

Issue politicization and social class: how the electoral supply activates class divides in political preferences

Macarena Ares

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Against premature claims about the declining political relevance of social class in post-industrial democracies, recent research indicates that class continues to be a relevant determinant of political preferences. In post-industrial societies 'old' class divides on economic issues coexist with 'new' class alignments on cultural topics. While there is cumulated evidence of social classes' distinct placement on these issues, this paper argues that the strength of class divides depends on the extent to which these issues are politicized by political parties. Studying preferences on economic and cultural issues (attitudes towards redistribution, immigration, gay rights and European integration), this study shows that class divides in preferences are context-dependent. The multi-level analyses drawing on data from the European Social Survey and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey for 27 European democracies demonstrate that classes' differences in preferences are accentuated on issues strongly contested and emphasized by parties, and mitigated on issues where party conflict is weaker. Adding to recent literature on parties and class conflict, this study identifies another stage at which parties can affect the strength of class voting. The varying strength of class divides across contexts also has implications for parties' ability to garner support beyond a single class. This becomes increasingly unlikely in contexts of high issue politicization.

Keywords: social class, politicization, public opinion, social cleavages, political parties.

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1. Introduction

The class cleavage was central in structuring political conflict in industrialized democracies for much of the 20th century. While its relevance was hotly disputed in the 1990s (Clark et al., 1993), recent accounts of class voting have overcome this debate, and have focused instead on identifying new class-party alignments in post-industrial societies (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). By now, there is cumulative evidence that class still serves as a site of preference formation, and that classes' policy preferences differ on more than one dimension of political conflict (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014; Oesch, 2008). In addition to the traditional economic division around the role of the state in the economy, social classes hold distinct positions on issues referring to civil liberties, environmental protection, alternative lifestyles, or immigration. Recent studies of class voting have also highlighted the role played by political parties in activating or mitigating the strength of class voting (Evans & De Graaf, 2013b; Evans & Tilley, 2012b, 2017). According to this line of research, the link between class and voting hinges crucially on the interaction between the supply and demand side of electoral politics. Class differences become manifest in differential patterns of voting only when political parties present distinct policy alternatives that appeal to different classes (Evans & De Graaf, 2013a).

In this paper, I combine the theoretical contributions from these demand- and supply-side studies of class voting with recent findings in political psychology highlighting parties' influence on attitude formation (e.g. Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Petersen et al., 2010; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020) to assess how the supply side moderates the link between social class and issue preferences. Moreover, I characterize the partisan supply by bringing in the concept of politicization, which captures the intensity and visibility of conflict between parties (Hooghe & Marks, 2012; Hutter & Grande, 2014). Specifically, I show how the strength of the relationship between social class and policy preferences on different issues is moderated by the extent to which parties politicize these same issues. My main argument is that class differences in preferences will be greater in contexts in which the intensity of issue conflict between parties is higher. The empirical analyses combining individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and party-level data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on 27 European countries provide support for this expectation. For three of the four policy issues considered, class divides in preferences are greater where these issues are highly politicized. The results of this study highlight the important role that parties play in strengthening or mitigating class opposition on different topics.

This study makes two key contributions to current accounts of class voting, electoral realignment and party conflict in post-industrial societies. First, it emphasizes the importance of political parties in strengthening or mitigating class voting, beyond what was proposed in

previous research. While earlier studies tended to take classes' issue preferences as purely 'social' – i.e. a consequence of structural position – this article argues that class differences in preferences are also political, in that they are dependent on the characteristics of party conflict. Crucially, this paper identifies another stage at which political parties can alter the importance of class in politics: in the articulation of class divides in policy preferences, which can later guide differential patterns of electoral behavior. Parties can attenuate or strengthen class divisions in public opinion by making issues less or more politically contentious. As a second contribution, by assessing classes' issue positions across different political contexts, this study provides relevant information about which social classes are likely to be mobilized jointly on a policy platform. Depending on the context of politicization, parties will be more or less likely to garner electoral support across class borders.

Since the analyses are based on cross-sectional survey data, they face certain limitations in their ability to isolate the causal effect of parties' politicization of issues on the relationship between social class and individuals' placement on these issues. The theoretical argument guiding this study proposes that it is the configuration of the electoral supply that affects the importance of social class for opinion formation. Yet, the moderating role of issue politicization by parties manifest in the analyses could also be due to party positions responding to class divisions in public opinion, or to both parties' and classes' responding to other factors. This study implements a series of robustness checks to address this limitation by, for example, taking lagged values of parties' positions and introducing different controls at the country-year level. The results are robust to these alternative specifications. Moreover, these findings should be read in the context of recent literature emphasizing that parties have agency in how they strategically position themselves on issues relative to other competitors (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020), and that their policy stances do affect public opinion (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). However, as other research in this area, these results have to be considered in light of the limitations imposed by the nature of the data available. In the final discussion I reflect on how future research might causally test the relationship uncovered in this article.

2.1 Social classes' issue preferences in a multi-dimensional conflict space

Analyses of class voting in post-industrial democracies have adapted to two major transformations: the expansion of new occupations, and the salience of new issues of party conflict. The tertiarization and upgrading of the occupational structure have increased its heterogeneity, thus making it necessary to implement more detailed measures of social class, better suited for this new productive structure (Güveli, 2006; Oesch, 2006). This study

implements a market-based definition of social class that divides class locations according to the structural position that individuals occupy in the labor market and production units (Breen, 2005; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). This means that classes are based on individuals' market condition and occupational profile, with class divisions capturing how the labor market stratifies individuals' life chances. This definition purposely excludes subjective aspects such as class consciousness or collective action. Social classes are socio-economic groups that occupy a similar position in the job structure, who – as a consequence of this position – share similar economic prospects (e.g. future earnings, employment security or prospects for upward mobility). This definition of class underlies influential class schemes like Erikson & Goldthorpe's (1992) (EGP) or Oesch's (2006).

Recent class schemes – most notably, Oesch's (2006) – have accounted for the occupational heterogeneity inherent to post-industrial economies. One of the key contributions of new schemes has been to divide social classes based on differences in the nature of the work carried out across occupations (their 'work logic'). This dimension captures the different experiences and relationships established in the workplace, which serves as a site of socialization and preference formation (Ares, 2020; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). The work logic has become particularly important to distinguish among professional occupations previously aggregated into a single (service) class. Different class schemes have introduced new divisions separating socio-cultural professions (in health care, education, social welfare and the media) from managers, and professionals in technical occupations (Güveli et al., 2007; Oesch, 2006). In comparison to managers and technical professionals, individuals in socio-cultural occupations are more likely to favor a stronger role of the state in the economy and more income redistribution (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Socio-cultural professionals also hold particularly culturally liberal preferences (e.g. more favorable to immigration or alternative lifestyles). The nature of their work – which puts them in frequent interaction with other people's needs, and makes use of social and cultural knowledge – fosters values and attitudes associated with these culturally libertarian positions (Oesch, 2006; Güveli, 2006).

Among the low-skilled occupations, the literature has mostly focused on the electoral behavior of production workers and small business owners, because of their realignment with radical right parties (Arzheimer, 2013; Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013). Both social classes tend to hold markedly authoritarian attitudes: they are generally opposed to immigration, put a higher emphasis on social order, defend traditional gender roles, and oppose supranational integration (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). These two classes do, however, differ on their placement on economic issues. While workers still constitute the class with highest support

for state intervention in the economy and income redistribution, small business owners are more favorable towards free-market solutions (Houtman et al., 2008).

