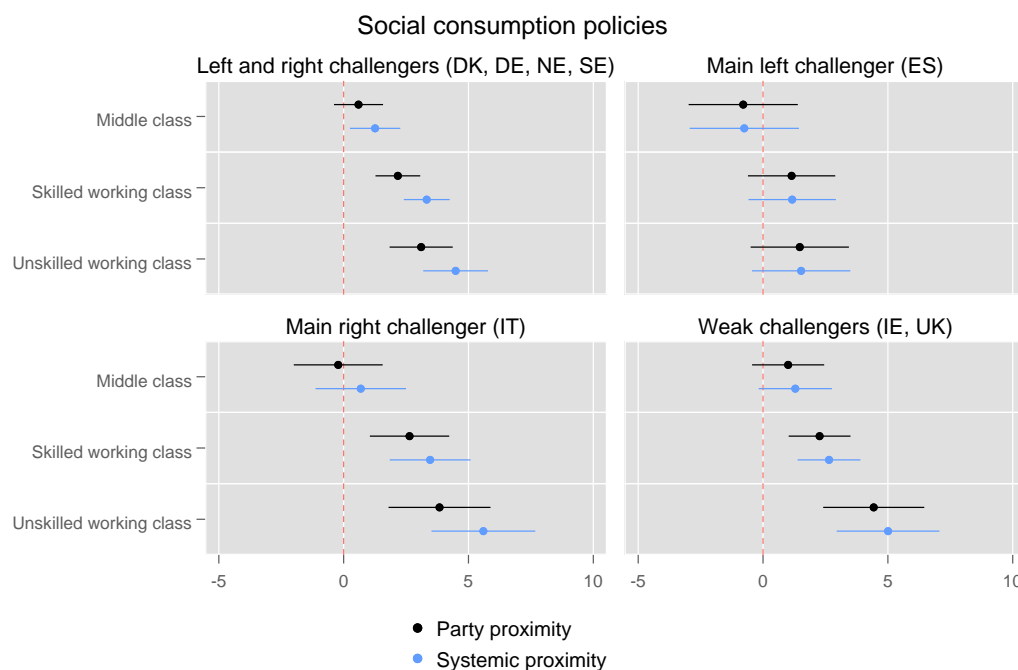
*Note: Class as a determinant of perceived proximity. Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, trade union membership and country-FE. The coefficients for all variables are presented in Table 5 in the Appendix.*

## **4.2. Evaluations of party proximity and systemic proximity under different party system configurations**

The configuration of the partisan supply, particularly the presence (absence) of strong challenger parties on the left and right of the ideological spectrum, could mitigate (strengthen) some of the class inequalities in perceptions of proximity revealed in figure 3. As we summarized in Figure 2, an expanded political supply could provide a wider range of policy positions to voters (e.g. radical right parties explicitly advocating for welfare chauvinistic policies, or radical left parties promoting consumptive policies) and, moreover, challenger parties have been more successful in mobilizing a working-class support base. This is why we expected class biases in representation to be strongest in systems without strong challenger parties, and weakest in systems with left- and right-wing challengers. In systems with strong challenger parties on either the left or right, we expect these class differences to be moderate and to vary depending on the specific social policy logic under consideration.

The four panels in Figures 5 to 7 present average class differences in proximity to preferred party and to the system by different configurations of the party system. The analyses draw on data from eight different countries, which are not uniformly distributed across the four types of partisan supply. Specifically, only Spain has a party system with a strong challenger on the left exclusively, while Italy represents the only case with a strong challenger only on the right ideological camp.

Figure 5: Social class differences in subjective proximity to preferred party and the party system on social consumption across different party system configurations

