A forgotten middle class?

Perceptions of representation and the role of labour in a comparative perspective

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Abstract

Against the background of a crisis of political representation, the paper studies the perceptions of government responsiveness in advanced democracies. It argues that social class matters and that labour parties and unions are institutions that are the most likely to empower the lower and middle classes. Using ISSP data from 1996 to 2016, it shows that the lower classes perceive the strongest lack of political influence and the upper classes the weakest, while the middle classes are located between the two. The crisis of political representation is therefore the most pronounced among the lower classes. However, the paper also shows that some specific segments of the middle classes – the skilled workers and especially the skilled manual workers – perceive a strong lack of political influence. The article demonstrates further that the role of labour parties and unions is relatively limited. It is only among workers who identify with the mainstream Left that one can identify an effect of centre-left governments on political representation. The article contributes to the literature on unequal representation by exploring systematically the micro-level foundations and the determinants of cross-national variation. It also sheds new light on the debate by introducing class as a critical variable.

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Introduction

Since a few years, various studies have documented an "objective" amount of unequal representation and unequal responsiveness in advanced democracies. Studies have come to this conclusion based on the analysis of government policies (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012; Hacker and Pierson, 2010), the voting behaviour of legislators (Bartels, 2008; Lloren and Wuest, 2013), the congruence of policy preferences or ideological dispositions between representatives and citizens (Giger et al., 2012; Rosset et al., 2013; Rosset and Stecker, 2019) or the characteristics of elected representatives – the so-called descriptive (mis)representation (Carnes, 2013; Pilotti, 2016). Starting from those debates, the aim of the paper is to offer a novel but complementary perspective by investigating the perceptions of representation and political influence among specific social groups. By analysing the degree to which citizens feel the government is responsive – used traditionally to measure external efficacy in participation research (Esaiasson et al., 2015; Dalton, 2017), the paper proposes a more direct measurement of representation, but also a more subjective one (see also Esaiasson and Wlezien, 2017).

This choice offers two new opportunities in respect to current debates in the literature. First, it makes possible to study more closely the micro-level foundations of representation. This is important because scholars continue to disagree on the mere existence of differences in policy preferences across social groups. Soroka and Wlezien (2008) argued for example that the potential for unequal representation was relatively limited, for the reason that preferences on spending and taxation displayed only small differences across income groups. This was later criticized by Gilens (2009) who could show substantial differences in policy preferences across income groups. Moreover, there are important discussions about the social roots of recent political phenomenon – for example the social basis of 2016 Trump election (e.g., Lupu and Carnes, 2017) – and, in particular, a strong interest in the fate of the middle class as shown by the publication of a recent report from the OECD (2019). There is a widespread scholarly interest for those segments of the electorate who still have something to lose, in terms of social status (Gidron and Hall, 2017) or employment security (Rovny and Rovny, 2017; Weisstaner; 2019). Technological change and automation in particular accelerate the decline of occupations in the middle of the occupational structure (Oesch, 2013) and this creates new mobilising opportunities for political parties (Kurer and Palier, 2019).

Second, having a more direct measurement of representation makes it easier to study cross-national variation. Analysing more carefully the reasons behind cross-country differences and the mechanisms leading to stronger or weaker unequal representation lies now at the centre of

the research agenda (Pontusson, 2018). Several important single-country studies have documented an important degree of government responsiveness to the preferences of the rich in European countries (Elsässer et al., 2018; Persson and Gilljam, 2017; Schakel, 2019). These studies demonstrate that this phenomenon is by far not limited to the United States, despite the importance of public funding of parties and campaigns in European countries (Elsässer et al. 2018). This raises therefore new research questions that need to be addressed in a comparative perspective (for first comparative studies, see Schakel et al. 2018).

The paper explores which groups of the population feel less represented than others in advanced democracies based on data from the International Social Survey Programme from 1996 to 2016 on nineteen countries. The paper argues that the perception of government responsiveness (or in other words the perception of political influence) is anchored in the class structure. Furthermore, the paper explores the role of labour parties and unions in moderating the class gaps in representation. Historically, these institutions have had a strong influence on the political representation of more disadvantaged citizens. Investigating why and when social class matters for representation sheds new light on unequal representation focused mostly on income so far.

The paper starts with a discussion of the class concept, then explains why some social classes should feel less represented than others and why labour parties and unions should limit unequal representation. After having discussed the data and methods, it presents the results, first on the micro-level foundations and second on the role of labour parties and unions.

The concept of social class

Social classes are subject to various controversies and multiple theoretical approaches co-exist. In this paper, I refer to social class as a way to capture unequal positions among individuals based on labour market divisions and employment relationships. The focus is therefore on the "objective" component of social class (class in itself). The concept of social class is closely linked to the development of class schemata in sociological empirical research where occupation is a central indicator. One can think for example of the Erikson and Goldthorpe class schema (1992), the Wright class schema ([1985] 1997) or the Oesch class schema (2006). Although the theoretical bases vary, all these class schemata place some individuals at the top of the social structure and this confers them with some advantages, while some individuals are located at the bottom and this goes together with some disadvantages. However, the literature

also stresses the categorical nature of social class and the difficulty to make a ranking of several classes (typically for the intermediate classes, see Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007: 514). Several class schemata include horizontal distinctions based on different theoretical criteria (for example work logics in the Oesch class schema, organizational vs skill assets in the Wright schema).

The paper combines these two insights. It emphasizes in a first step the "vertical" dimension of social class and investigates in a second step "horizontal" distinctions. Emphasizing the vertical dimension, the paper proceeds with the distinction of three broad classes: the upper (middle) classes, the (lower) middle classes and the lower classes. The upper (middle) classes group together large employers, self-employed professionals, higher level managerial occupations and professional occupations. The (lower) middle classes group together the semi-professionals, small business owners (old middle classes) as well as skilled workers in administrative, production or service jobs. Finally, the lower classes include unskilled workers. The boundaries between these groups is inspired by the delimitation proposed by the German sociologist Michael Vester (2001) who made a difference between the "line of respectability" separating the lower classes from the middle classes and the "line of distinction" separating the middle classes from the upper classes. More precisely, these occupational categories are derived from the Oesch 16-class schema to which I will return in the methods section.

Class gaps in representation

Vertical distinctions

Logically, citizens belonging to the upper classes are the most likely to feel represented. The reverse is true for people belonging to the lower classes, while people belonging to the middle classes should be located somewhere between the two. The research on participation has demonstrated an important link between socio-economic status and various forms of political participation (Verba et al. 1995; Dalton, 2017). As argued by Brady et al. (1995), one needs time, money and civic skills in order to participate in politics, and all those resources are closely linked to socio-economic status.

To illustrate the link between social classes and political influence, the framework of Bourdieu (1979) can be fruitful. According to the space of social positions that he developed, upper classes combine a higher volume of total capital (economic and cultural capital) than other classes. Economic capital makes possible for them to influence politics with money. They can

donate to political parties or campaigns (e.g., Cagé, 2018), they can influence their employees on the way they should think politically (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez, 2018), or mobilise different means to influence the political agenda (via media ownership for example). Cultural capital matters also for politics. Linked to education, it helps people who have more knowledge about the different means to influence politics.