Within Oesch's class scheme, there are a few social classes that illustrate very well patterns of post-industrial realignment.¹ Professionals in socio-cultural occupations and the manufacturing working class represent paradigmatic examples of electoral realignment (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015; Güveli et al., 2007; Houtman et al., 2008). Socio-cultural professionals have recently become the new core electorate of the left, while other professionals in managerial occupations, as well as large employers have remained the electoral preserve of the center-right. Production workers and small business owners, on the other hand, represent two social groups increasingly contested by the radical right. A class that has received less attention, in spite of its increasing relevance in service economies, are low-skilled service workers (Ares, 2017). While we do not know much about their preferences, it has been frequently assumed that they are close to socio-cultural professionals. Because of the large body of evidence gathered around the policy preferences of these specific classes, and because they occupy different poles on the cultural and economic dimensions of conflict, it is particularly relevant to address how their preferences depend on the configuration of the partisan supply. Moreover, their placement on economic and cultural issues across contexts has relevant implications for potential class-party alignments. The diversification of the occupational structure, and the rising competition on cultural issues has led political parties to seek support beyond their traditional social-class electorates. Electoral success appears increasingly dependent on mobilizing voters' support across class lines (i.e. building cross-class voter coalitions). The potential for this cross-class mobilization is likely to depend on the similarity in policy preferences of different social groups, which I expect to vary across contexts of politicization.

2.2. The politicization of issues by parties

In comparison to the frequent focus on demand-side politics to explain new patterns of class-party alignments, fewer studies have addressed the importance of the electoral supply side in this process. Moreover, the ones that have done so, have mainly studied the relationship between social class and electoral behavior, without considering the role played by parties in shaping public opinion. Following arguments about the role of political actors in activating or reinforcing conflict (Sartori, 1969), this research attributed cross-national and temporal variation in the strength of class voting to the extent to which parties present clear alternatives to voters (Elff,

¹ Appendix 1 presents a table summarizing Oesch's eight-class scheme, with some typical occupations included in each of the classes.

2007; Evans & De Graaf, 2013a; Evans & Tilley, 2012a, 2017; Rennwald & Evans, 2014). When there is variation in parties' programmatic positions, distinct preferences between social groups can be manifested through the vote. If, on the contrary, parties do not offer real alternatives, class differences are not reflected in party choice. Many of these studies focused primarily on the left-right ideological differentiation of the electoral supply. However, disparity in parties' stances on socio-cultural issues was not as frequently associated to class voting, even though these issues have become increasingly salient (for an exception, see Goldberg & Sciarini, 2014).

While these studies addressed the moderating role of the supply side on the class-party link in the vote, we know very little about the consequences of parties' stances for class distinctiveness in policy preferences. Divisions in public opinion are relevant since they can be considered a pre-condition for class voting. If social class does not play a role in the articulation of preferences, then there are few differences in opinion to be expressed through the vote. I propose that the configuration of the electoral supply moderates the strength of class opposition on policy issues. Class opposition refers to individuals in different social classes taking different, antagonizing positions on a specific issue. Hence, its meaning is restricted to a disparity in preferences between classes, independently of whether and how this disparity is manifested in the vote. As the literature in political psychology has indicated, political parties are relevant actors in the process of public opinion formation. While material interests, group affiliations or values can be key determinants of voters' attitudes, whether and how these predispositions are translated into specific preferences (e.g. on public policy) is not an automatic process, and it hinges crucially on the political context (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Zaller, 1992).

Opinion formation on specific issues is a cognitively demanding process that can be facilitated by cues and heuristics. The articulation of policy preferences places high demands on voters in terms of skills, resources and motivation. In this process, parties' issue positioning frequently serves as a heuristic, reducing the costs of information and providing cues to voters about which issues are contested and how these issues relate to their interests (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014; Pannico, 2017). Hence, the political context of party competition can alter the amount and types of information available to voters (Cavaille & Neundorf, 2015, 2016). In polarized contexts, the clarity of the cues that voters receive is higher due to the bigger distance between parties and the greater homogeneity in their messages, hence aiding voters in developing more consistent attitudes (Levendusky, 2010). Moreover, more information and cues are available on issues that are relatively more salient for party competition. A growing body of literature has documented the effect of the context of competition and, specifically, of parties' role in this process, on opinion formation. Political parties can shape public opinion on specific (and controversial) policy issues (e.g. Broockman & Butler, 2017; Minozzi et al., 2015), and party

leaders' stances on a specific policy can polarize attitudes among all citizens (Nicholson, 2012). Even on policies with high stakes (like unemployment insurance and early retirement) citizens' opinions shift in response to changes in parties' issue positions (Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020).

The amount of information and the clarity of parties' positions available in contexts of high politicization should operate on the relationship between social class and issue preferences. Implicit in most understandings of class voting is the assumption that common economic life chances and occupational experiences shape policy preferences, and that these guide electoral behavior. Yet, given that opinion formation is a demanding process, the influence of class location and work experience on interests and preferences may not be automatic. Whether and how this connection occurs is likely to depend on how issues are framed in the political debate (Kinder, 1998). Political parties have a crucial role in structuring alternatives and connecting different choice options to individuals' predispositions (based on social class or other factors) (Petersen et al., 2010). When policy issues become highly contentious between parties, this should raise the awareness on class-related interests among voters. Salient contestation between political parties increases the information available to voters, and facilitates that they connect particular values with policy positions (Petersen et al., 2010). This is why the *politicization* of issues – understood as combination of the intensity and visibility of conflict (Hutter & Grande, 2014) – can be central in strengthening or mitigating class divides in issue preferences.

Having outlined the importance of the political context for opinion formation and class divides, a relevant question is to what extent parties are responsible for politicizing issues. As recent literature on issue competition has indicated (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020; Meguid, 2005), even if parties' strategies are constrained by social and economic transformations, they are not just victims of structural conditions but are also agents of their own fate. Addressing party competition on different issues beyond the left-right ideological conflict, this literature contends that the stances that parties take on issues, and the visibility they attribute to them, partly responds to their strategic choices. Some parties, frequently niche parties, might choose to strategically politicize to their advantage issues which were previously not central to party competition (e.g. green parties emphasizing environmentalism). In turn, other parties retain agency on how they react to these challenges, by taking an accommodative, adversarial or dismissive strategy, with direct implications for the politicization of niche parties' main issues (Meguid, 2005). If established parties expect to benefit from a new issue, like European integration, they have an incentive to take a stance and politicize it (Abou-Chadi, 2016). These studies have demonstrated that parties compete not only spatially (i.e. taking different positions) but also on the emphasis placed on different topics. The strategic interaction between parties affects the contentiousness of different topics (Abou-Chadi, 2016; Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020).

Moreover, since parties do not necessarily compete on all issues in every election, this generates variation in issue politicization across space and time.