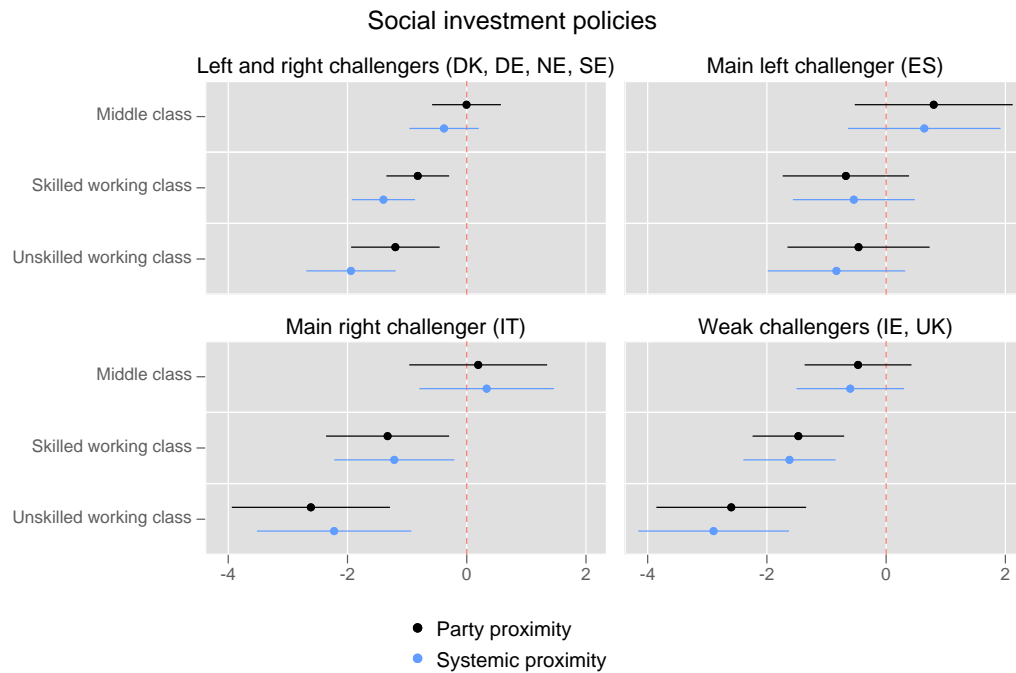


*Note: Class as a determinant of proximity across party systems (coefficients indicate differences to the upper middle class). Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, and trade union membership. Average differences for small business owners are not presented because they represent a small group in the sample, with a low number of occurrences when the analyses are disaggregated by party system.*

The analyses summarized in Figure 5 return two interesting results. First, they indicate that, overall, the trends in unequal congruence identified in figures 3 and 4 are persistent across most configurations of the partisan supply. Working-class voters perceive their own party and the system as less congruent with their consumption priorities (in comparison to the upper middle class) in most of the countries under study. Second, there is one case for which there are no apparent class inequalities in terms of consumption priorities: Spain. In this country, in which the partisan supply is characterized by the presence of a strong left-wing challenger (Podemos) but the absence of one on the right, there are no class differences in perceptions of proximity, either by voters' preferred party or the system overall. This could indicate that, in a more diversified partisan supply, and specifically in a country in which the challenger left party has pursued a strong anti-austerity agenda, working-class demands are

better represented. However, if class biases were mitigated by the more diversified party supply, this absence of a class gradient should also be manifest in those systems in which we observe both a right- and left-wing challenger. This is not what the top left panel in the figure indicates. Moreover, the class inequalities visible under this diversified party supply are not driven by any of the four countries included in this type, but rather consistent across them. Hence, these results do not fully support our expectation about congruence with the lower-grade classes being improved in contexts of a more diversified partisan supply. Moreover, Figure 6 below (addressing congruence with social investment priorities) displays a similar pattern. Class differences in perceptions of congruence are rather constant across different party systems with Spain, again, being the exception without a class gradient. Since we only observe one country with a strong challenger exclusively on the left, it is difficult to generalize these results, particularly because Podemos' agenda strongly emphasized anti-austerity economic policies – in response to earlier cutbacks on key welfare policies, including pensions, unemployment benefits or education.