Beyond the resources and the volume of capital, one can also argue that there is a connexion between the recruitment of the political elite and social classes. The sociology of political elites has emphasized that politicians are more likely to have a background among occupations at the top of the occupational structure (e.g. Carnes, 2015; Evans and Tilley, 2017; Pilotti, 2016) and/or to have high levels of education (Bovens and Wille, 2017). Not only can citizens feel more represented if people from the same background have elected positions, but they have also a privileged access to them through formal or informal shared networks.

Based on these considerations, I therefore expect strong hierarchical differences in the way social classes perceive to be politically influential. I posit that:

H1a: Respondents belonging to the lower classes feel less represented in comparison with respondents belonging to the upper classes (lower-upper gap)

H1b: Respondents belonging to the lower classes feel less represented in comparison with respondents belonging to the middle classes (lower-middle gap)

H1c: Respondents belonging to the middle classes feel less represented than respondents belonging to the upper classes (middle-upper gap)

Horizontal distinctions among the upper classes

Upper classes cumulate a high volume of economic and cultural capital. However, they represent a very heterogeneous group. One obvious distinction concerns the divide between those who occupy employed positions (professionals and managers) and those who are employers. In his seminal lecture "Politics as a vocation", Weber (1919) already addressed the problem of the modern entrepreneur who is not available for politics, because he has simply not enough time to occupy elected positions. Hence, one might expect that, through the larger presence of professionals and managers in parliaments due to the process of professionalization of politics, citizens who are professionals or managers feel more represented. I therefore posit that:

H2: Professionals and managers are more likely to feel represented than large employers.

Horizontal distinctions among the middle classes and the role of collective resources

In order to understand differences within the broad category of the (lower) middle class, one needs to think of the collective resources that some classes or class segments have developed. Contrarily to the upper classes, the middle classes (and of course also the lower classes) cannot rely (or can rely less) on their individual resources, but must find ways to pool resources and organize themselves collectively to find access to resources.

The power resources approach developed in welfare state research suggests that policies are the results of struggles between classes and reflect somehow the organisation of social classes. The capacity of workers to organize collectively in order to counter labour market risks represents a crucial variable (Korpi 2006). Hence, the class gaps in representation are likely to depend on the collective resources that weaker social classes can develop and rely on to improve their relative position (Korpi 1983; Verba et al. 1978). Historically, the labour movement emerged around labour parties and unions and struggled for the emancipation of the working class. I therefore expect that skilled workers, because they have developed more collective resources, are more likely to feel represented in comparison with other segments of the middle classes.

H3: Skilled workers feel more represented than other segments of the middle classes

Alternative explanations

Perceptions of representation are likely to be influenced by a large range of factors, and especially by political variables. One can therefore only conclude that social class is relevant if other possible explanations are taken into account. First, sophisticated voters have more information about the way politics works and have more information about the different possibilities to influence policy-makers or to engage in political activities. To anticipate the presentation of the methods, I therefore control for education and political interest. Second, voters are exposed to party cues. When asked about their perceptions of representation, respondents might rely on cognitive shortcuts to answer (e.g., Kam, 2005). Among current political actors, populist radical right parties have developed a strong rhetoric about representation and emphasize the existence of a divide between "the people" and "the elite" (Mudde 2007). Hence, respondents who identify with this party family are therefore more likely to perceive a lack of responsiveness from the political elite. Third, the objective distance to the government also influences the perceptions of responsiveness. Anderson and Guillory (1997) have demonstrated the existence of a relationship between the outcomes of elections and the degree of satisfaction with democracy (see also Singh et al. 2012). Individuals who are the

winners in electoral contests display a higher level of satisfaction with democracy compared to losers in electoral contests. Belonging to the political majority or the political minority in a given country has several implications on the perceptions of the government. One must therefore control for an individual's majority or minority status.

Left governments and unions as moderators of the class gaps in representation

Is the existence of class gaps more likely in some contexts than in others? Building again on power resource approach, I therefore consider how the pillars of the labour movement, i.e., left parties and trade unions reduce the class gaps in representation. I am particularly interested in the effects of left parties when they hold power and in the effects of union membership at the individual level and union density at the macro-level. These are the institutions that have most obviously the capacity to reduce class gaps in representation. Evidence from the United States shows that union membership of voters increases legislators' policy responsiveness towards the preferences of the poor (Becher et al., 2018).

One can expect that centre-left parties in government empower generally the lower and middle classes against people located at the top of the occupational structure. This can be due to policies, because left governments tend to redistribute more than right governments. This can also be because parties have different constituencies – this second mechanism is closely linked to the first. Traditionally, left parties had constituencies among the lower and middle classes (or segments of them). This offers classes – who do not have an easy access to the political system – more opportunities to influence political decisions. Given the strong heterogeneity of the (lower) middle classes, one can expect also that the effect is more concentrated among the traditional constituency of social democracy, namely skilled workers (e.g., Knutsen 2006) that we isolate in a second hypothesis.

H4a: Relative to centre-right governments, centre-left governments reduce the perceived lack of political influence of the lower classes and middle classes (and thus reduce the class gaps in representation)

H4b: Relative to centre-right governments, centre-left governments reduce the perceived lack of political influence of skilled workers

However, a decline in working-class vote for the mainstream Left parties has occurred in recent decades (Häusermann and Gingrich, 2015; Knutsen 2006; Rennwald, 2015). Workers' vote for

the mainstream Left is still there, but co-exist with non-voting and radical right voting (Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). The next hypotheses incorporate therefore the fragmentation of the traditional constituencies of social democracy. The effect of left government is more specific and affects above all those workers who continue to identify with the centre-left.

H5a: Relative to centre-right governments, centre-left governments reduce the perceived lack of political influence of the middle and lower classes who identifies with the mainstream Left

H5b: Relative to centre-right governments, centre-left governments reduce the perceived lack of political influence of the skilled workers who identify with the mainstream Left

Next to centre-left governments, trade unions are also an important channel in reducing the class gaps. Stronger unions have more capacity to impact on policies as was discussed in the corporatism literature (e.g., Katzenstein, 1985) and thus to represent more effectively the interests of the lower and middle classes. Moreover, beyond a clear macro-level link, one can also expect the impact of unions to work through a different channel. Stronger unions make the development of workplace democracy easier. Hence, scholars have argued for a democratic spillover thesis where the participation of workers in a company translates into participation and political efficacy at the level of the entire democratic system (Baccaro et al. 2018; Pateman, 1970; Turner et al. 2019). We develop hypotheses both at the individual level with union membership and at the macro-level with union density.

H6a: Being a union member reduces the perceived lack of political influence of the lower and middle classes

H6b: Being a union member reduces the perceived lack of political influence of the skilled workers

H7a: When union density increases, the perceived lack of political influence of the lower class and middle class reduces

H7b: When union density increases, the perceived lack of political influence of the skilled workers reduces

Data and methods

Data

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) has included since 1996 questions on the perception of representation in the module Role of Government. The module Citizenship that has started in 2004 also includes questions on this topic. Respondents are asked their opinion about the following statement: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does". Respondents are invited to answer on a 5-point Likert scale (with agree strongly and disagree strongly as the two extreme categories). This question has been traditionally used to measure a respondent's external efficacy in political participation studies.