Given these insights from political psychology and issue competition scholarship, I hypothesize that in contexts where an issue is strongly politicized by parties, class differences in preferences on that issue will be greater. In response to the structure of competition and their own strategic considerations, parties provide information and heuristics to voters by mentioning an issue frequently and by taking a clear stance on it. These are two key dimensions of the concept of politicization: conflict visibility and intensity (Hutter & Grande, 2014)². The first, conflict visibility, refers to the salience of conflict over an issue. Salience is usually considered as the key – almost necessary – dimension of politicization, since the frequent presence of a topic in the public debate is seen as a prerequisite for an issue to be politicized (Green-Pedersen, 2012). A topic that is minimally mentioned can hardly be made contentious. The second dimension, the intensity of conflict, refers to actors' polarization around a given issue. For a topic to be controversial, actors need to take diversified and opposing positions on it. Both dimensions of politicization should be central for the strength of class opposition. If parties hold distant positions on an issue, but it is barely salient in the political debate, these positions are hardly visible for voters. If an issue is highly salient but parties' positions on it converge, voters do not receive contrasting messages. Hence, the main hypothesis is that class divides in issue preferences will be greater in contexts where these issues are strongly politicized by parties. In contexts of low politicization of an issue the distinctiveness of social classes' placement should be comparatively lower.

3. Data and methods

To assess whether the strength of the association between social class and issue preferences is moderated by parties' politicization of these issues, this paper combines individual-level data from rounds 3 to 8 of the ESS, with party-level data from the 2006, 2010 and 2014 CHES. This provides a sufficiently large number of level-2 observations (country-round) to be able to estimate multi-level models with cross-level interactive terms.³

² Hutter and Grande (2014) include a third dimension of politicization: the scope of conflict (or actor expansion). This third dimension, however, makes particular sense in their study on the European Union, an institutional setting in which a restricted set of actors usually participates in public debates.

³ Since the CHES is conducted every four years (and the ESS every two) the data from one round of the CHES is used to characterize the partisan supply in two rounds of the ESS. As a robustness test I repeat the analyses combining data from each CHES wave with only one round of the ESS (4, 6 and 8). These alternative specifications – included in Appendix 9 – do not alter the conclusions from this paper.

Because there is some disagreement about the dimensionality of political conflict in Europe and because party competition can differ across specific issues, I study individuals' issue preferences separately. The estimations are based on four different outcome variables capturing (i) preferences about income redistribution (with higher values indicating opposition to income redistribution by the government); (ii) preferences on immigration – an index measure based on six individual items gauging preferences on immigration with higher values indicating support for immigration⁴; (iii) attitudes towards homosexuality (with higher values indicating more positive attitudes); and (iv) preferences over European integration (with higher values gauging support for EU integration). These items are included consistently in the ESS rounds under consideration.⁵ These measures of preferences have been standardized (to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1) to allow for comparability across models. A detailed description of all variables is available in Appendix 2.

To evaluate the potential moderation by the electoral supply, I compute a measure of politicization on these same issues. In the CHES dataset there are four items that match the ESS questions measuring individual preferences. On redistribution, the CHES asks about a party's "*position on redistribution from the rich to the poor*". On immigration, there is information on the "*position on immigration policy*". On attitudes towards homosexuality, there is an item gauging party's "*position on social lifestyle (e.g. homosexuality)*". Last, on European integration, it asks about the "*orientation of the party leadership towards European integration*". Besides placing parties on these issues, experts are also asked to indicate the salience attributed to each of them by each party.⁶

The party-level data is used to operationalize politicization by partially following the proposal by Hutter and Grande (2014), which captures both the intensity and visibility of conflict. Politicization takes the product of the standard deviation of parties' positions on an issue (as a measure of actor polarization – the intensity of conflict) and the relative salience of that issue (as a measure of conflict visibility). The relative salience of an issue takes the ratio of the average salience of that issue (across parties) and the average salience of all issues within a party system.

⁴ A factor analysis of the six items returns a single factor with an eigenvalue higher than 1 and shows that all variables load strongly on a single dimension (results reported in appendix 3).

⁵ With the exception of the item on EU integration which was excluded from round 5.

⁶ The 2014 CHES excludes some of the items capturing salience on specific issues. No measure is available for the salience attributed to redistribution, immigration and social lifestyle. To compute the politicization of these issues in the 2014 round I rely on: the salience of economic issues in the party's public stance (for the politicization of redistribution), and on the salience of libertarian/traditional issues (for the politicization of immigration and social lifestyle). As a robustness check I run all models excluding observations from the 2014 CHES to make sure that the results are not affected by this alternative operationalization (results reported in appendix 16). The alternative specifications on the reduced sample return similar results to those discussed below (with the moderating role of the context being slightly stronger).

Only parties with parliamentary representation are taken into consideration. As an example, in the CHES from 2006, in Belgium, the standard deviation of parties' positions on the issue of redistribution takes the value 1.906. In this party system, the average salience of the issue of redistribution across all parties is of 5.802 (with salience measured on a 0 to 10 scale), while the average salience of all issues is of 5.578.⁷ The ratio of the two values is 1.040, indicating that redistribution is relatively more salient than other issues. For this country, the measure of politicization of redistribution takes the value of 1.982: the product of 1.906 times 1.040 (the intensity and visibility of conflict). To facilitate the comparison of results across issues, the measure of politicization is later rescaled to range from 0 to 1 (from the minimum to the maximum level of politicization observed in the sample). While I expect both the visibility and intensity of party conflict to impact jointly the process of opinion formation, as part of the robustness checks, I also address the relevance of salience and polarization separately, to account for the possibility that it is mostly one of these two dimensions that fosters attitudinal opposition between classes.

The figures in Appendix 4 present levels of politicization of the different issues (in the original scale) across countries and time. The issues of redistribution and immigration appear, on average, more politicized than the topics of gay and lesbian rights, or European integration. More importantly, there are no obvious temporal or geographical clusters in the distribution of politicization of these issues. Even on the topic of gay and lesbians' rights – on which we might have expected recent attitudinal shifts towards greater liberalization (Caughey et al., 2019) to possibly hinder opposition on this issue – we find high levels of politicization in more recent waves, and both in Western and Eastern Europe. This could be related to the active opposition to gay rights among some radical right parties (e.g. VOX or the AfD) (Arzheimer, 2015; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2019).

The other key explanatory variable in the analyses is social class. The operationalization follows Oesch's eight-class scheme, which assigns respondents to classes based on their occupation. This operationalization allows identifying some typical post-industrial classes (like socio-cultural professionals, or service workers) that are not well-captured in other schemes. One might raise the concern that these horizontal divisions based on work logic might capture not only the formation of political preferences in the context of the occupation but also selection effects related to values (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014). These could, in turn, be associated to different preferences, particularly on cultural issues (Stubager, 2008). For this reason, I repeat the analyses implementing the (six-class) EGP scheme in the robustness checks. This alternative

⁷ The average salience of all issues within a party system is calculated based on the different issues included in the rounds of the CHES under consideration.