Figure 6: Social class differences in subjective proximity to preferred party and the party system on social investment across different party system configurations

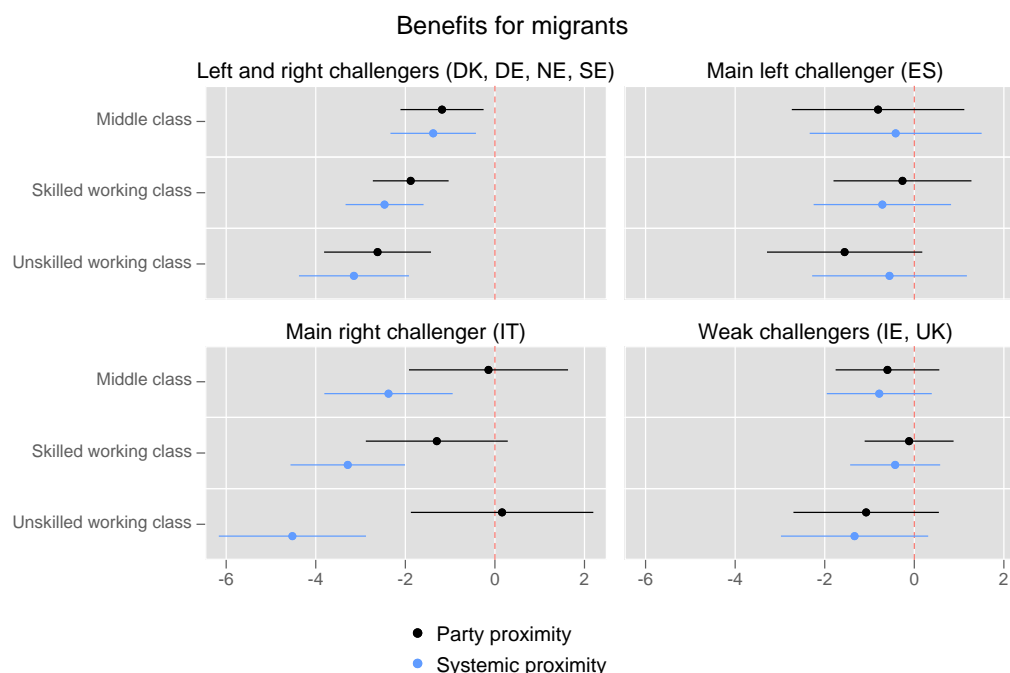


*Note: Class as a determinant of proximity across party systems (coefficients indicate differences to the upper middle class). Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, and trade union membership. Average differences for small business owners are not presented because they represent a small group in the sample, with a low number of occurrences when the analyses are disaggregated by party system.*

Finally, figure 7 addresses priorities for the expansion of benefits for migrants. On this dimension there is some substantive variation in the class differences in congruence manifest across different party systems. In countries with no strong right-wing challenger party (irrespective of whether there is a strong left-wing challenger or not) there are no class differences in perceptions of congruence with voters' preferred party or with the system overall. In these contexts, parties are equally congruent with all classes. When a right-wing challenger is present in the party system, we do observe a class gradient in perceptions of proximity. Interestingly, in the case of Italy, in which we do not observe a strong contender on the left, the unskilled working class perceives the party system as more distant from their own priorities but not their preferred party. This could indicate that, presumably, radical-right voters perceive their party as congruent with their demands. We have to be cautious, however, in this interpretation, since it is based on a single country observation. In this case, the absence of a class gradient in countries without a right-wing challenger runs against our initial expectation that these parties could channel the welfare chauvinistic demands of the lower classes. However, we can also interpret this absence of class differences along the same interpretation provided for the analyses by policy fields, by referring to salience. In countries like Spain, Ireland and the United Kingdom, immigration has been a less salient topic until more recently. On policies that are less salient to voters (of different class location) it is less surprising to find no class gradient in perceptions of congruence. Overall, the different results do not lend support to the expectation that a diversified partisan supply mitigates class biases in perceived proximity, mostly because we do observe such biases in party systems with challenger parties on both the right and the left. However, the patterns observed for Spain on the logics of consumption and investment, and in Italy on welfare chauvinism seem to indicate that parties could mitigate some of these inequalities.