Relying on those two ISSP modules, I use five different surveys conducted between 1996 and 2016 and merge them into a single dataset. I select advanced democracies were at least one survey is available[1]. Table 1 shows the different surveys used in the analysis (table A.1 in the Appendix presents the countries and surveys analysed).

Table 1: Information about the surveys included in the analysis

Survey name	Role of government III	Citizenship I	Role of government IV	Citizenship II	Role of government V
Year	1996	2004	2006	2014	2016
N countries (analysed)	12	18	16	15	14

Measures

The question about the perceived government responsiveness provides the dependent variable. I work with a binary distinction and allocate the value of 1 to those respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" and the value of 0 to those respondents who disagree or strongly disagree with the statement and those who neither agree nor disagree.

Social class is the key independent variable in the analysis. It is based on the Oesch class schema, which combines a hierarchical and horizontal dimension. The most detailed version of this class schema include sixteen classes as shown in Table 2. I start from this detailed version, and then work with three broad classes. The categories at the bottom of the table shaded in light

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[1] Italy 1996 is excluded from the analysis, because it does not include enough information on occupation that is necessary to construct a detailed class schema.

grey represent the lower classes (16% of the population), the categories in medium grey are grouped into the middle classes (62.6%) and the categories shaded in dark grey belong to the upper classes (21.4%). Information about the proportion of the classes by country can be found in Table A.2 in Appendix. The size of the middle classes has decreased over time. While it represented 64% of the population in 1996, it represents 61.6% of the population in 2016. The share of the lower classes has also decreased (from 16% in 1996 to 14.2% in 2016), while the share of upper classes has increased (from 19.9% in 1996 to 24.1% in 2016).

The paper further distinguishes the middle classes in the following way. The category of skilled workers is made of skilled service (e.g., cooks, hairdressers), skilled manual (e.g., mechanics, carpenters) and skilled clerks (e.g., secretaries, bank tellers). The category of semi-professionals is made of socio-cultural semi-professionals (e.g. primary school teachers, social workers), technicians (e.g., electrical technicians, safety inspectors), lower-grade managers and administrators (e.g., tax officials, bookkeepers). Small business owners without employees are grouped together with the small business owners with employees.

Table 2: Oesch's 16-class schema with the average size of classes

	Interpersonal work logic	Technical work logic	Organizational work logic	Independent work logic	
Professional/ managerial	Socio-cultural professionals 5.3	Technical experts 3.8	Higher-grade managers and administrators 9.3	Large employers 1.2	Self-employed prof. 1.8
Associate professional/ managerial	Socio-cultural semi-professionals 8.6	Technicians 3.9	Lower-grade managers and administrators 7.4	Small business owners with employees 3.1	
Generally/ vocationally skilled	Skilled service 10.2	Skilled manual 11.9	Skilled clerks 10.4	Small business owners without employees 7.1	
Low/un-skilled	Routine service 8.0	Low-skilled manual 7.1	Unskilled clerks 0.9		

Respondents are allocated to one of these sixteen classes based on their current or, if missing, past job. The class measure is based on three variables: occupation (based on ISCO 4-digit),

employment status (separating employers and the self-employed from employees) and number of employees in order to distinguish the large employers (more than 9 employees) from the small business owners (with 0 to 8 employees). ISSP surveys include detailed occupational codes and the Oesch class schema is easily constructed using the stata commands iskooesch for ISCO-88 occupational codes (ISSP 1996[2], 2004 and 2006) and iscooesch for ISCO-08 codes (for ISSP 2014 and 2016).

Next to social class, I use in the analyses a number of socio-demographics as control variables: age, sex, main activity status (categorical variable)[3]. Education is an additional and important control variable. I recode the available information into four categories: lower secondary education or below, upper secondary education, post secondary education and tertiary education.

Alternative explanations include political interest, radical right cueing and majority/minority status. Political interest is coded from 1 (very interested) to 5 (not at all interested)[4] and is included as a continuous variable in the models. The surveys usually include questions on party identification (which party do you feel close to?). I therefore rely on this information to create a variable on radical right cueing, where I allocate the value of 1 to all respondents who feel close to a radical right party, and the value of 0 to all others. I classify as radical right parties a broad range of parties who are usually considered as populist radical right parties (Mudde 2007), as well as smaller extreme right parties.[5] In the two last surveys (2014 and 2016), there is no information on party identification[6] and I use instead a question on the party voted for at

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[2] Several additional steps are necessary for the ISSP 1996 survey. The surveys conducted in Sweden and Britain include national classification of occupations. For Sweden, it could be easily converted into ISCO-88 codes. For Britain, the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) at the level of minor groups (2 codes) could be converted roughly into the categories of the Oesch class schema and additional information on educational background was used for the 16-classes version. Finally, ISSP 1996 includes the ISCO codes in the 1968 version in Norway, Spain and the USA and conversion to the 1988 version was necessary. In ISSP 1996, the variable on the number of employees (for the self-employed) is not available in Norway, Spain, US. This has only little incidences on the 8-class schema. The category "large employers and self-employed" only includes self-employed in those countries. Large employers are included in the category of the small business owners.

[3] It would be possible to include more socio-demographic variables (e.g., public or private sector of employment, place of residence). However, those variables are lacking in several surveys and I prefer therefore to include a smaller number of socio-demographics.

[4] In the 2004 and 2014 ISSP surveys, there is no intermediate category ("somewhat interested").

[5] Australia: One Nation; Austria: FPÖ; Belgium: Flemish Interest, National Front; Switzerland: SVP, Freedom Party, Swiss Democrats, Lega, Federal Democratic Union, Movement of the citizens; Denmark: Danish People's Party, Progress Party; Germany: AfD, Republikaner, NDP; France: National Front; Finland: True Finns; Norway: Progress Party; New Zealand: New Zealand First; Sweden: Sweden Democrats; Netherlands: PVV, LPF, Centrum Democrats; Great-Britain: UKIP, BNP

[6] This is also the case for Spain 1996 where only party choice is available and not party identification.

the last national parliamentary election (or the first round of the presidential election in France, or the presidential election in the 2016 Austrian survey).

I use the same questions to construct a variable on party identification with the mainstream Left parties, this means social democratic, socialist or labour parties. I also associate the Democratic Party in the USA with the mainstream Left[7].

For the majority/minority status, I consider which parties are in government during the survey's time of fieldwork, and then I allocate the value of 1 to the respondents who identify with one of the government parties (or voted for one of the government parties, depending on the information available) and the value of 0 to all others.

Finally, I consider two macro-level moderators: government partisanship and union density. For each survey, I match the time of fieldwork with the current government. I allocate the value of 1 to all governments where the centre-Left holds the Prime ministership, and the value of 0 to all others. For union density, I match each survey with annual data on union density from the Visser (2016) data set[8].