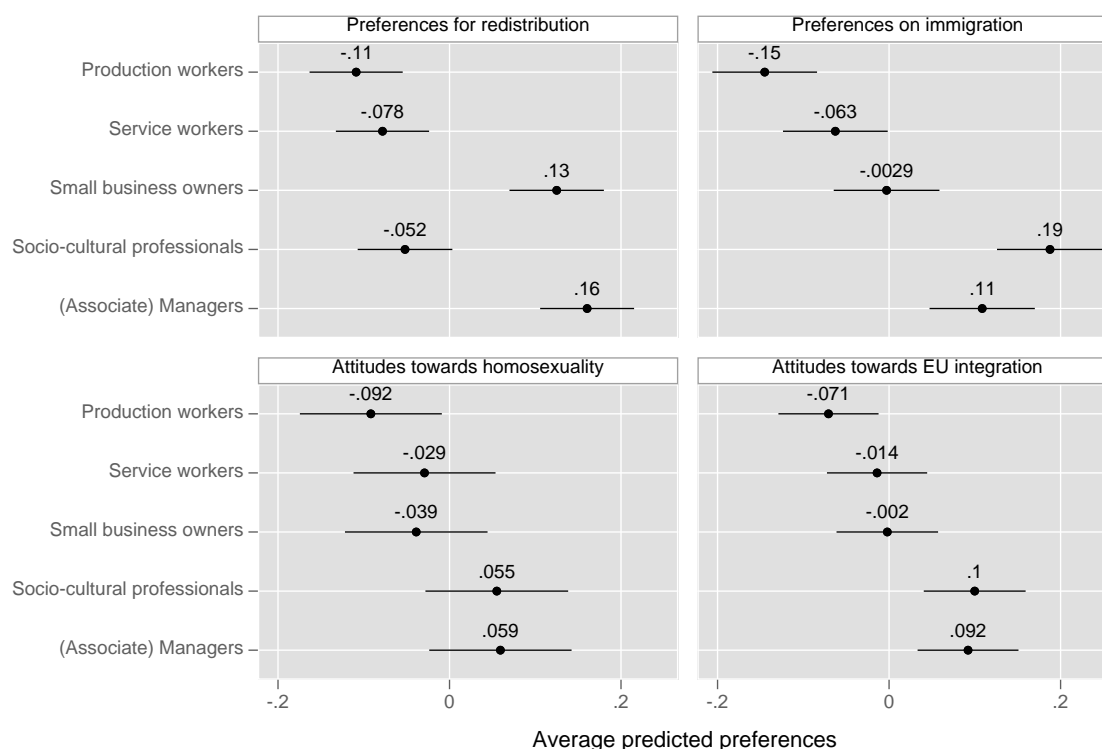
operationalization leads to the same conclusions. In the main analyses, I rely on Oesch's measure because it provides a clearer picture of some of the key class divides in post-industrial societies highlighted in the theory section. The presentation of the results focuses particularly on five social classes in the scheme for which there are clear expectations about their placement on different issues. The figures summarize the results for socio-cultural professionals, managers, small business owners, production workers and service workers. While managers and production workers frequently represent opposite poles on the economic dimension, socio-cultural professionals, and production workers and small business owners usually stand on opposite sides on cultural issues. Service workers are included since they are frequently assumed as close to socio-cultural professionals, but evidence on their preferences is scarce. The tables included in appendices 5 and 6 present the results for the entire class scheme. To estimate interaction coefficients between social class (measured at the individual level) and politicization (measured at the country-round level) I rely on linear multi-level models with cross-level interactions, which include random slopes for social class. All analyses introduce additional controls for: atypical employment (i.e. labor market outsider status), educational attainment, union membership, gender and age.⁸

4. Results

Before going into whether the political context moderates class divides, Figure 1 presents social classes' average placement on the four issues under consideration. These estimates are average predicted values based on multi-level additive models controlling for the politicization of the corresponding issue at the country-round level. The results here presented replicate established findings from earlier research. On income redistribution – with higher values indicating opposition to redistribution by the government – workers and the managerial class stand on opposing poles. There is also a visible division among professionals, with socio-cultural professionals being clearly more supportive of state intervention. While workers and socio-cultural professionals appear relatively close on this topic, they are located on opposing poles on issues of the cultural domain. On the topics of immigration, homosexuals' rights and EU integration, production and service workers tend to be located on the authoritarian and nationalistic pole, while the professional classes appear as more libertarian and cosmopolitan. In line with studies of radical right support, small business owners also appear as more culturally conservative. The main question in this paper, however, is whether these differences are strengthened or mitigated depending on the configuration of the partisan supply.

⁸ Appendix 2 includes a detailed description of these variables.

Figure 1: Social classes' average predicted preferences



Note: Estimates are based on linear multi-level additive regression models introducing controls for age, gender, education, union membership, and politicization of issues (with random intercepts for country-round). The coefficients for all variables are presented in models 1, 2, 3 and 4 of appendix 5.

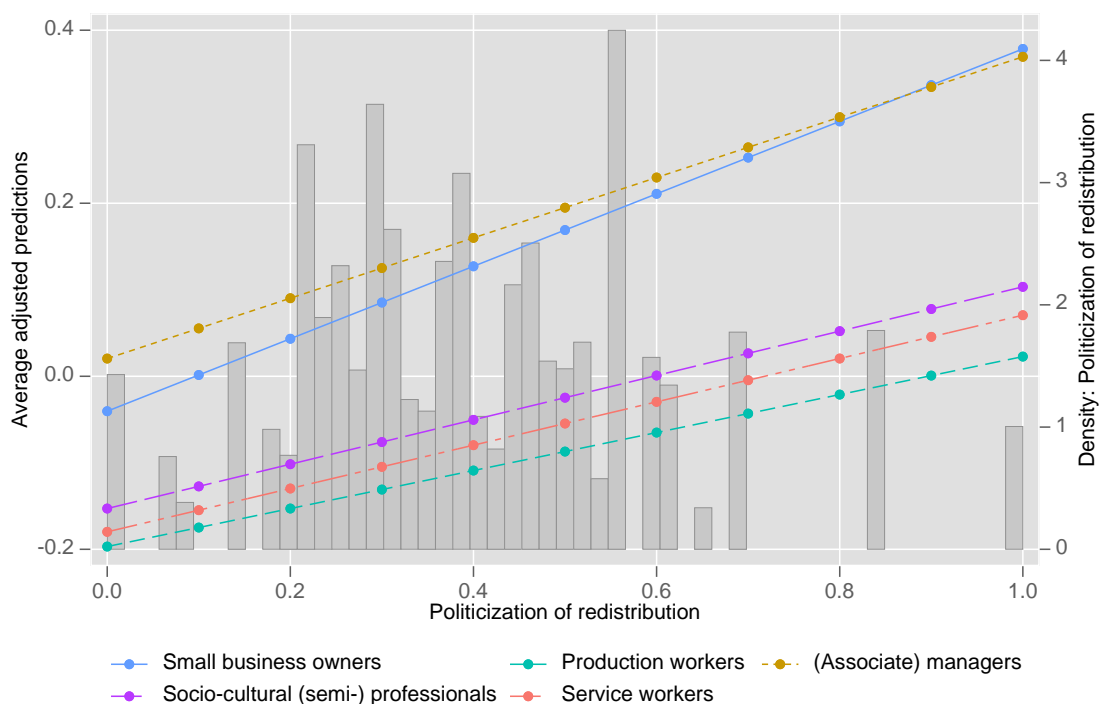
Figure 2 summarizes social classes' average predicted preferences on redistribution, across different levels of politicization of this issue. Politicization is rescaled to range from 0 to 1 – with 0 corresponding to the minimum politicization observed in the sample, and 1 to the maximum. The estimates are based on a multi-level linear model with a cross-level interaction between social class and the politicization of redistribution, including random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round.⁹ Higher values on the Y-axis indicate stronger opposition to income redistribution by the government. Across all levels of politicization, production workers consistently appear as the class most favorable to income redistribution, while managers and small business owners locate themselves on the opposite pole. In line with the expected moderation from the supply side, the preferences of the different social classes are spread further apart at higher levels of politicization. Class divides are greater in contexts in which parties are more polarized on redistribution and place a greater salience on it.¹⁰ At the

⁹ The main estimates from the model are presented in Appendix 6, model 5.