Figure 7: Social class differences in subjective proximity to preferred party and the party system on benefits for migrants across different party system configurations



*Note: Class as a determinant of proximity across party systems (coefficients indicate differences to the upper middle class). Estimates are based on linear regression models introducing controls for age, sex, and trade union membership. Average differences for small business owners are not presented because they represent a small group in the sample, with a low number of occurrences when the analyses are disaggregated by party system.*

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter set out to address a shortcoming in existing literature which, in spite of profusely documenting the lower policy responsiveness to the interests of lower-income citizens, paid relatively little attention – with some exceptions (e.g. Rennwald & Pontusson, 2021) – to how citizens perceive opinion congruence. We did this by focusing on an area that is particularly relevant to redress material and political inequalities: welfare policy. Leveraging new data on voters’ and parties’ social policy priorities, this chapter has evidenced that there is a class gradient underlying voters’ perceptions of representation. Lower-grade classes generally report worse perceptions of congruence between politicians’ social policy priorities and their own. Moreover, these class differences are manifest not only when enquiring about social policy in general, but also when voters have to explicitly state parties’ and their own

positioning on specific and concrete social policies. The detailed nature of the data allowed us to gauge voters' assessment of party and systemic representation on three welfare policy logics, and six policy fields. Overall, the analyses report a class gradient in the proximity that voters' report to their own party and to the party system in general. Upper middle-class voters perceive parties' priorities as closer to their own.

The analyses also revealed some interesting differentiation in the size of class inequalities across welfare policies. Representation (by own party and the system) is more class-biased on those policies that the literature has identified as more salient to voters, and to the working classes in particular. We find a stronger class gradient in proximity on social consumption policies, in comparison to social investment or welfare chauvinism. Class differences are particularly strong for the expansion of pensions, unemployment benefits, and tertiary education; while they are negligible for childcare and active labor market policies.

These results indicate that it might be hard to redress some of these inequalities in congruence. The lower-grade classes prioritize further expansion in those policy areas that represent a bigger portion of social spending (most notably, pensions). It appears very unlikely that parties' policy platforms will adopt a strongly expansionary pension agenda, moving the system's position closer to the working class demands. Moreover, voters' own preferred parties do not seem to fully mitigate perceptions of unequal representation either. Even if distance to preferred party is usually smaller than to the system, it still displays a class gradient. Our expectations about the lower classes possibly being better represented on the issue of investment and, especially, welfare chauvinism is also partly disconfirmed by the analyses. We expected the upper classes to be less-well represented on these logics because these groups desire further expansion on investment, which parties could be limited in delivering due to tight budget constraints, and because parties might have been more responsive to welfare chauvinistic trends. However, also on these two logics, the higher-grade classes perceive better representation, even if to a lower extent than on the consumption logic. Faced with important demographic and socio-economic transformations, worse perceptions of responsiveness might hinder the possibilities for governments to introduce welfare reforms. Responsiveness plays an important role in building a 'reservoir of goodwill'

on which governments can capitalize to survive difficult periods of more ‘responsible’ but less responsive decisions (Linde & Peters, 2020). The absence of such a reservoir might undermine the capability for parties to make hard choices.

In a last step of the analyses we took into consideration whether the configuration of the partisan supply could moderate some of the class inequalities identified in the first step of the analyses. While we expected the class gradient to be mitigated under an expanded political supply with challenger parties on the left *and* right of the ideological spectrum, this is not what the evidence indicates. In fact, class-biases in representation are rather robust across contexts, especially in what concerns consumption and investment policies. The only manifest exception is the Spanish case, for which we do not find class differences in perceived representation. We are, however, cautious to attribute this merely to the presence of a strong radical left challenger, because class-biases are also apparent in countries in which both left and right challengers exist. Moreover, the Spanish case alone, with a left-wing challenger characterized by emphasizing a strong anti-austerity agenda, may be particular. Welfare chauvinism is the only logic for which we observe stronger variation across party configurations. These differences, however, point to issue salience as a potentially conditioning factor. Class-biases on welfare chauvinism appear to be smaller in countries in which the salience of the immigration issue is lower. The class gradient is also more moderate on social policies that are typically less salient to the public, like childcare or active labor market policies. Hence, while strong challenger parties mitigate class biases in some occasions (in Spain, or on benefits for migrants in Italy), the relative salience of different issues –affected by an expansion of conflict with the presence of strong challengers on both ends of the ideological spectrum – in turn rather seems to heighten class biases. Further analyses might attempt to adjudicate between these factors, by addressing cases that vary on the two dimensions. Despite the complex context-effects conditioning class biases, however, the main finding our analysis is the consistent existence of class biases in representation across different areas of the welfare state and social policy.

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