Models

In a first step, I work with descriptive statistics showing the extent of the class gaps in representation. I then analyse whether this class gap holds in a multivariate context. Since individuals are nested in country-year combinations, I use multilevel logistic regressions with a random intercept at the country-year level. Overall, there are 75 country-year combinations. Since there are three cases (Belgium 2004, Great Britain 2014 and 2016) where no information on party identification or party choice is available and I remove those cases from the multivariate analysis.

Results

There is a profound disagreement among citizens on the perception of government responsiveness. Averaging across countries and time, half of the respondents think that the government is responsive, while the other half think that the government is not responsive

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[7] The question wording in the USA surveys is different from all other countries. I treat respondents who declare to be strong democrats, not very strong democrats, independents but close to the democrats – there is a separate category for independents – as having an identification with the mainstream Left.

[8] I also use the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al., 2018) and OECD data for Australia and the United States. Please note that the last observations in Visser data set are for 2013, and I therefore attribute 2013 values in the ISSP 2014 and 2016 surveys.

(50.3% and 49.7% to be more precise). This has not changed much over time. One would expect an increase in the perceived lack of political influence. Rather, there has been a decrease in perceived political influence, but also important fluctuation. Figure 1 indicates that 56.7% of the respondents perceive a lack of political influence in 1996, while the proportion if of 52.2% in 2016, averaged across nineteen countries.

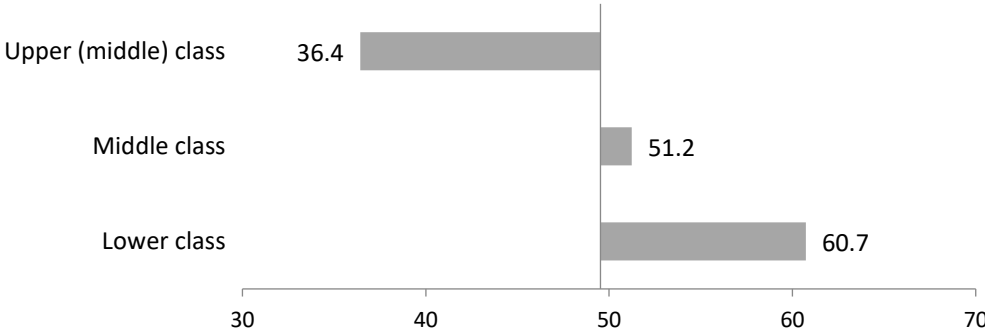**Figure 1:** Perceived lack of political influence over time (in %)
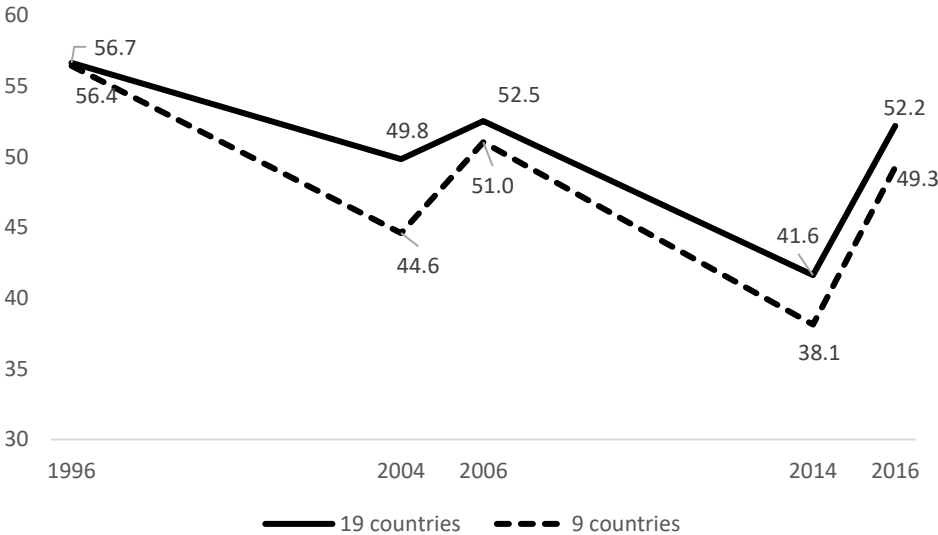
Note: Figure entries are the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does". The dotted line shows the answers for a more limited set of countries, i.e., nine countries where all five surveys are available.

Setting aside the cross-time variation for the time being, I now explore the roots of perceived political influence among social classes. Starting with our three broad classes and descriptive statistics, we observe a strong hierarchy in the distribution of answers. Figure 2 shows that the lower classes perceive a much higher lack of political influence than the middle classes and the upper classes. Table A.3 in Appendix confirms that all countries display the same ranking between classes. This gives preliminary support for our hypotheses 1a to 1c.

Disaggregating the upper classes, Figure 3 indicates that socio-cultural professionals (e.g., university teachers, employed medical doctors) and managers (e.g., business administrators, financial managers) perceive the lowest political influence (see also Table A.4 in the Appendix for results by country). The employers and self-employed professionals (e.g., firm owners, lawyers) perceive a stronger lack of political influence, but this is clearly above the average score. This also supports our hypothesis 2. Disaggregating the segments of the middle classes in Figure 3 reveals a gap (11 to 13 percentage points) between the semi-professionals (e.g.,

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technicians, primary teachers, bookkeepers, etc.) on the one hand and the skilled workers (e.g., mechanics, cooks, secretaries) and small business owners (e.g., shop owners) on the other hand. The former are less likely than average to perceive a lack of political influence, while the later are more likely than average to perceive a lack of political influence. If we disaggregate the category of skilled workers further (not shown), we observe that skilled manuals are the one who perceive the strongest lack of political influence (61.2%), followed by skilled service (53.9%) and skilled clerks (51.2%). Please note that the percentage obtained by the skilled manuals reach the one obtained for the lower classes (60.7%) in Figure 1. I had expected that skilled workers would feel more represented than other segments of the middle class (hypothesis 3). These descriptive results show exactly the contrary. Skilled workers (and particularly skilled manual) feel less represented than other segments of the middle class.

Figure 2: Perceived lack of political influence by social class (3-class schema) (in %) – represented in difference with the mean

Note: Figure entries are the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does".