¹⁰ The coefficients for the interactive terms in model 5, appendix 6, indicate how the slopes in preferences across politicization differ for each class with respect to production workers. The interactive terms

lowest level of politicization the largest difference in preferences is of 0.217 points between production workers and managers (statistically significant at $p < 0.001$), roughly one fifth of the standard deviation of preferences for redistribution in the sample. At the highest level of politicization, the largest difference is between production workers and small business owners and rises to 0.356 points (statistically significant at $p < 0.001$). Interestingly, socio-cultural professionals remain relatively close to production and service workers across different political contexts. Contrasts of predicted class preferences on redistribution (as well as on preferences on immigration, homosexuality and the EU) at low, medium and high levels of politicization – with confidence intervals – are graphically summarized in Appendix 7.

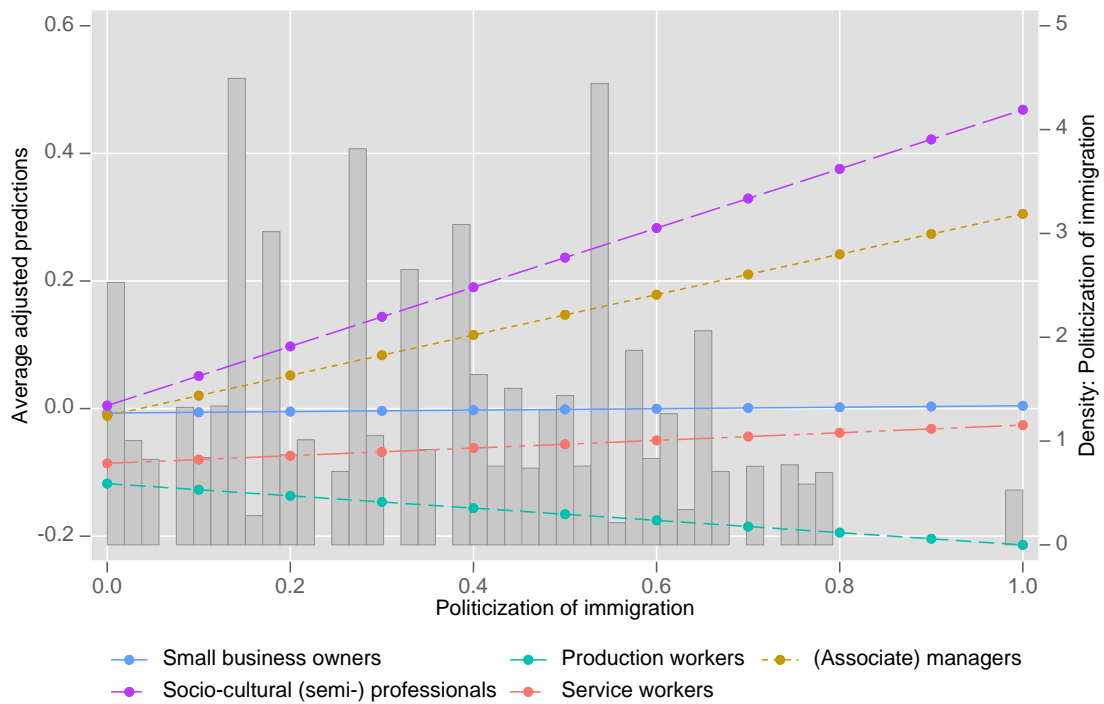
Figure 2: Average predicted preferences on redistribution along politicization of this issue



Note: Estimates from a linear multi-level interactive regression model (with random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round) introducing controls for age, gender, education, and union membership. The coefficients for all variables are presented in model 5 of appendix 6.

associated to small business owners and managers are significantly different from production workers at conventional levels of statistical significance. However, for socio-cultural professionals and service workers, their slopes in preferences along politicization are not different from that of production workers (for $p < 0.10$).

Figure 3: Average predicted preferences on immigration along politicization of this issue

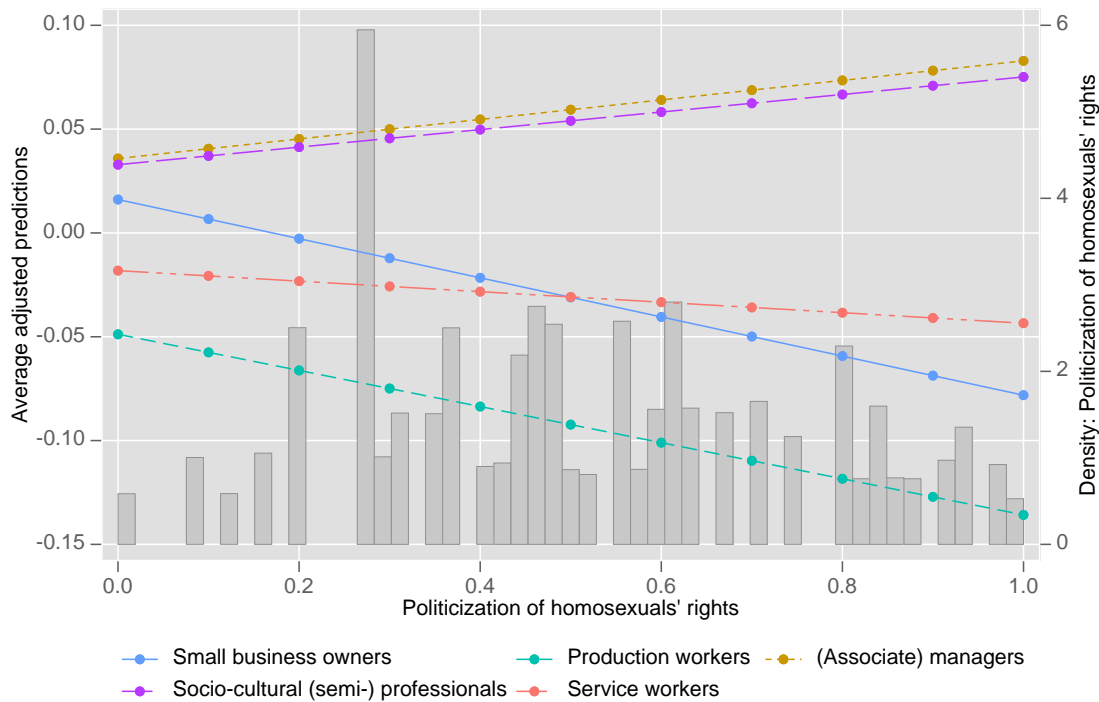


Note: Estimates from a linear multi-level interactive regression model (with random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round) introducing controls for age, gender, education, and union membership. The coefficients for all variables are presented in model 6 of appendix 6.

The increasing differentiation between social classes along politicization is more marked for the issue of immigration. Figure 3 summarizes average predicted preferences of the different classes, with higher values on the Y axis indicating a more positive stance towards immigration. This figure depicts a clear fanning out pattern.¹¹ While at the lowest level of politicization the largest difference between classes is of only 0.122 points (between production workers and socio-cultural professionals and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$), this difference is more than five times larger (0.682 points) when the politicization of immigration is greatest (significant at $p < 0.001$). Differences in preferences between production and service workers also increase along the politicization of immigration, but these two classes remain as the two most opposed to immigration across all contexts.