Figure 3: Perceived lack of political influence among segments of the upper (middle) class (in %)
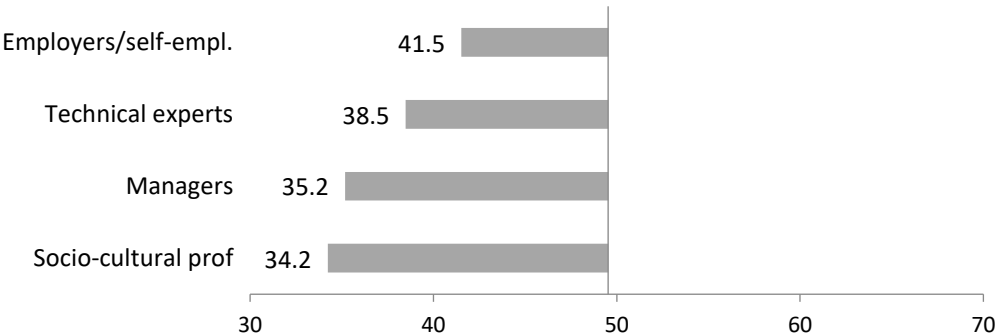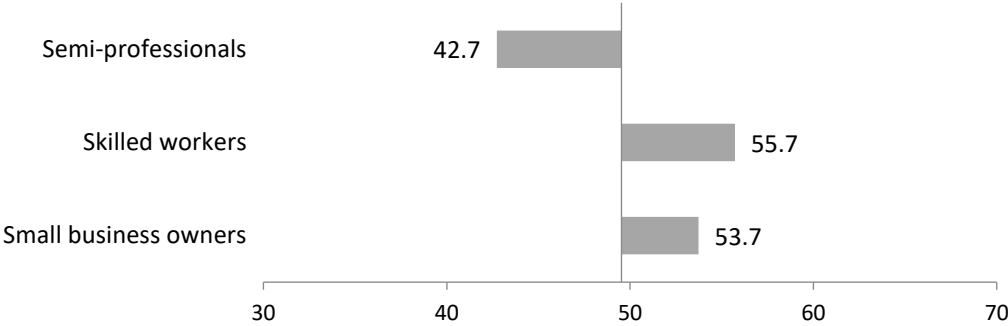
Figure 4: Perceived lack of political influence among segments of the middle class (in %)

It is important to analyse whether the relationship between social class and perceived responsiveness holds in a multivariate framework. Table 3 presents the results of multilevel logistic regressions where additional variables are included. M1 controls for socio-demographics variables, M2 controls additionally for education, M3 takes into account political variables (political interest and radical right cueing), M4 introduces finally the majority/minority status.

The coefficients for social class are strongly reduced when education is taken into account, and slightly reduced when alternative political explanations are taken into account. However, a significant class gap remains in all models. Compared to the upper classes, the lower classes and middle classes are more likely to perceive a lack of political influence. This speaks again for our hypotheses 1a to 1c. Perceived responsiveness is therefore firmly anchored in the class structure. It cannot be reduced to a political phenomenon that fluctuates depending on the government or party cueing.

The results for the alternative explanations go in the expected direction. The lack of perceived responsiveness increases with lack of political interest. It increases also among the supporters of populist radical right parties. It decreases among those individuals who are in a majority status, i.e. who support a party being in the government. Finally, the socio-demographic control variables also reveal interesting differences. Women are less likely to perceive a lack of responsiveness. Older individuals as well as unemployed respondents, retired respondents and people doing domestic work are more likely to perceive a lack of political influence.

Table 3: The effect of social class and other determinants on the perceptions of representation, multilevel logistic regressions

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Class (Ref.=Upper classes)				
Lower classes	0.915***	0.521***	0.436***	0.423***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Middle classes	0.568***	0.301***	0.255***	0.251***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Female	-0.092***	-0.061***	-0.112***	-0.115***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Age	0.006***	0.003***	0.006***	0.007***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Activity (Ref.=Paid work)				
Unemployed	0.310***	0.252***	0.255***	0.243***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
In education	-0.198***	-0.246***	-0.166***	-0.185***
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Retired	0.260***	0.204***	0.189***	0.188***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Domestic work	0.265***	0.189***	0.172***	0.172***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Other	0.373***	0.300***	0.305***	0.288***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Education (Ref.=Tertiary)				
Lower sec		0.771***	0.635***	0.642***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Upper sec		0.507***	0.428***	0.431***
		(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Post sec		0.315***	0.255***	0.260***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Low pol. interest			0.217***	0.210***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
Rad right ID			0.596***	0.585***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Majority				-0.271***
				(0.02)
Constant	-0.877***	-0.970***	-1.616***	-1.536***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Variance intercept	0.461***	0.450***	0.463***	0.467***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
N (72)	84171	84171	84171	84171
AIC	107264.1	106184.5	104932.8	104655.2
ICC	.1228956	.1203541	.1234376	.1243287
Log-likelihood	-53621.0	-53078.3	-52450.4	-52310.6

Standard errors in parentheses $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$

Tables A.5 and A.6 in Appendix reproduce the same analyses and take into account the horizontal divisions of interest, first by disaggregating the upper classes, second by disaggregating the middle classes. The difference between professionals/managers and employers does not hold in a multivariate framework (Table A.5). Once we control for education in M2, the positive significant effect of being an employer/self-employed professional (compared to a socio-cultural professional) disappears. Horizontal differences among the upper classes remain therefore relatively limited. This speaks against our hypothesis 2.

As shown in Table A.6, the gap between semi-professionals and skilled workers remains in a multivariate framework, even if we take into account the level of education. Furthermore, our descriptive results in Figure 3 revealed a small gap (2 percentage points) between skilled workers and small business owners. This result is again confirmed. Compared to a skilled worker, being a small business owner reduces significantly the perceived lack of political influence. Among the middle classes, the skilled workers are therefore the most likely to feel a lack of representation. However, they clearly remain behind the lower classes who are the most likely to perceive a lack of political influence.

Still a role for labour?

I first focus on the role of centre-left governments in reducing the class gaps in representation, and then on the role of trade unions. Hypotheses 4a and 4b imply an interaction between government partisanship and social class, and hypotheses 5a and 5b an interaction between government partisanship, social class and mainstream Left party identification. I use again multilevel binary logistic regressions and I calculate first a model with a two-way interaction and then a model including a three-way interaction. Having shown previously that social class matters even when alternative explanations are taken into account, I limit the other variables to socio-demographic controls and education. Most of the variation in government partisanship and union density lies at the country-level – there are several countries with no centre-left government in the period covered by ISSP surveys – and I introduce a random slope at the country-level. I also introduce a random coefficient for social class, since cross-level interactions are present in the models.

I use average marginal effects to present the results and the regression tables can be found in Table A.7 in the appendix. M1 and M3 include the two-way interaction between social class

and centre-left government, M2 and M4 include the three-way interaction between social class, centre-left government and mainstream Left party identification. M1 and M2 are based on the 3-class schema, M3 and M4 disaggregate the middle classes.

Contrary to our hypothesis 4a, centre-left governments do not reduce the perceived lack of political influence of the lower and middle classes (see Figure 5a). Having a centre-left government increases the perceived lack of responsiveness among the middle classes by around 1.5 percentage points. It also increases the perceived lack of responsiveness among the upper classes by around 2.5 percentage points. A centre-left government works therefore in the other direction: it increases the perceived lack of responsiveness among the more privileged classes.

Isolating the skilled workers (skilled manual, skilled service, skilled clerks) as implied by hypothesis 4b does not improve the results as shown in Figure 5b. Government partisanship has no effect on the skilled workers, while it increases the lack of responsiveness among small business owners (a traditional constituency of mainstream right-wing parties) and semi-professional occupations.

Figure 5: The effect of centre-left governments on the perceived lack of political influence (AME)

a) Among social classes (3-class schema)   b) Among segments of the middle classes
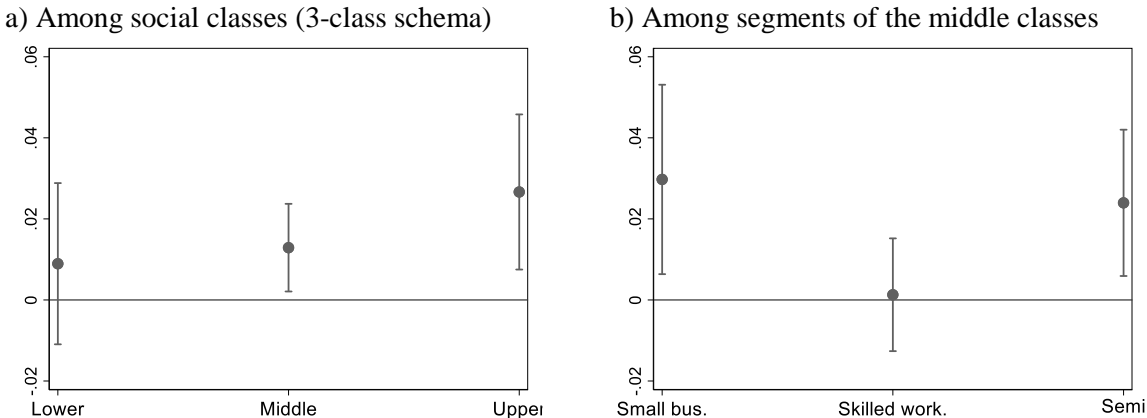
Note: Average marginal effects based on M1 and M3 in Table A.7. Legend for classes: Lower=Lower classes, Middle=Middle Classes, Upper=Upper classes, Small bus.=Small business owners, Skilled work.=Skilled workers, Semi=Semi-professionals.

I now consider whether identification with the parties of the mainstream Left conditions the effect of government partisanship on perceived responsiveness (see Figure 6). It is clearly the case. Centre-left governments decrease the perceived lack of responsiveness for those who identify with the mainstream Left (see Figure 6a). However, this holds for all classes, including

the upper classes – the effect is significant at the 90% level. Hence, this only helps little to reduce the class gaps in perceived responsiveness. We can therefore only partially accept H5a. Taking into further consideration various segments of the middle classes (Figure 6b), we observe that the lack of perceived responsiveness reduces in particular for the skilled workers who identify with the mainstream Left, confirming the hypothesis 5b. The effect of centre-left government is therefore relatively limited: it goes only in the expected direction if we isolate the group of skilled workers who identify with the mainstream Left. Having a left government does not increase generally the perceive responsiveness among lower and middle classes.

Figure 6: The effect of centre-left government on the perceived lack of political influence by party identification (AME)

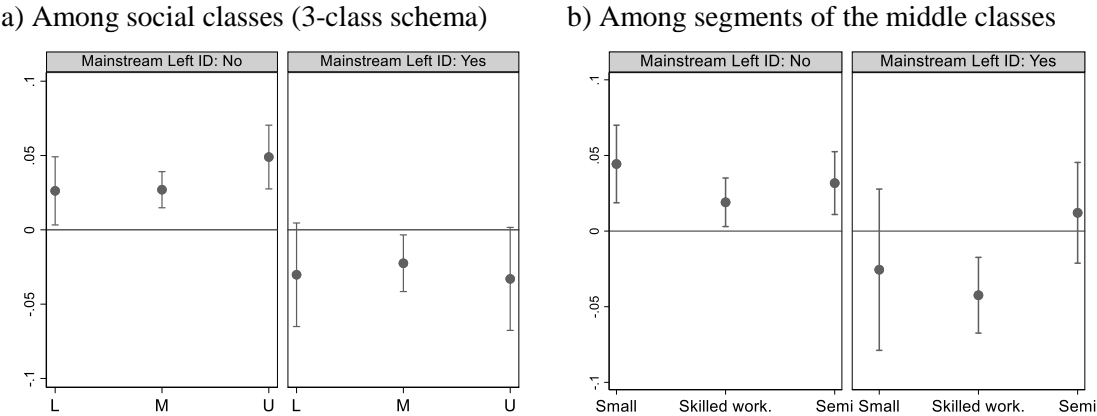a) Among social classes (3-class schema)   b) Among segments of the middle classes

Note: Average marginal effects based on M2 and M4 in Table A.7. Legend: L=Lower classes, M=Middle classes, U=Upper classes.

Finally, I turn to the effect of unions on the class gaps in representation. The first models include an interaction between union membership and social class (regression tables available upon request). Figure 7a indicates that being a union member reduces generally the perceived lack of political influence among all classes. Thus, there is no specific effect of union membership on the class gaps in representation as hypothesised in H6a. Figure 6b reveals also that the negative effect of union membership among the middle classes is concentrated among small business owners – whose status of employment make them, traditionally at least, unlikely candidates for union membership.

Figure 7: The effect of union membership on the perceived lack of political influence (AME)

a) Among social classes (3-class schema)

b) Among segments of the middle classes
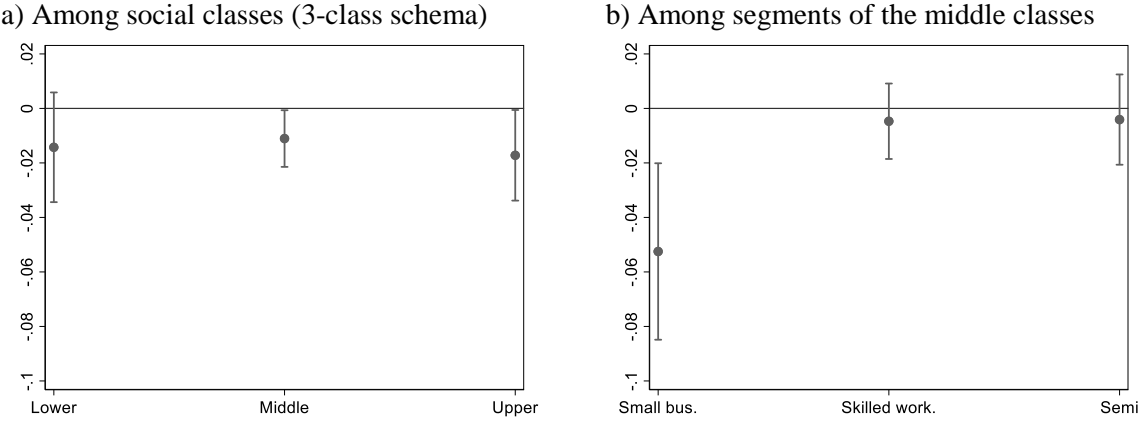
Using now union density as a macro-level variable, I plot predicted probabilities of perceiving a lack of political influence at low and high values of union density in Figure 8. Surprisingly, for all classes, when union density increases, the perceived lack of political influence increases. This does not confirm our hypotheses H7a and H7b. It seems that union density makes respondents more aware of the unresponsiveness of politics. The effect of unions at the macro-level differs also from the effect at the individual level where we showed that union membership decreased the perceived lack of responsiveness. This calls for further analyses on the effect of unions, interacting micro and macro variables.