¹¹ The interactive terms of model 6 in appendix 6 indicate that the slopes of the association between social class and preferences on immigration across levels of politicization of this issue differ for all social classes with respect to production workers (all coefficients statistically significant at least at the 0.01 level).

Figure 4: Average predicted preferences on attitudes towards homosexuality along politicization of this issue



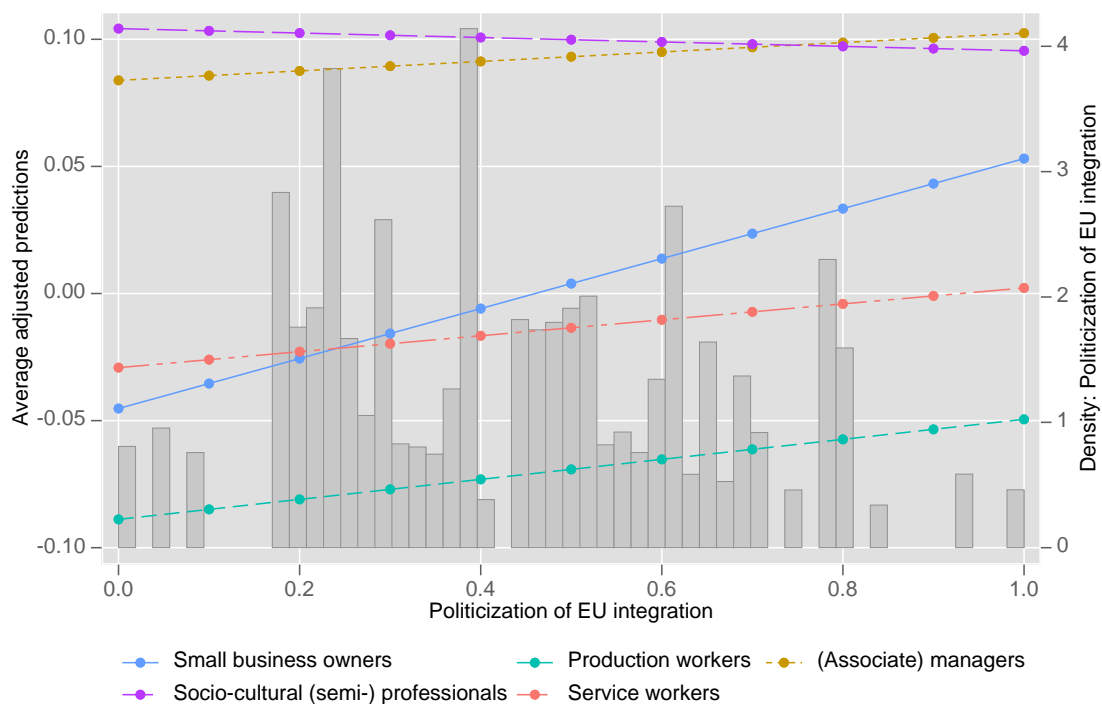
Note: Estimates from a linear multi-level interactive regression model (with random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round) introducing controls for age, gender, education, and union membership. The coefficients for all variables are presented in model 7 of appendix 6.

Following with another issue typically associated with the cultural dimension, Figure 4 depicts the same graphical summary, now for attitudes towards gays and lesbians. Higher values on the Y axis indicate more positive attitudes towards homosexuality. These results provide further support for the proposition that the strength of class discrepancies is dependent on the politicization of this issue.¹² While attitudinal differences between social classes are rather minor when homosexuals' rights are not politicized (the maximum difference is of 0.085 between production workers and managers, statistically significant at $p < 0.01$), they increase substantively at high levels of politicization (to 0.218 points, significant at $p < 0.001$). As with preferences on immigration, production workers and socio-cultural professionals are also located on opposing poles, and particularly distant at the highest levels of politicization. Whereas for the lowest levels of politicization, service workers are closest to production workers in terms of preferences, this changes under greatest politicization, where service workers grow apart from production workers, and small business owners appear as the class closest to them.

¹² The variation in the slopes of how social class is associated to preferences across different contexts is captured by the interaction terms presented in model 7, appendix 6. All coefficients, indicating differences in slopes with respect to production workers, are statistically significant at least at the 0.05 level, except for small business owners'.

Figure 5 presents social classes' average predicted preferences for European integration. Higher values on the Y axis indicate support for further EU integration. In this case, the figure does not depict a consistent association between the strength of class divides and the politicization of European integration.¹³ In fact, some classes appear slightly more similar in terms of their preferences at higher levels of politicization. Hence, on this particular issue, the results do not support the proposition that the greater politicization of issues by parties strengthens class divides. Across political contexts, classes' relative placement is in line with previous studies. Managers and socio-cultural professionals are highly supportive of EU integration, in contrast to the opposition from production and service workers. It is unexpected that small business owners appear more supportive of integration when this issue is highly politicized, since this class is expected to oppose EU integration in both economic and cultural terms.

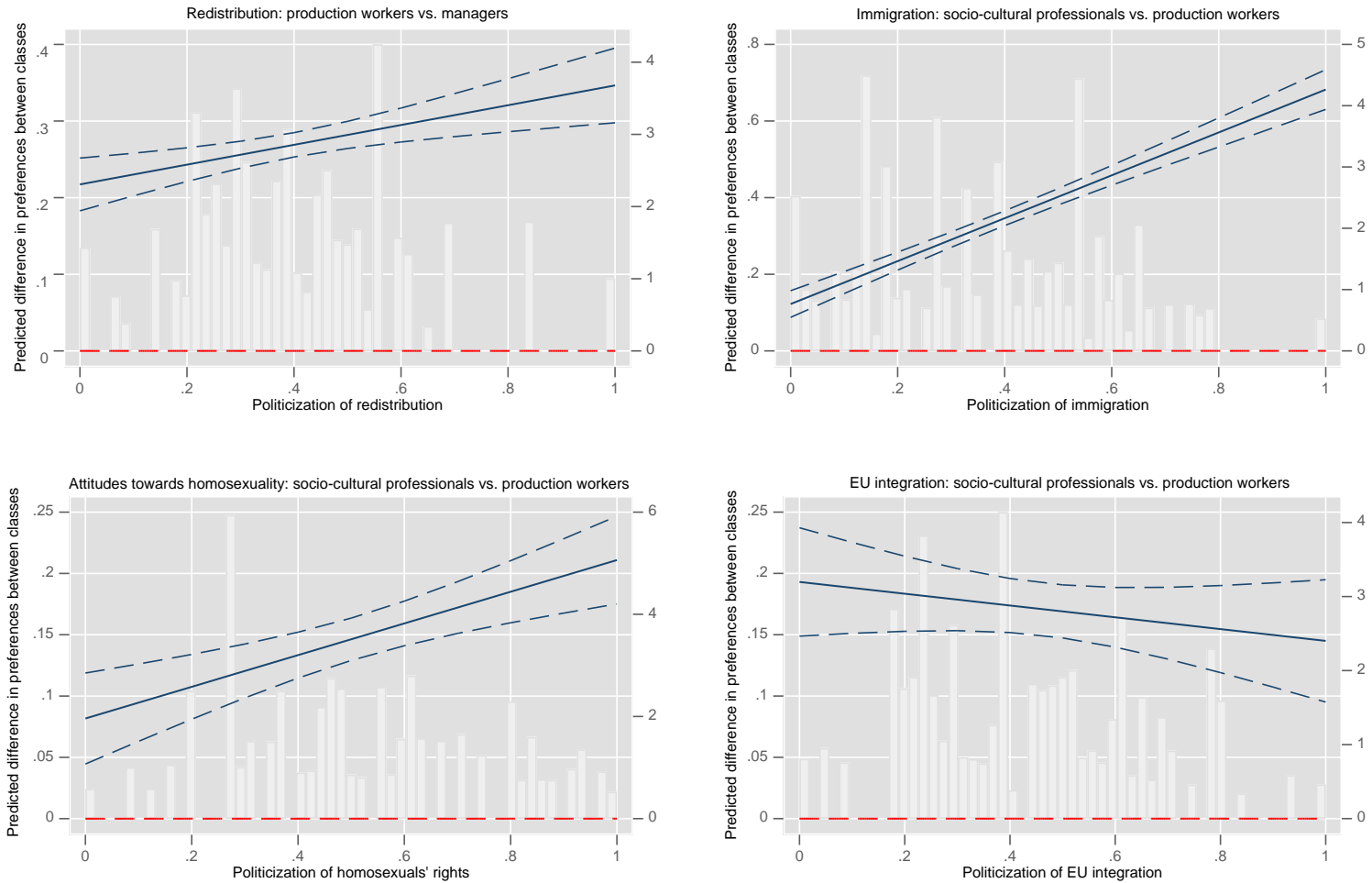
Figure 5: Average predicted preferences on European integration along politicization of this issue