Figure 8: Probabilities of perceiving a lack of political influence at low and high values of union density

a) Among social classes (3-class schema)

b) Among segments of the middle classes
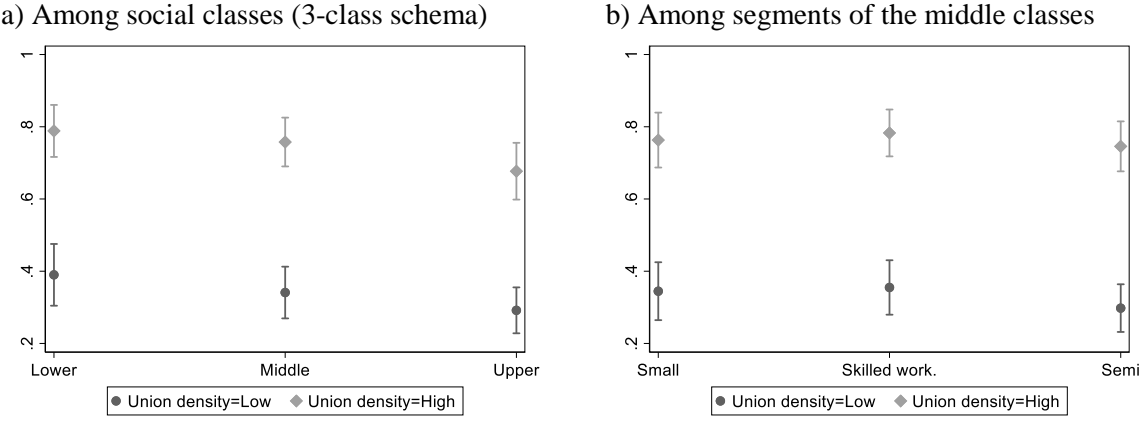
Conclusion

The paper has investigated whether there are specific groups among the population who feel less represented than others. Using ISSP data from 1996 to 2016, it has explored the perceptions of government responsiveness, or in other words, whether respondents perceive to have political influence. The paper could clearly show a strong stratification in the perceptions of representation. This remains even if we consider several alternative explanations, such as the role of political variables. Middle classes feel more represented than lower classes, and upper classes feel more represented than lower classes. It is not the case that the middle classes feel particularly unrepresented. The problem lies above all among the lower classes. However, the paper could also show that specific segments of the middle do not feel well represented. This is the case for skilled workers and especially skilled manual workers. The story about the "forgotten middle class" concerns therefore above all the traditionally (skilled) working-class segments of the population.

The paper has also investigated the role of labour parties and unions as important institutions with the potential to reduce the class gaps in representation. However, the findings support only partially the emphasis placed on those institutions in the theoretical framework. The role of centre-left government remains relatively limited. It reduces the perceived lack of political influence among skilled workers who identify with the mainstream Left. In other instances, the effect of left governments is the opposite: it increases the perceived lack of responsiveness among the upper classes. Left governments have therefore more effects on the traditionally adversary classes than on the allied classes. Hypotheses on the role of trade unions could also not be confirmed. Interestingly, union density increases the perceived lack of political influence. Further work should try to explain why this is the case.

Further work should consider more closely the changes over time. As shown at the beginning of the empirical part, the perceived lack of political influence has not increased over time, but rather seems to fluctuate. This suggests that the potential for a crisis in political representation is there since many years. Political parties from the radical right had therefore since a long time a structural potential that they could exploit in electoral contests. Important will be also to assess whether the role of labour parties and unions has changed over time. Further analyses will incorporate data from the 1970s in order to investigate changes in a more long-term perspective.

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APPENDIX

Table A.1: Countries covered in the analysis, by ISSP survey

		Gov. III 1996	Citiz. I 2004	Gov. IV 2006	Citiz. II 2014	Gov. V 2016	Total
1	Australia	1	1	1	1	1	5
2	Austria	0	1	0	1	0	2
3	Belgium	0	1	0	1*	1	3
4	Canada	1	1	1	0	0	3
5	Denmark	0	1	1	1	1	4
6	Finland	0	1	1	1	1	4
7	France	1	1	1	1	1	5
8	Germany	1	1	1	1	1	5
9	Great-Britain	1	1	1	1	1	5
10	Iceland	0	0	0	1	1	2
11	Ireland	1	1	1	0	0	3
12	Netherlands	0	1	1	1	0	3
13	New Zealand	1	1	1	0	1	4
14	Norway	1	1	1	1	1	5
15	Portugal	0	1	1	0	0	2
16	Spain	1	1	1	1	1	5
17	Sweden	1	1	1	1	1	5
18	Switzerland	1	1	1	1	1	5
19	USA	1	1	1	1	1	5
	Total	12	18	16	15	14	75

Note: *Survey is restricted to Flanders

Table A.2: Size of classes (3-class schema) by country (in %)

	Lower classes	Middle classes	Upper classes
Australia	11.9	64.3	23.8
Austria	19.1	69.2	11.6
Belgium	14.8	61.6	23.6
Canada	8.1	58.2	33.8
Denmark	12.2	62.0	25.8
Finland	17.7	59.2	23.1
France	14.0	60.2	25.8
Germany	13.7	68.5	17.8
Great-Britain	19.2	58.9	21.9
Iceland	10.4	64.0	25.6
Ireland	22.9	64.4	12.8
Netherlands	10.1	60.3	29.6
New Zealand	10.8	58.3	30.9
Norway	12.7	63.8	23.5
Portugal	27.9	64.1	8.0
Spain	25.8	64.2	10.0
Sweden	16.3	61.3	22.4
Switzerland	10.8	67.6	21.6
USA	19.8	58.3	21.9
Average	16.0	62.7	21.4

Table A.3: Perceived lack of political influence by social class (3-class schema) and country (in %)

	Lower classes	Middle classes	Upper classes	Average	Ratio L/U	Ratio M/U
Australia	64.4	54.4	40.8	52.3	1.58	1.33
Austria	65.2	61.1	36.1	59.0	1.81	1.69
Belgium	66.0	63.8	49.7	60.8	1.33	1.28
Canada	61.4	51.0	42.9	49.1	1.43	1.19
Denmark	57.0	51.7	41.3	49.6	1.38	1.25
Finland	68.0	59.1	43.3	57.0	1.57	1.37
France	21.0	18.4	12.3	17.2	1.71	1.50
Germany	75.4	62.4	43.7	60.8	1.72	1.43
Great-Britain	63.4	56.8	44.2	55.3	1.43	1.28
Iceland	36.6	38.7	30.9	36.5	1.18	1.25
Ireland	76.2	62.8	45.5	63.7	1.67	1.38
Netherlands	59.3	48.3	31.4	44.3	1.89	1.54
New Zealand	58.4	50.9	38.4	47.9	1.52	1.33
Norway	50.6	38.9	23.6	36.7	2.15	1.65
Portugal	68.9	61.0	40.7	61.6	1.69	1.50
Spain	69.1	62.8	52.4	63.3	1.32	1.20
Sweden	60.8	53.1	39.3	51.2	1.54	1.35
Switzerland	49.4	37.7	26.0	36.4	1.90	1.45
USA	53.3	45.9	34.0	44.8	1.57	1.35