Note: Estimates from a linear multi-level interactive regression model (with random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round) introducing controls for age, gender, education, and union membership. The coefficients for all variables are presented in model 8 of appendix 6.

¹³ The cross-level interactive terms presented in Model 8, appendix 6, indicate that differences in slopes (in the association between social class and preferences for EU integration) with respect to production workers are not statistically significant (at conventional levels) for any of the social classes.

Figure 6: Differences in predicted preferences between selected classes along politicization of issues



Note: Estimates from linear multi-level interactive regression models (with random slopes for social class and random intercepts for country-round) introducing controls for age, gender, education, and union membership. The coefficients for all variables are presented in appendix 6.

Figure 6 provides another depiction of the results discussed so far. Each of the panels plots the difference in preferences between two selected classes for each of the issues, along different levels of politicization. Positive slopes are in line with the expected association between politicization and class divides. On the issue of redistribution, the upper-left panel plots average differences between managers and production workers, as the two classes illustrating economic conflict. The other three panels reflect differences in preferences between production workers and socio-cultural professionals, as the two classes illustrating cultural conflict. Figure 6 displays clearly the differing pattern of EU integration, in comparison to the other three issues, for which increases in politicization are associated to greater class divides. Interestingly, the issues of gays' and lesbians' rights and, particularly, immigration show great potential for class divides, but this opposition is more context-dependent than on the issue of redistribution.

The differing pattern for EU integration could be explained by attitudes on this issue being more fixed (less malleable) than on the other topics. To address this possibility, I take the rate of non-response and 'Don't know' replies to the different attitudinal items as a proxy for malleability of attitudes. Since cognitive availability and attitudinal consistency tend to be correlated (Goren, 2013), we would expect higher rates of non-response to be indicative of attitudes that are less fixed. Non-response to the EU integration item is higher than the other issue preferences (as shown in appendix 8), hence indicating that these attitudes should be more open to change. Thus, the malleability of attitudes does not appear to explain this different pattern. The next section shows that this difference on EU integration is robust to alternative specifications, and in the discussion I reflect on further potential explanations for this different result.

5. Robustness checks

Because all models are estimated on cross-sectional data, they are limited in that they cannot identify a causal effect of parties' politicization of issues on the link between class and preferences. One could reasonably argue that parties might be able to anticipate potential class differences on certain issues, and accordingly politicize them. This would imply that it is actually differences in public opinion between social classes that explain issue politicization. The question of whether parties lead or follow public opinion has been frequently debated in the political psychology scholarship (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). Ideally, one would resort to cross-national panel data to follow individuals' trajectories on issue preferences, and see how they react to changes in the supply side. For example, Cavaille and Neundorf (2016) find, for the British case, that partisan elites' decisions to polarize on the economy usually precede aggregate attitudinal change as measured by survey data. However, currently, no cross-national panel data is available to pursue this approach.

The current estimations rely on party-level data that was measured in previous years or in the same year that the ESS was fielded. As a robustness check, I restrict the sample to those rounds of the ESS that were fielded at least two years after the CHES. This introduces a two-year lag between the measurement of parties' and classes positions, with politicization temporally preceding classes' preferences. These analyses (presented in Appendix 9) return similar results, although the moderating role of the partisan supply is slightly weaker. These alternative specifications, however, are not ideal, since the partisan supply should play a role at the time when preferences are formed, not two years into the future.

Even if the possibilities to address endogeneity are limited by data availability, there are theoretical grounds to expect that at least part of the moderation found is driven by the partisan supply. Several experimental and quasi-experimental studies have been able to isolate the causal effect of parties' and politicians' stances on opinion formation (Levendusky, 2010; Minozzi et al., 2015; Petersen et al., 2010; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2020). Moreover, recent literature on issue competition has emphasized that parties have agency in how they position themselves, and emphasize or downplay specific issues (Abou-Chadi et al., 2020; Meguid, 2005; Meyer & Wagner, 2013). Even if parties' issue positioning faces constraints and incentives generated by other parties' strategies, public opinion itself, or party leadership's own preferences, parties can affect public opinion, and have agency in deciding how to politicize issues. This gives us confidence in that, at least part of the moderation found, can be safely attributed to parties' behavior. As additional robustness tests, I also include controls for socio-economic indicators at the country-round level to address the possibility that both parties and preferences could be responding to changes in the countries' socio-economic situation. Controls account for economic and social conditions (unemployment level, poverty rate, Gini index, level of immigration, number of asylum seekers, and number of immigrants from non-EU countries). These models are presented in Appendix 10, and indicate that the results commented above are not driven by differences in objective socio-economic conditions between countries. The partisan supply still moderates class differences in preferences in these models.

Moving to the operationalization of politicization, the measure captures both the salience of an issue and the polarization of parties' positions around it. The two dimensions are relevant for public opinion formation, since party cues on policy issues become clearer when party conflict is intense, and more information is available when conflict is visible. Yet, it is possible that one of the two dimensions plays a bigger role in affecting individuals' preferences. That is, that either the availability of information or the articulation of strongly opposed positions is more important in this process. For this reason, I also assess the moderating role of polarization and salience separately. The results of these alternative specifications (included in appendices 11 and 12)

indicate that, while each factor is associated to class differentiation in preferences (for the three issues for which this moderation is present in the main analyses), their separate moderating role is weaker. For the issues of redistribution and attitudes towards gays and lesbians it appears that the link to salience is weaker than for polarization. Overall, the results suggest that, as previous literature has argued (Hutter & Grande, 2014), politicization is a multifaceted process, best captured by a composite measure. In the absence of salience, actor polarization will probably not be evident to a majority of citizens. Similarly, if an issue is visible but hardly contested, party competition provides little information about alternative positions on the issue.

The largest moderating role of the partisan supply appears on two issues typically categorized as cultural. This could raise questions about whether these class differences are dependent on the implementation of Oesch's class scheme, which emphasizes horizontal class differentiation based on work logic. To address these concerns I replicate the analyses operationalizing class through EGP's six-class scheme. Figures 13.A-13.D in appendix 13 indicate that the moderating role of the partisan supply is also evident for class differences along the EGP scheme. On the economic issue, the main opposition is between workers (skilled and unskilled), and the service class and petty bourgeoisie. On the issues of immigration and attitudes towards gays and lesbians, the main opposition is between workers and the service class. These class differences become substantively larger at higher levels of politicization. This alternative operationalization produces the same lack of moderation in what concerns European integration. Additional tests also exclude the control for educational attainment (appendix 14). Whether to include controls that are likely to be antecedents of social class (like education) is a topic of debate in class analyses (Knutsen & Langsæther, 2015). Previous studies have sometimes attributed cultural preferences to individuals' education rather than class (Van de Werfhorst & De Graaf, 2004). Moreover, education could also ground differences in receptiveness towards party messages (Zaller, 1992). This is the reason for including educational attainment as a control in the main analyses. However, results are robust to excluding education, as well as to including an additional control for political interest (appendix 14).

Finally, to make sure that the results are not driven by particular countries, I repeat the estimations removing one country at a time from the estimation. Appendix 15 replicates figures 2-5 when each of the countries is excluded. As these plots display, the patterns described above are robust to excluding individual countries from the analyses.

6. Discussion

This study brings an important contribution to our understanding of class politics in post-industrial societies. In line with the main argument, the results document that differences in how social classes are positioned on relevant issues (like income redistribution, or the rights of immigrants and homosexuals) depend on the extent to which these issues are politicized by parties. While earlier literature proposed that the configuration of the electoral supply affects the link between class and voting, this study identifies another key stage at which the partisan supply intervenes: in activating or mitigating class opposition in policy preferences. Given that differences in political values between classes are a relevant mechanism behind class voting (Langsæther, 2019), this paper highlights another point at which parties' strategic considerations and patterns of competition can affect class voting. Moreover, it also shows the relevance of going beyond aggregate measures of ideological differentiation and characterizing the political context in terms of parties' placement on and emphasis of concrete issues. On income redistribution, the key divide between the managers and production workers is magnified under a strong politicization of this issue. Interestingly, moderation is particularly strong for two of the cultural issues. On the topic of the rights of immigrants and of homosexuals, the divide between production workers and socio-cultural professionals is mitigated when these issues are hardly contested and emphasized, but divergence between these classes grows much stronger at high politicization. Hence, while the potential for class opposition is high, it is strongly context-dependent.

Even if it goes beyond the scope of this study to assess how class issue-opposition is reflected in electoral behavior, classes' average issue placement provides relevant information about social coalitions that could be mobilized by different parties. Overall, cross-class coalitions (or the ability of parties to garner support beyond a single-class base) will become increasingly unlikely in contexts of high issue politicization. For instance, a coalition between socio-cultural professionals and workers is likely with low levels of politicization of the cultural issues of immigration and homosexuals' rights, and medium (or even high) levels of politicization of the redistributive conflict. However, this coalition becomes increasingly unlikely when cultural issues are more contentious. This would imply that the possibilities for, for example, left-wing parties to cater jointly to socio-cultural professionals and their traditional workers' base are scarce when cultural issues are controversial. We find an analogous situation for small business owners and workers, who display similar cultural preferences on immigration and attitudes towards gays and lesbians, but diverge on economic preferences, especially under great politicization of this issue. At the same time, the politicization of EU integration hardly threatens specific class coalitions, since it does not increase class divides. These are some potential social

coalitions suggested by the analyses of individual issues. Whether and under which conditions these groups can be jointly mobilized will also depend on the extent to which these different issues are integrated. If issues are highly integrated or embedded (i.e. not orthogonal to one another) (Kriesi et al., 2006; Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2019), then classes' placement on a single issue becomes less informative about likely social coalitions. As suggested by the literature addressing the integration of international issues on domestic dimensions of competition, a stronger embedment of issues may sharpen differences between parties and social groups, decreasing the likelihood that social classes can be targeted separately on individual topics. Independently of issue integration, an important takeaway from these analyses is that the potential for classes to align with different parties is likely to be context-dependent. Future research could address how different configurations of the partisan supply – characterized by the politicization of different issues – affect the likelihood that certain parties (e.g. social-democratic) garner support among different classes, and how issue preferences mediate the link between class and voting across these different contexts.

One of the puzzling results from the analyses is that there is no apparent moderation by the partisan supply on class differentiation on Europeanization. One possible explanation for this finding could be that European integration is an issue less closely integrated into the main party cleavages (Evans & Andersen, 2004; but see Whitefield & Rohrschneider, 2019). On topics that are less integrated into the main lines of party competition party cues to voters tend to be weaker and more infrequent. In their UK-based study, Evans and Andersen (2004) argue that respondents' EU positions are less affected by their partisanship, hence indicating that party messages may play a weaker role on this issue. This could potentially explain the lower impact of parties' politicization of EU integration on classes' opinion differentiation. The lower absolute politicization of this issue across countries (in comparison to the others, see Appendix 4) would be in line with this explanation. Interestingly, taking the number of 'Don't know' answers as a sign of availability and malleability of attitudes indicated that there are more of these answers on the issue of EU integration, yet, these attitudes appear to be less inclined to change (at least in response to changes in politicization). The lack of moderation could also be explained by differences in how this issue is politicized across countries. Specifically, by the extent to which this topic is framed and politicized on economic or cultural terms. The analyses displayed different key class divides on economic and cultural issues. While economic topics oppose production workers to managers and small business owners, cultural issues divide workers from socio-cultural professionals. If European integration is framed differently across countries, and politicization increases through greater emphasis on its cultural or economic dimension, this could reinforce different class divides across countries. This could confuse differences in

preferences, since the measure here implemented asks about EU integration in general – without separating economy and culture. To disentangle these two potential explanations, future research could address whether the extent to which EU issues are integrated into main party cleavages affects the moderating role of the partisan supply; and rely on measures (of both preferences and party stances) that separate the cultural and economic dimensions of EU integration.

The evidence here presented is in line with the argument that social classes' placement on different issues is context-dependent, and that class issue opposition is stronger when these issues are strongly politicized by parties. Because the analyses are based on cross-sectional survey data, they are limited in their ability to isolate the causal effect of the partisan supply on attitudes. Hence, we must be cautious in interpreting these results as evidence of an effect of politicization. However, the robustness of the results to different specifications gives us confidence in the association between issue politicization and class opposition. Moreover, the strategic behavior by parties to position themselves and politicize different dimensions of conflict – identified in analyses of issue competition – and the (quasi-)experimental evidence on the impact of party's messages on public opinion lend further credibility to the theoretical link between the partisan supply and classes' preferences. Yet, parties and their messages are also constrained by structural changes, and must face transformations to the social composition of their electoral bases. Hence, future research efforts could be centered around research designs that allow for the identification of partisan effects on class divides in preferences. These could take the form of experimental treatments subjecting respondents to different party messages, or quasi-experimental designs identifying stances of exogenous politicization of an issue. The increased internal validity of these designs might come at the cost of lower generalizability. However, a growing body of work in this direction would provide further insight about parties' role in activating or mitigating class politics.

7. References

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