Table A.4: Perceived lack of political influence among segments of the upper and middle classes by country (in %)

	Upper (middle) classes				Lower (middle) classes		
	Socio-cultural	Manager	Tech. expert	Empl. /self	Small business	Skilled workers	Skilled manual
Australia	40.4	38.9	43.5	43.9	55.4	58.9	66.5
Austria	30.4	42.0	28.6	45.0	57.4	65.1	72.8
Belgium	47.7	49.8	48.3	54.8	62.9	66.0	70.5
Canada	42.1	47.6	38.3	41.3	57.2	53.7	58.0
Denmark	34.4	42.2	42.6	48.7	53.5	53.7	61.5
Finland	39.9	39.5	52.8	41.1	54.7	66.1	71.1
France	11.5	11.7	13.5	16.4	19.7	20.5	21.0
Germany	40.5	39.4	44.7	51.5	61.0	66.2	69.5
Great-Britain	41.1	45.3	38.5	51.1	55.1	60.0	69.6
Iceland	31.3	28.1	39.0	30.5	34.5	40.6	44.6
Ireland	50.5	38.7	49.2	47.1	68.9	63.7	65.7
Netherlands	25.0	32.9	35.9	28.9	50.7	55.8	63.7
New Zealand	35.7	37.9	46.1	37.4	53.4	54.6	59.2
Norway	18.9	25.4	22.0	29.1	43.8	43.7	48.6
Portugal	47.8	24.4	32.5	45.5	64.8	62.3	66.5
Spain	47.9	53.2	55.6	55.2	67.7	65.2	67.1
Sweden	36.6	34.8	47.0	45.1	59.1	59.1	66.3
Switzerland	23.0	25.3	29.8	26.0	33.7	43.0	44.7
USA	25.6	35.3	35.7	36.3	47.8	49.8	54.9

Table A.5: The effect of social class and other determinants on the perceptions of representation, with finer differences among the upper classes, multilevel logistic regressions

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Class (Ref.=Socio-cultural)				
Lower classes	1.012***	0.523***	0.435***	0.436***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Middle classes	0.666***	0.303***	0.254***	0.265***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Managers	0.083*	-0.064	-0.057	-0.037
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Tech. experts	0.200***	0.130**	0.090+	0.102*
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Employer/self	0.180***	0.060	0.065	0.086
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Education (Ref.=Tertiary)				
Lower sec		0.776***	0.639***	0.645***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Upper sec		0.511***	0.432***	0.434***
		(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Post sec		0.317***	0.257***	0.261***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Low pol. interest			0.217***	0.210***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
Rad right ID			0.596***	0.585***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Majority				-0.271***
				(0.02)
Constant	-0.980***	-0.980***	-1.619***	-1.553***
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Variance intercept	0.460***	0.449***	0.462***	0.466***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
N	84171	84171	84171	84171
AIC	107249.8	106170.2	104925.8	104649.0
ICC	0.123	0.120	0.123	0.124
Log likelihood	-53610.9	-53068.1	-52443.9	-52304.5

Standard errors in parentheses $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$. All models include controls for sex, age, main activity status (not shown).

Table A.6: The effect of social class and other determinants on the perceptions of representation, with finer differences among the middle classes, multilevel logistic regressions

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Class (Ref.=Skilled workers)				
Lower classes	0.204***	0.148***	0.128***	0.118***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Small business	-0.143***	-0.093***	-0.062*	-0.055*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Semi-prof.	-0.436***	-0.253***	-0.209***	-0.206***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Upper classes	-0.749***	-0.431***	-0.361***	-0.355***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Education (Ref.=Tertiary)				
Lower sec		0.713***	0.592***	0.599***
		(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Upper sec		0.454***	0.388***	0.390***
		(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Post sec		0.292***	0.238***	0.243***
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Low pol. interest			0.216***	0.209***
			(0.01)	(0.01)
Rad right ID			0.594***	0.583***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Majority				-0.273***
				(0.02)
Constant	-0.306***	-0.680***	-1.369***	-1.298***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Variance intercept	0.449***	0.442***	0.456***	0.460***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
N (72)	84171	84171	84171	84171
AIC	107058.1	106211.5	104978.1	104697.4
ICC	0.120	0.119	0.122	0.123
Log likelihood	-53521.1	-53094.7	-52476.0	-52334.7

Standard errors in parentheses $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. All models include controls for sex and age (now shown). Status of main activity was not included.

Table A.7: The effect of social class, centre-left governments and mainstream Left party identification on the perceptions of representation, multilevel logistic regressions

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Class (Ref.=Upper)			Class (Ref.=Skilled workers)	
Lower	0.513***	0.498***	0.119**	0.120**
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Middle	0.303***	0.300***		
	(0.03)	(0.03)		
Small business			-0.107**	-0.102**
			(0.03)	(0.04)
Semi-prof.			-0.269***	-0.237***
			(0.03)	(0.03)
Upper classes			-0.443***	-0.428***
			(0.04)	(0.04)
Leftgov	0.112**	0.204***	0.005	0.079*
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Lower#Leftgov	-0.074	-0.094		
	(0.06)	(0.07)		
Middle# Leftgov	-0.058	-0.093+		
	(0.04)	(0.05)		
Mleft ID		-0.090+		-0.000
		(0.05)		(0.04)
Mleft ID # Leftgov		-0.347***		-0.253***
		(0.08)		(0.06)
Lower# Leftgov # Mleft ID		0.198*		
		(0.09)		
Middle #Leftgov # Mleft ID		0.172*		
		(0.08)		
Lower# Leftgov			0.008	0.009
			(0.05)	(0.06)
Small# Leftgov			0.117*	0.104+
			(0.05)	(0.06)
Semi-prof# Leftgov			0.094*	0.052
			(0.05)	(0.05)
Upper # Leftgov			0.135**	0.153**
			(0.05)	(0.05)
Lower# Leftgov # Mleft ID				0.010
				(0.08)
Small# Leftgov # Mleft ID				-0.093
				(0.10)
Semi-prof# Leftgov # Mleft ID				0.008
				(0.08)
Upper# Leftgov # Mleft ID				-0.178*
				(0.08)
Constant	-0.904***	-0.898***	-0.466***	-0.476***
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.12)
Variance intercept	0.336**	0.342**	0.312***	0.317***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Variance random slope	0.010***	0.010***	0.003***	0.003***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
N (19)	88891	88891	88891	88891
AIC	113851.9	113747.9	113704.4	113599.9
ICC	0.093	0.094	0.087	0.088
Log likelihood	-56906.9	-56848.9	-56829.2	-56766.9

Standard errors in parentheses $^+ p < 0.10$, $^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$. All models include controls for sex, age, main activity status (not shown).